Two nights after Firewalk, Chloe stood on stage, accepting her descent into the madness of Rachel Amber's life, but out there in the crowd, Max Caulfield's face awaited her. Struggling to navigate life at Blackwell Academy, Chloe, Rachel and Max face curve balls and blooming romances and all three of them are plagued by demons from without and within. The struggles of family, school, friendships, enemies and love are faced, and lessons learned the hard way. When communication is the most important thing, what damage can be done by secrets and insecurities?
Part One

Chapter One: Lenaia

Now? She wants to talk about this now? Chloe couldn’t help but look away from Rachel’s face toward the crowd. If she focused hard enough not even the lights pointed at the stage could wash them out. Even this quick glance made the seats, which seemed small in number half an hour ago, look like hundreds. At first, Chloe didn’t realize what Rachel was doing, but now that it was clear she felt her face heat up. Voices were almost audible in the crowd. This was so wrong and so right, so very Rachel. When the actress dropped to one knee in her torn tights, Chloe shivered, and she was not able to completely blame the outfit she wore on stage.

“Spirit, take my hands, most faithful friend,” Looking down past what she could only think of as a beak atop her own head, Chloe watched Rachel come back into herself fully. Gone was the transformation into character, gone was the face of the ‘actor’ presented to Keaton or the rest of the school, to the rest of the world. This was the Rachel Amber who told off skeevy men for girls she barely knew, who had therapy sessions in a truck in the junkyard, who lost her cool when she saw her father cheating. Here, her face was uncomfortably soft. Chloe felt their fingers lace together and shivered again. I could get used to that. “For but a little longer I beseech: continue in thy service to my schemes.” Chloe knew she should respond, but her throat was dry and did not seem to want to open. Her tongue set heavy in her mouth.

“And when they are complete I swear to thee, we shall fly beyond this aisle, the corners of the world our mere prologue. I’ll seek to make thy happiness so great that e’en the name of liberty is
forgot.” There was more noise in the crowd, more muttering, more whispering, more talking. People were watching them, most of them probably smart enough to know this had little to do with a play. This was being outed in more ways than one, but so publicly that Chloe could not imagine looking at the crowd again. “What sayest thou to my most hopeful wish?” Chloe missed a beat, swallowing, trying to get her mouth and throat to function.

“Say yes!” cried a woman from the crowd. Then, after a moment, another voice, a younger one echoed the sentiment more loudly, more passionately. She knew she was flushed and under any other circumstance would hate that, but at least the stage lights would wash it out for most of the crowd. Chloe blinked and then the second that felt like a year passed and her body was working again. She exhaled--she had to exhale or her lungs would burst--before answering, aware that there was never going to be any other response, not to that question and not from Rachel Amber.

“Yes,” she replied, squeezing the hand holding hers. Rachel rose like a marionette come to life and released her.

“I am most pleased,” Rachel told her, standing, hazel eyes alive in a way Chloe wasn’t sure she had ever seen before. “Your duty, done for now. Go forth hence with haste! I’ve work to do.” And explaining to do, Chloe thought, feeling dazed as she nodded and rushed off stage right. Though she knew she should not, it was hard not to turn and shoot one more glance at Rachel as she exited, taking in her face in profile from beneath the beak on her own head. The other girl’s features were already firming, molded once again into the role of Prospera. Chloe turned away and with a jolt of both shock and relief saw Juliet waiting by Keaton in the back-up costume the man had advised Chloe would set to large on her shoulders.

“You nailed it,” Juliet said by way of greeting and Chloe was too stunned by what all had happened to be set on edge by the girl’s embrace, and besides something in her tone told Chloe that she, too, was well aware about what had just happened. Later she would laugh at the comical sound of their head-beaks momentarily clicking together, which registered from the microphone still attached to her outfit that someone had apparently not yet deactivated. For the moment, though, when Juliet released her and stepped away, presumably to memorize lines for any later scenes she might have, Chloe simply stood off to the edge of the stage in a daze.

“A born thespian, my dear. I will have you on my casts, next year. The ending- transformative!” Chloe blinked and then thanked Mr. Keaton. He turned to the stage with his hands clasped, genuine glee on his lined face. He’s eating this up. I’m half surprised he didn’t try to hug me. A chair behind the set beckoned to her. With Juliet’s surprise appearance, she had no more lines to rush to memorize. I can’t believe I didn’t fuck it up… but what Rachel did, what was that? Was that real? What did I just promise her? Chloe jumped when Juliet returned with a cup of water and shoved it firmly into her hand.

“Thank you,” Juliet said. “You saved us.” Chloe shook her head, slowly coming back to her senses.
“It was really nothing,” she told the woman. From that same folding chair she listened to the majority of the rest of the play. On occasion she would rise and stand beside Keaton or Rachel herself to watch. Though Chloe was unable to find any words for Rachel and Rachel herself seemed to be low on them, when they were both off stage they kept close to one another and that was convincing enough that Chloe was sure the promise Rachel had extracted from her was real. Sideways glances shot to the other girl showed her mostly in her ‘actress’ or ‘character’ modes. It seemed almost appropriate that Rachel wasn’t looking to talk about anything not related to the play, and that episode on stage was the aberration.

Eventually, though, all trying things must come to an end. Chloe watched as one by one the various actors and actresses funneled from the back to center stage to make their bows. She waited for a sense of relief to wash over her, but instead she continued to almost thrum with nerves, with energy. She felt shaky and cool, though it was not that cold of an evening. When it seemed time for the curtain call finally, Chloe stood, clapping with the crowd outside when, quite suddenly, near the center of the forming line of actors, Rachel turned and gestured for her. Chloe shook her head and that seemed to be all that Rachel needed to take matters into her own hands.

Chloe watched her approach and allowed herself to be lead on stage. It was hard to lift her head to the crowd, to the pairs of eyes who Rachel had just minutes ago made witness to something kind of embarrassing. The uptick in cheers was absurd, strange. Didn’t these people know who she was? She was Chloe Price, the loser, ditching drop out who probably wasn’t supposed to even be on school grounds. If only all of them knew what I was doing right before the play, in the dorms, collecting money for a drug dealer.

After a second of hesitation and a soft nudge from Rachel, Chloe made a quick bow and as she rose up she looked out into the crowd and could feel her eyes widen with shock. The rest of the performers on stage began to rearrange themselves, she felt Rachel take her hand. None of it registered except in the mechanical, because as Chloe rose out of the first ‘group’ bow, she sought out the same spot in the crowd she had been looking at before that. There, standing toward the front of the crowd, beside a man in a dark suit, was a face that Chloe could never forget, no matter how changed it seemed by the time of its owner’s short absence.

As Rachel’s movements lead her into another bow, Chloe broke eye contact with Max Caulfield. Her breath was ragged as she looked up again. The girl stood out from the crowd only by the highlighting that was Chloe’s focus, her hair shorter than when she left Arcadia Bay, one thin braid down the left side hanging close to her face. The photographer, sure Chloe had seen her, reached back and raised her grey sweatshirt’s hood, shadowing her face in a way that neither the eyeshadow nor the winged eyeliner had already done, before turning to walk away.

Chloe was pulled down for one more bow and then watched Max disappear into a crowd of people that might not have existed for all she could care or notice. Chloe turned to Rachel once Max was lost among people standing and moving from their seats. Rachel smiled and waved out toward the
crowd and Chloe wanted to speak, to tell her that this was without a doubt the strangest day of her life. Instead, the curtain fell, as it were, and lights began to dim or redirect themselves from the stage to the crowd.

“Well?” Rachel asked, turning toward her. Rachel’s microphone was not active, so Chloe could be reasonably sure her own was not either.

“I think ‘holy shit’ about covers it.” For a moment Rachel was grinning at her, but perhaps seeing it was not all about some thrill of acting, her face calmed and she nodded.

“I say let’s get the hell out of these outfits,” Rachel replied after a moment. Before she turned to lead the way she added, “Unless you’re into this sort of thing, I guess?” The girl gestured to Chloe’s costume. While this was enough to pull her from her stunned reverie it seemed to do little to quiet the jittery feelings. Chloe shook her head, trying to smile. “Then dressing room. Before I decide to burn these clothes.” Chloe thought about a half hearted joke. She also thought about her cellphone, about texting Max and asking, ‘Have I lost my fucking mind or are you here?’

Instead, Chloe followed behind Rachel, listening to the rest of the cast exchanging words with each other, still unable to feel like she was really part of it. In fact, the whole night felt like it belonged to someone else, like it would be a Rachel Amber story whispered and muttered in the halls of Blackwell Academy as she passed by. That strange disconnect lasted until well after they were in street clothes and out of makeup, rushing into the night, away from the school instead of returning to the stage. Slowly, Chloe felt like she eased back in her body, settling into flesh and bone that was familiar and warm. The night was not so cool anymore, though her limbs still felt jittery, like they were humming, vibrating despite doing their job and keeping her standing.

Nearing an hour later, they were walking vaguely in the direction of what she assumed to be Rachel’s house. Chloe had not bothered to ask; she did not care. Rachel had woken up from a daze of her own, too. Now she moved through the dark streets with joy, almost playing like a child as she hurried from the center of the road to the sidewalk in reaction to an oncoming car, or leaped from the curb back into the road. It was infectious, too. Though there were still plenty of distracting thoughts banging around in her head, Chloe could breathe more easily and she felt no lack of energy at the idea of keeping up with Rachel.

“So,” Rachel started and Chloe slowed slightly. “What happened to you there at the end? Did you get some kind of late stage fright?” Chloe shot her a look, realizing that her behavior during the ‘taking a bow’ portion of the night must have been noticeable. “What was it then?” The question was breathy, Rachel still moving rather quickly as they traversed the streets of one of Arcadia Bay’s upper class neighborhoods. Chloe followed as best as she could.

“Well,” Chloe said, “You know how I mentioned my friend? The one who moved away and
stopped responding to my messages?” The question sounded too casual, but it was not out of pretense. She simply did not know how to bring up such subjects.

“Yep,” Rachel replied, without a care in the world. *She has this way of making me think I’m overthinking everything. What if she’s underthinking it all?*

“She was in, like, the second row.” Chloe hurried to keep up with Rachel, who had momentarily begun to run. “Watching. She’s here, in town.” Rachel slowed now and Chloe stumbled trying not to run into her. With just a bit of The Actress still in her eyes, Rachel turned her head to look back at Chloe more directly, before beginning to walk backward.

“And, are you alright?” Chloe felt a bit warmer as she contemplated the question and then answered, a small smirk sliding into place.

“Well, yeah,” Chloe said, tilting her head and knocking the edge of her fringe from her own eyes. “Tonight was, amazing. Seeing her was just really weird,” then, Chloe began to laugh. It seemed likely to be brief at first, but then it took hold and she had to slow and finally stop walking entirely. Rachel waited, rolling her eyes, for Chloe to get her breath back. “As if the rest of it was *totally* normal,” Chloe clarified.

“You’ve got the adrenaline running still,” Rachel replied, nodding a couple of times. “I do too. Everything’s funny, everything’s fun. I always get like this after a performance.” She threw her arms wide and spun, almost dancing into the street. Was this a side of her that she ever showed anyone else? If not, Chloe felt good about it. *It’s like she’s a little high,* Chloe thought, before admitting that she had just laughed at absolutely nothing. *Okay, it’s like we’re both a little high.* A smile broke across her own face despite the conflicting thoughts. “I love this. I love nights after a show.”

“I could learn to love this, if it means seeing you like this.” Rachel moved close, taking first one and then another of Chloe’s hands. She released them a moment later and then sighed, dramatically raising her own arms upward, then letting them drop.

“Are you proud of yourself, Chloe Price?” Rachel asked. That was a funny question, but then a lot of things felt a bit strange about the night. Chloe considered how to answer and decided to go for honesty.

“It’s, I feel great. I wouldn’t have thought this morning that I was going to be in this good of a mood.” *Even with the weird shit, I… I loved it.* Rachel suddenly slowed and her face began to transform. It was really strange to watch, it wasn’t like the other changes: from Rachel to Actor
Rachel, to Prospera. Instead she was contemplative, disconcerted and finally bore a look of surrender. It was so shocking a transformation that Chloe opened her mouth to ask what was wrong and before she could, Rachel shook her head.

“Chloe,” Rachel said, “You don’t want to leave, do you? Not yet.” Chloe tilted her head. “You know, like we were talking about yesterday? Like we talked about on stage. Just getting up, leaving in the middle of the night.” Chloe blinked, slowly. *Is that what she’s thinking about, now of all times?*

“Well, yeah, but I thought like, you know, eventually?” The questioning tone in her voice made her feel pathetic. Rachel shook her head. “What? You want to leave now?”

“Right now,” Rachel responded, throwing her arms up, suddenly looking more like herself. “Right the hell now. You and me, we go back to my place, sneak some clothes out and then we get the hell out of Arcadia Bay. I have a little money. We can get that old truck of yours running and just leave.” Chloe blinked, unsettled by the tone of Rachel’s voice. It was friendly enough but it did not quite match her words, or her face. “Or do you want to stay now?” Chloe shook her head and then, after a minute, she nodded. “Because of that friend?”

*How does she know me so well already?* Chloe wondered yet again, her earlier glee slightly quelled. Rachel turned (though she did not quite turning her back on Chloe,) and began to walk from one side of the street to the other. She was disappointed, that much Chloe didn’t need to be told. It showed in the way she walked, back and forth, in the slope of her shoulders or the shaking of her head. After a couple seconds these worked themselves out, though and Rachel turned back.

“Look,” Chloe said, “Mom’s clearly chosen David over me. That’s not keeping me here. I don’t give a fuck about going back to Blackwell Academy next year, I don’t care about *any* of that. But - and I guess you’ve noticed this,” Chloe chuckled to herself, a bit derisively. “Max was pretty big in my life and when she left it kind of got into my head. If she’s in Arcadia Bay, I want to know what the *fuck* for.” Rachel nodded and this time she put on the look of a war-hardened five-star general.

“Alright, then, recruit. We will not seek evac until the mission is complete. We’ll find this Max and find out what her problem is. Then we’ll make for the extraction zone, get the truck running and blow this popsicle stand.” She furrowed her brow and lifted her chin, “Is that understood?”

“Rachel?” the girl’s face went back to normal and she shifted her shoulders beneath the plaid shirt. “When you talk like that, I imagine you with David’s mustache,” Chloe deadpanned. “I never want to imagine that again.”
“Yes sir,” Rachel replied, saluting before turning back. “But, whatever the case? That’s a battle to fight tomorrow.” Chloe rolled her eyes at the girl’s back, but allowed herself to smile at it, too. “Tonight, I want to pack some of my clothes up and take them to the truck.”

“What, for me or for you?” Chloe teased.

“Well,” Rachel turned back around, looking Chloe over once or twice with eyes that were nearly uncomfortable in their appraising. Chloe would have turned the red of an apple if it weren’t for the fact that something moved slowly on the edge of Chloe’s vision and she glanced to follow it. “You do look hella good in my clothes.” Rachel must have seen her line of sight, because she tilted her head up slightly and looked. Soft, pale flakes poured down on them. Oh shit, Chloe thought as she got over the momentary amazement. “They’re beautiful,” Rachel continued, a little awed. Does she get it? Chloe couldn’t help but wonder as a bit of ash landed in the thespian’s hair. She has to. Yet she doesn’t react.

“Well,” Chloe finally said as she brushed the ash from Rachel’s hair and tried desperately not to look into her eyes, “if we’re going on a secret mission behind enemy lines, we should probably get a move on.” Rachel leaned in, bridging the small space between them and Chloe reached out, sure the girl was going to grab her hand and drag her along the road. Instead, Chloe was backed up two steps against the light pole behind her as Rachel drew closer than expected. For a second, all that was Rachel Amber, at least all that was her face, was close and in detail as it had never been.

It was easy, Chloe reflected in that moment, to say something was beautiful from afar, that someone was beautiful. Up close, though, Rachel was far more than beautiful. The two existing in this proximity to one another made Chloe’s breath catch in her chest, made her heartbeat rise and cheeks heat, it made her jittery limbs slow and weaken and all thought of her mother, David, Max or Blackwell Academy vanish. The warmth of Rachel’s kiss did not catch her off guard; Chloe had been given enough warning to see it coming. It was still, somehow, surprising in its intensity and in how quickly she returned it. In the end, when the two broke apart a moment later, Chloe was lead along the road a lot more easily than ever before.

“So, what kind of place does Rachel plus Chloe equal?” Rachel asked, as they turned down a road. Chloe hurried to draw even with her but made no move to release her hand, in fact holding it slightly tighter. Though it was belated, Chloe thought her mood had stabilized again from the earlier unpleasantness, the irrational fear that Rachel was disappointed in her for not agreeing to abandon Arcadia Bay that night.

“I don’t know,” Chloe told her, “but you did say something about New York City.” Rachel’s grin widened, becoming more natural, more Rachel. For the first time, Chloe felt a fire which would become a familiar friend burst into life in her chest with as much ferocity as the forest fire that caused the ash falling upon them. She did not break her eyes from Rachel’s face even when Rachel turned away to watch where they were walking. I don’t think I can look away.

“Nothing,” Chloe lied, “I could just think of way worse ways to live than that.”

“That’s the spirit,” the girl responded, releasing Chloe’s hand to crack her knuckles in an imitation which Chloe found accurate if not flattering. “Now, my badass thespian in the making, we’ve got a bag full of clothes to extract and get back to the forward operating base.”

“Enough military talk though,” Chloe said, as seriously as she could through a smile that almost hurt her face. “I’m trying to forget about-” she paused, considering for a moment and then clarifying, “I’m trying to forget about my stepdouche.” Rachel pulled an impressed face and nodded once.

“Ten-Four, Captain Price.” Chloe allowed one backwards look at their tracks through the ash and then turned back forward. *This is so, so weird.*

“Calm down there, Soap.”

----

Upebz, J nvtu sfnfncks:
Uif qmbz uppl qmbdf ibmg bo ipvs bgufs Kpzdf jt pgg xpsl.
Qvu uif gmzfs po ifs xjoetijfme.
Djsdmf uif ujnf boe Ebuf
Uif cvt tipvme bssjwf bu uif tupq bdsptt gspn uif ejofs pof ipvs cfgpsf dvsubjo ujnf.
J ibwf up bwpje uif ejofs xjoepxt.
Kpzdf jt qbslfe bu uif xftu foe pg uif mpu.
Kpzdf dboopu tff nf.
Upojhiu, tif dbo gjobmmz tff nf.
Chapter Two: Under Hecate’s Eye

Chloe stood at the foot of the stairway long after Rachel disappeared up it and around the corner. Everything Mr. Amber had just revealed chased the sound of the glass-top kitchen table shattering around in her head, leaving her a bit dazed as she turned back toward Rachel’s father and the woman she had called her mother for sixteen years. Blinking, she watched the District Attorney turn away from her, from the staircase and lower himself into a seat, pressing his face into hands that were beginning to show their owner’s age. Mrs. Amber did not speak to her either, instead retreating to the kitchen sink without a word as if the dishes or putting away leftover food was the most important thing in the world.

Holy. Shit.

Reasonably speaking, Chloe knew that no one in that house was so much as thinking of thinking about her, but for some reason she felt like she stuck out, like she shouldn’t be there and that at any point one of the Ambers would lift their heads and ask what the hell she was up to. Focus. Chloe blinked. Rachel. Nodding to herself, she took one last look at the sitting room and the ruins of the kitchen table before ascending the stairs without a word to anyone downstairs. The mantra, ‘Focus. Rachel.’ pushed her down an unfamiliar dark hall, checking each door. Three of them were identical and white, but one bore Rachel’s name, making the entire situation that much more simple. No overthinking went into opening the door or stepping inside. Overthinking wasn’t really her shtick, instead Chloe was fairly certain her mother, David and most of the staff of Blackwell Academy would accuse her of quite the opposite.

That being said, the memory of shattering glass stuck with her when she stepped inside. She opened her mouth to call out for Rachel, only to find her on her bed, back to the door. Rachel was about one or two steps shy of being in a fetal position, but it was close enough to jar Chloe. Somehow, it was almost like she had never expected Rachel to be capable of being hurt in that way. Fire and anger and revenge? That sounded far more like Rachel than this. Time to rethink that, then. One look around the room was enough to discomfort Chloe further. Beside the closet was a duffel bag, not unlike the one Rachel had brought Chloe. A shirt still hung half out of it, apparently the sole survivor of whatever catastrophe had left clothing strewn about Rachel’s bedroom.

The one lamp in the room was lying on its side with the lampshade on the floor beneath it, discarded in the remains of one of Rachel’s plaid shirts. Okay, she was pissed. That makes sense. Chloe tried not to think about the implications involved in Rachel taking her rage out of a previously packed bag of clothing. Not about you, remember? Their mutual explosions in the junkyard had taught her to keep that kind of insecurity to herself.
“Rachel?” Chloe started, carefully. No response came, but it seemed impossible that Rachel had simply come up here, wrecked her room and gone to sleep within the thirty or forty seconds Chloe had been standing dumbfounded at the bottom of the steps. Besides, she was too still. I need to distract her, get her attention, reach her, whatever it is. Her phone vibrated insistently twice in her pocket. A combination of guilt and frustration and simply being disturbed made Chloe pull the phone out as she leaned quietly against Rachel’s door.

A look at her inbox revealed several missed messages from her mother, from Eliot, from Steph, from some group chat and, most recently, from Max. Not losing my mind. She was totally here. With this new, frustrating puzzle in front of her, the idea of making ground on the one relating to Max’s sudden reappearance appealed enough to her for her to take a couple of seconds to open the message.

*Hey, I’m in town for a few days. I want to talk. Tomorrow morning, nine thirty, outside my old house. Don’t worry about responding tonight, I’m sure what you’re doing is more important.*

Listed as a second later, the next message read:

*I’m pretty sure that’s not how the first half of The Tempest is supposed to go. But you know what they say, classics are meant to be broken. Suck it, Shakespeare.*

Chloe blinked at the serious tone of the first text and the jovial one of the other but just as quickly as she pulled the phone out, Chloe put it back up, deciding that the hoard of other texts waiting on her could be read in the morning. ‘What the fuck is going on’ seems to be kind of a recurring question. I think I’m going to need some help answering that. She turned about the room. It was easy to drag her eyes across it and see a mess, the aftermath of some ugly storm. What she needed was something to get Rachel’s attention.

A recurring theme did jump out at her on her third, uncomfortable sweep of the room. God, I hope she doesn’t believe in this stuff for real, Chloe couldn’t help but think as she passed her eyes over a zodiac chart, a small light that looked like it was supposed to cast stars around the room and a couple of pithy sayings about ‘reaching for the stars.’ Okay, we’ll file that concern away for later. Maybe something to think about, something to distract would be enough to bring Rachel to back to her for the moment, to let Chloe find out just how not alright she really was.

_How not alright would you be?_ Chloe asked herself. _If you found out mom wasn’t your mother, would you even want to talk to anyone?_ Though it was probably a sign of poor mental health to answer herself outright, the response came anyway. _If I would, it would be Rachel._ She had to hope that maybe her feelings were matched that intensely. Back on the bed, Rachel shifted. Chloe reached out for the nightlight and flipped it on. Immediately, very soft pinpoints of light appeared on the ceiling, soft enough that she had to squint to see them. Rachel did not seem to notice. *Too small, too dark.*
The busted lamp would have been tempting if the bulb wasn’t shattered and the light in the large star hanging over Rachel’s pinboard was too small. After switching the light off so as not to be so easily burnt, Chloe unscrewed the cover of the nightlight, the part that allowed it to shine stars across the ceiling. It was actually rather thick and so unlikely to break from simply being handled. The light inside was small, about the size of some older, oversized christmas lights. *Yeah, that’s not gonna work at all.*

Sweeping the room one more time, her eyes landed on a box against one wall. Beneath the leg of a pair of jeans draped over it, Chloe could read the letters, G-E-N-C-Y. Bingo. She threw the jeans aside without much hesitation: it wasn’t like either of them worried about wrinkling the clothing. Inside, a nice, large flashlight with a good sturdy handle sat in wait. *Yes.* It took half a second to finish preparing her little idea. She even suppressed the urge to congratulate herself on her quick thinking and handywork. A soft click was all the announcement given before about a quarter of Rachel’s bedroom ceiling populated itself with stars properly.

*That’s more fucking like it,* Chloe allowed herself by way of gloating before she turned back to Rachel. Perhaps it was not bright enough that Rachel, with her back turned to Chloe and the rest of the room, would have noticed. *Then I’ll just try to make her notice.* Unphased by the notion, Chloe eased herself down onto the bed beside Rachel. The way the girl momentarily stiffened and then relaxed told her that Rachel was definitely still awake. Quietly, she reached out and pressed a hand to her shoulder, shaking her slightly.

For a moment, Chloe expected rage, like at the junkyard. Instead, grief seemed to have quelled the fire in Rachel’s attitude. Chloe backed up a bit on the bed, sitting up against the headboard as Rachel turned over and followed suit. For a moment, she was looking expectantly, even curiously at Chloe. Then, her puffy, red eyes slid from Chloe’s face to the room beyond her and finally went to the ceiling. Briefly, Rachel didn’t react at all, but eventually, she reached out and seized Chloe in a very brief hug that probably felt stranger than it should. *I mean, have I ever hugged anyone but mom, dad or Max?*

“It’s actually kind of beautiful,” Rachel admitted when the split apart.

“And the stars are nice, too, right?” Chloe responded, grinning. Rachel shook her head and bumped lightly against Chloe’s shoulder in retaliation. “That’s better,” Chloe said and before she knew what Rachel was planning, the girl was pressing closer to her side. One lanky, thin arm rested awkwardly, almost uncomfortably.

“You know,” Rachel said, perhaps dodging the bigger issue. “I’ve always thought stars were gorgeous.” Chloe wasn’t sure if she knew too many people who would disagree. “That, and the dark in between them.” *Okay, that one’s new.* “Then one day,” Rachel seemed like she was getting
into a story telling mode. “I was reading and I found out that some of those stars are dead. They have been for a long, long time. I mean, cosmically long. The light isn’t really being sent to us anymore. It’s a lie. It’s just lies… kind of like my family. Kind of like my life.” Oh, well, shit. Chloe tried to come up with some sort of response. It took a moment more than either of them would have liked because Rachel looked down from the ceiling, from her or from the room at large and to the bed.

“I mean,” Chloe sighed. “Who gives a fuck?” Rachel jerked slightly. Careful. “Okay, some of the stars are dead. Maybe lots of them. Is that light any less beautiful? Has your moth-your mom, ever really not been your mom?” Rachel shook her head and surprisingly did not pull away immediately. “What’s going on in there, Rachel?” Chloe asked her.

“I’m scared, I’m sad and I’m really angry.” She nodded in response and waited. “And I think I want to see her. Does that make me is that wrong?” Chloe tilted her head and shifted, releasing Rachel as she sat more completely forward.

“I don’t think so. I think you’ve got questions and she’ll have answers.”

“She wants to see me now,” Rachel responded. “I want to see her. I want to know about my mother. Not just what he says,” Chloe understood who he was without any sort of clarification. Mr. Amber did not have much of Rachel’s trust at the moment. Okay, think, Chloe. Things have calmed down. No one’s going to throw something at someone else, no one’s breaking anything anymore. Unless you count taking apart her nightlight to make your light show. You know what to do.

“I can help,” Chloe said, quietly. Genuine surprise flitted across Rachel’s face. It would have been downright cute under other circumstances. “She and I have the same dealer, remember? We’ll get ahold of Frank, first thing in the morning.” Rachel shook her head again, though Chloe had to be sure it wasn’t a rejection of the idea.

“And what? We’re just going to walk to wherever she is? What if she’s halfway across the state?” The mental image of the junkyard truck came to mind. It was still a wreck, obviously, but with time and a little work. One thing at a time. Or two things, maybe. Or three, fine, but four things at a time is a bit much.

“First, we find out whatever we can about your mother from Frank. And I chase down a text I got a few minutes ago. Then we worry about finding a ride. Besides, I think with the right tools I can take care of that problem.” If I can find a way to get back into the house without anyone noticing, dad’s toolbox has everything we need, if I can find it behind David’s ‘Look at the Size of my Dick’ box. Rachel gave a mostly humorless chuckle.
“Chloe Price, saving the day again.” She shrugged. “No,” Rachel continued, emphatically. “I mean it. You are a badass. First the play, now this? If there’s a problem, you’re ready to take its legs out from under it.”

“That’s right,” Chloe agreed instead of push modesty. “It’s like I had to tell that fucker at the Mill. You could have a flamethrower, an army of robot ninjas, and a motherfucking dragon on a leash between you and Sera, and I would still get you to her.” Rachel’s smile seemed softer, but at the same time a little more real as she leaned back against the headboard. About that moment, the door to the room opened.

She and Rachel turned to look in unison as Mrs. Amber’s face appeared at the door. She looked momentarily at the scene before her: clothing strewn about the room, a busted lamp upturned on a dresser, Rachel and Chloe less than an inch apart on the bed and of course the light show across the ceiling. The woman blinked, twisted her face into some sort of picture of the ‘healthy, happy family’ image she first gave off and then spoke.

“Considering the hour, and circumstances today, Chloe, do you think maybe you should contact your mother and see if she’s alright with you staying in our guest room tonight? I really don’t care for the idea of you walking home alone that late and to top it all off, the ash is still kind of thick.” Chloe blinked and realized what this whole scene might look like to an outsider. She also realized she did not care. With all the potential for trouble and mysteries the next day held, Chloe decided sleep might be for the best. Besides, Rachel seems calmer now. If she’s not, she knows where to find me.

“I don’t think she’ll mind. I told her I’d be hanging out with Rachel tonight,” Chloe lied. “I guess time got away from me. I’ll just send a text.” Chloe rose to her feet, sure that the woman was about to usher her from the room. “Rachel,” she turned, speaking clearly enough that hopefully Mrs. Amber knew she didn’t care if the woman heard it. “I’ll just be in your guest room if you want to talk. If you want anything.” For a moment, Rachel didn’t respond beyond a slight curling of her lips. “I promise we’ll figure this out.” The slight curl lessened. Chloe didn’t have time to analyze that, as she could feel Mrs. Amber’s impatience behind her for the first time. Or maybe you’re imagining it, you ass.

“Thanks, Chloe. I’ve never had anyone who has ever had my back like you do.” Chloe could not bring herself to look at either Rachel or Mrs. Amber in that moment. It was a shitty thing to do, but Chloe could tell by Rachel’s voice that that statement might have been directed at her, but it was meant for her mother. She filed it away in a pile of things she had to let go and nodded. What am I going to do?

What am I going to do? The same thought crossed her mind several hours later as she looked from
left to right and lead Rachel across a street that was unlikely to have too much traffic, being a residential area at shortly after nine in the morning. She pulled the ringing phone from her pocket and with one quick glance back at Rachel—clad in what was essentially her outfit from the concert—answered it as soon as they were on the other side of the road.

“Howdy?” she asked, though she knew exactly who it was, she just wasn’t sure why he couldn’t answer in text.

“Price,” Frank’s voice didn’t immediately sound dismissive, or rather it sounded no more dismissive than usual. That was a relief. Chloe raised an eyebrow in Rachel’s direction. “Where are you?”

“Busy,” she replied. “Do we have a deal? You keep that extra hundred bucks and just tell me what you know about Sera?”

“No,” Frank said, quickly. “Not over the phone. Where can we meet? Preferably soon.” Chloe glanced back at Rachel, weighing her options. If Frank was coming in person it was better if they met somewhere that she and Rachel could control things. It was getting harder and harder to think of Frank as cavalierly as she might have before, especially after getting an eyeful of his boss. “Price? Are you listening?”

“American Rust junkyard, hour and a half. I’ve got something to take care of first.”

“Fine,” Frank replied. She heard the sound of his RV starting up. *Shit, does he want to be there waiting for us?* “Price, what do you want with this woman? She’s bad news, man.”

“I’ve got a friend who needs to find her.” Rachel drew closer, as if trying to listen in. She was close enough that Chloe could feel the warmth of her body as they turned the corner (not to mention feel Rachel bump into her, not expecting the sudden change of direction) onto a road in town she had not been down in some time. “Frank? We cool, man?” There was silence, and then Frank sighed, his long-suffering sigh. *At least that’s normal.*

“If you’re half as smart as you think you are, you won’t show up. You’ll forget about all of this and forget my number until you run out of weed.” Frank’s voice dropped. “Unfortunately, I think you’re as much a dumbass as you are a smartass. Just be careful.” The sudden departure from friendly conversation was not as jarring as it might have been with anyone else. Frank talked a lot of smack. Sometimes it was almost like that was his way of showing that he cared. *Asshole.*
Chloe had not finished putting her phone up when she saw someone walking toward them from the opposite end of the road. At first glance, she barely recognized the girl she had grown up with. Though, once one set aside the changes in hair, makeup habits and clothing style, that just left the demeanor. Max was a bit hunched forward as she approached and Chloe’s difficulty in reading her face was probably as much the time they spent apart as the joint she was pressing to her lips. *Jesus Christ, it’s broad daylight,* she thought. *Wait a minute. Max fucking Caulfield’s a stoner? Now this shit I’ve got to see.*

Rachel put a hand on her shoulder and Chloe turned back. The approach of a hooded, smoking figure seemed to have caused her to raise an eyebrow. Chloe responded with a nod. Max made no move to wave or call out to them. It made the brief period of time between noticing her and the three of them coming into a range to comfortably talk awkward. She felt like explaining to Rachel that this person acting a little bit odd was her best friend and everything was going to be fine. The issue was, not only did Rachel know who this was by now, Chloe wasn’t sure that the rest of it was entirely true.

Eventually, Max pulled to a stop, about five feet away from them and exhaled a long stream of smoke. Chloe immediately matched eyes with her and was actually alarmed to see that despite the calm demeanor, her eyes told a story of someone who looked fit to piss herself. That was Max for you, though, her eyes were the way she expressed herself the most, both figuratively and literally, what with her photography. Rachel released Chloe’s shoulder and stepped up next to her, for which she was grateful.

“So, you’re pretty pissed off at me right now.”

“Yes,” Chloe answered honestly. Though that was true, she was also a little confused by the entire way Max was behaving, the way the imitation of a calm and collected tone shook with each syllable.

“Think you hate my fucking guts yet?”

“No,” Chloe replied, again, honestly. “But I want to chew you the hell out and get some answers.”

“Sure,” Max replied, and Chloe watched a certain edge about the look in her eyes soften. “But I need something, first.”
“Whatever you need,” she said, nodding at Max. Still, she was taken by surprise when the girl bolted the two or three steps between them and grabbed at Chloe, her arms wrapping tight around her. The surprise faded quickly and Chloe returned the hug, despite the fact that Max was threatening to squeeze the very air from her lungs. After a couple of long, long seconds, Max finally let go of her and stepped back.

“Hi,” the girl said, immediately turning to Rachel instead of explaining a damn thing. The hand that was unoccupied by something that could get all three of them in some trouble reached out. “I’m Max, and that was a nice Prospero. Or, I guess, Prospera.”

“So, that was you,” Chloe said as Rachel reached out and shook her hand with what Chloe originally thought was bemusement. As soon as she let go, though, it became obvious what was really at work. Rachel was all but glaring at Max.

“Y-yeah,” Max stuttered and this time she lowered her hood, showing off a face only slightly changed by time. Maybe it really hasn’t been all that long after all. “Can we walk toward that shitty little park over that way?” Chloe could read that Rachel’s anger had not gone unnoticed by the way Max’s eyes dropped to the ground and would no longer match either of their gazes. What is going on with her? “Hit?” She offered the blunt.

“Actually,” Chloe replied, “Yes. To both.” Their hands contacted briefly and as soon as Chloe had control of the rapidly dwindling bundle of ‘oh fuck yes, I needed that hours ago’ Max withdrew her hand and turned to lead the way. When several seconds of silence had passed, without Rachel speaking, Chloe turned worried eyes on her. Rachel, too, was dodging matching eyes with her, but was instead staring daggers at the back of Max’s head. Chloe exhaled and offered her the blunt. Rachel did not respond in the least. Chloe passed it forward without another word to the thespian.

Is she scared of me or Rachel? Both of us? Everything? Chloe hurried, confused as Max stepped off of the sidewalk and into someone’s grass, to follow. Okay, just another weird thing. I think we’ve got bigger issues than either of those though.

“Why are you, you know, here?” After a second, she added, “I didn’t mean that to sound shitty, actually. Though, I think it would make sense for it to sound shitty, so, pretend I did.” Chloe heard a chuckle escape the girl, before she turned to walk backwards.

“Well, that’s a long story. To make it short? I kind of ran away from Seattle.” She’s trying to sound funny. It is not working.
“And you came to Arcadia Bay?” Chloe asked, snorting. She again tried to include Rachel in her amusement, but the girl had turned stone faced and simply adjusted the jacket on her shoulders in response to Chloe’s glance.

“I missed you,” Max answered, as if it were one of the hardest things in the world to admit. “Things weren’t good in Seattle. I didn’t want to be there. I never wanted to go there.” Well, I mean, considering that was the only time I’ve ever seen her fight with her mother, I believe that. “I mean, don’t get me wrong. I had a couple friends. That was okay. They are okay. I just, I missed you. I wanted to stay here. So,” she laughed. “Here I am. And I’m really, fucking sorry.” A pale messenger bag around Max’s shoulders shifted as she turned away. It did nothing to distract Chloe from seeing devastation in Max’s eyes before she was facing ahead of them, approaching what amounted to an empty lot with a couple benches and a merry-go-round in it. Oh, again, what the fuck? “I shouldn’t have stopped talking. I just got wrapped up in being miserable and that’s a shitty excuse.”

“It is,” Chloe told her. Max looked back, slightly calmer. “But you’re Max, so, you know, I-”

“If you’re just going to fuck off and abandon her again, you can stow the bullshit.” Chloe turned toward Rachel, who had finally spoken for the first time since the three met up. Conflicting feelings rose up at once, anger and surprise and maybe a little bit of amusement. “Honestly, abandoning someone like that? It’s the shittiest thing one person can do to another and if you’re just going to do it again, you’re going to have to go through me.” What is she- oh. This isn’t Rachel’s mother. She gets to talk to Sera however she wants. It’s my choice how I deal with Max’s shit.

“Hey,” Chloe spoke up. For a moment, they pulled to a stop and Max stood silently facing the two, one arm inside the pocket of her sweatshirt and the other allowing her to take another hit. To an outsider from a distance the girl would look the picture of ‘grace under fire’ but Chloe could swear Rachel intimidated Max, from the silence, from the way she suddenly looked down and away from them yet again. “Hey,” Chloe said again, until Rachel snapped around to look at her, taken aback by the tone of her voice. “I get what you’re trying to do, but don’t. Not with her. Not now. I’ll decide how pissed I want to be about whatever I want to be pissed about. Not you, thanks.” Chloe felt almost as stunned by her response as both Rachel and Max looked as each lifted their heads. For a moment, the idea that Rachel might storm off or get angrier let Chloe worry again, but just for a moment. Then Rachel cracked a grin.

“Okay, that was low as fuck of me,” Rachel said, before turning toward Max, away from Chloe. “I was definitely projecting my own bullshit,” It was a hell of a sudden personality shift and Chloe desperately sought some evidence that this was a character Rachel was playing and not Rachel herself. Would it be more disturbing that I’m finding none or if she were? “I’m Rachel and I’m dealing with some shit that’s not your fault.” When Rachel reached out, Chloe was certain it was not an act. For a moment Max didn’t respond, her eyes still cast away or downward, face contorted and it caused Rachel to wrinkle her brow and tilt her head in worry.
Then, the pair shook hands and Chloe was left with more questions than she had started the day with. Max took a few steps away from them and flicked the butt of the blunt aside, stomping it down. Instead of immediately turning back or even stopping to kick dirt off of her converse, Max walked right to the merry go round and took a seat. Chloe shot Rachel a quick look and received in return the confusion she was feeling herself.

“It’s actually pretty good to meet you, Rachel,” Max replied. Slowly, she lifted her head and locked eyes with each of them in turn. “I’ve got some issues with uh, well, life, but don’t ta-take it personally.” She doesn’t look horribly different after all, but god damn is this a different Max. “You know, you really were good as Prospera,” at this Max seemed to laugh at herself. “So, confession time, Chloe.”

“What’s that?” Chloe asked, cautiously as she and Rachel approached the merry-go-round.

“I sort of set up a tour of Blackwell Academy today. Paid some lady to pretend to be my mother a few days ago, had her call and set something up with your principal.”

“Well,” Chloe said, more quickly. “Two things. 1. Kind of got suspended for the rest of the year. 2. I’m sorry, did you just tell me you ran away from Seattle to go to a tour of Blackwell Academy? Because, I get it, Max, you’re a little bit of a different person now, but this seems… extreme.” Without looking back at Rachel to gauge her state, Chloe dropped onto the ride, just on the opposite side of a handle from Max, allowing herself a moment to more directly take the girl’s appearance in. Max returned to staring at the ground.

“I sort of, kind of hatched a plan to get into Blackwell next year and come back here.” Chloe blinked. “You know, so things can be like they should have been? Like we always planned.”

“Max, I’ve never been one to question your genius schemes and all, but you realize that you’re going to have to convince your parents to let you go.” Max nodded. “Okay, and, follow me here: you just got done running away from home.”

“You’re one to talk,” Chloe lifted her head toward Rachel. “I’m pretty sure you’ve been living where, exactly?” Max raised her head at Rachel’s words and turned to fix an inquisitive look on Chloe. “Go ahead, tell her.”

“Sort of living in a truck in a junkyard.” Chloe admitted, though she did so while glaring at Rachel.
for exposing a detail like that. “Juuuuu-ust for the last couple of days. Though I slept in the swankiest guest room ever last ni-”

“You what?!” Max asked, and in a way she sounded like her mother. Oh, damn.

-----

Vqfca K owuv tgogodgt:
Kh K jcvg vq, tgykpf vq ocmg vjku iq tkjv.
K owuv pqv hwem wr cpf rkuu Ejnqg qhh.
Vqfca oa pgy nkhg dgikpu.
Kh K co nwema, ujg yknn dg kp kv. Kfecnna, vjga yknn dqvj dg kp kv.
Kv ycu Pqv Tcejgn yjq uqqqf cv vjg tccf cpf nwiejgqv cv Ejnqg'u dtqmgp dqfa.
Ujg ku pqv oa gpgoa. Ujg jcu vq vtwuv og.
K co cnoqquv qwv qh yggf.
Chapter Three: Duel with Menelaus

“So,” Max said, speaking a bit more briskly than she had thus far, “let me sum it up.” The trio were on the move again, toward a nearby bus stop. “Your mother’s gotten together with some guy who has a complex about being worshipped for his military service, who is not so subtly a sexist and you think she’s just okay with that?” Chloe nodded, even though she was looking at the back of Max’s head. When Max perceived no answer, she looked back.

“Yeah?” Chloe replied. “It’s kind of gotten to the point where I don’t know what to say to her anymore. I love my mom, of course but she’s actually just, I don’t know, chosen that asshole over me. I just fucked up one too many times, I guess.” You’re not getting upset, Chloe told herself as she felt the ghost of a lump rising in her throat. “I don’t get what she sees in him.”

“Chloe, you’re being a dumbass.” Chloe actually staggered for a moment and, seeing that, Max stopped, looking past her toward Rachel. “Rachel, does Chloe seem like a dumbass to you?”

“Of course not,” Rachel replied, her tone guarded as she shifted her shoulders beneath the jacket Chloe couldn’t help but think was probably too warm for the day.

“Right, so she has no reason to act like one.” This time Max had no problem matching anyone’s eyes and when Chloe looked in them her throat closed up. In a way, they were like Rachel’s, confident, assertive, almost an opposite from the way Max had been acting so far. The biggest difference is that Max looked deadly serious. “Your mother sees something in him. The good things. You don’t see any of the good things. You only see the bad. Chloe, there are some platitudes that are bullshit. You can tell anyone babbling about everything happening for a reason
or the world working in mysterious ways to shove it up their ass.” And she has such a pirate’s mouth, too. Chloe tried not to smile at her internal dialogue even though amusement rose up to challenge the discomfort in her stomach.

"One that isn’t bullshit is that love is blind. The opposite is true, too. Hate is blind. You see the bad. It sounds like Joyce sees the good and neither of you can see what the other sees because you’re both being dumbasses.” Chloe watched Max sigh and as she exhaled the fire seemed to leave her eyes as she kind of folded into herself a bit, leaning forward. “Go talk to your mom again. This time, don’t tell her what an asshole David is. Tell her what to look for. Show her how to see it.” For a moment the three stood in silence, before Max turned and lead the way again. Chloe filed away Max’s apparent good memory of the town’s public transport system (such as it was) for later contemplation.

So, Max is going to come swinging back into my life and just tell me what to do to fix everything in the blink of an eye? How pretentious is that? A small part of her wanted to rebel immediately. Then again... . Chloe’s gaze swung to Rachel’s thoughtful face. Haven’t I been doing the same shit? Rachel and I have been hanging out two days. Now I’m telling her I’ll find her mother no matter what? We- we talked about running away together, for fuck’s sake. And face it, this is Max. One last question, the inkling of a possibility formed in the back of her mind and she spent several quiet seconds observing Max before dismissing it.

“I’ll think about it,” Chloe told her. “But right now, Rachel and I have bigger fish to fry.”

“And I need to find somewhere other than the Two Whales Diner to get some breakfast,” Max replied, as if in agreement with something, though Chloe wasn’t able to pin down what. “So, you’ve got a mysterious meeting in a junkyard?” Chloe again nodded at Max’s back. Beside her, a long-suffering groan issued and Chloe glanced sideways to see Rachel rolling her eyes.

“Yeah,” Rachel answered for her. “Chloe’s helping me find someone. She thinks she’s got a lead.” When she says it like that, Chloe thought, grinning. Max beat her to the joke, as if with words stolen directly from her mind.

“Detective Price on the case,” Max replied, sagely. “Don’t worry, No one’s a match for Arcadia Bay’s legendary detective. She is vengeance, she is the night.”

“I am batman!” The whole bit was worth it to hear Rachel laugh for the first time all morning. It was enough to call back the night before, before the disastrous family dinner, before the shattering of Rachel’s kitchen table or her image of her family. We danced and laughed in ash, from a fire that she- that we started. Chloe shook her head and tried to keep the smile on her face for Rachel’s sake. I can’t unpack that right now. My own shit comes second. Regardless of what the weird ass dreams keep telling me.
“You know,” Rachel started, “If you’re still here after all of this is over, the three of us should hang out.” Chloe glanced sideways. “I mean properly. Not just walking around a park trying not to get caught smoking a doobie.”

“Yeah,” Max said, again glancing back. Up ahead was the sign and a small box just big enough for them to sit in, a roof just small enough to cover them if it were raining. “About that. Sorry. I was kind of getting toward the end of my rope and none of my usual, uh, coping mechanisms were working.” Oh, so we’re getting to this, now. “I know it’s crazy, considering I lived in Seattle but I really get a little nervous hanging out anywhere where there are a bunch of cars. The longer I spend away from the road, the better. And it sort of feeds the rest of it: all the other shit that messes with me gets worse if I’m around them. Also, I think my mother would say that ‘interpersonal conflict’ is also sort of what sets me off.”

“Hey,” Rachel spoke over Chloe as she opened her mouth to ask for more information. “It’s alright, I wasn’t really trying to give you shit. Trust me, I understand. Almost everyone has that one thing that scares the hell out of them. Some of us just have phobias that are a little worse.” That was an inclusive ‘us.’ What the hell scares Rachel Amber? “As for the rest, I don’t think anyone here has any reason to lecture on interpersonal skills.”

“What’s your phobia?” Chloe asked without thinking. She backpedaled a bit as soon as she realized that it might be a rather personal subject to bring up in front of someone Rachel had just meant. “That is, if you want to say.”

“Maybe some other time,” Rachel replied, her voice growing quieter, even if she did try to make it sound as if she was teasing with the information.

“Thanks for understanding,” Max added, as if to cut off the uncomfortable line of questioning. Fine by me, Chloe thought.

“So, do you think you’ll be able to get in on scholarship?” Rachel again took charge of the conversation. “I’ve heard it can be a pain in the ass.”

“It can,” Chloe and Max agreed in unison.

“Thing is,” Max said, “That’s the one part of my plan that I’m absolutely sure about.” When Max glanced back, that same serious determination shone in her face. “I’ll get that scholarship, so make sure to do whatever you can to make it back to Blackwell Academy, Chloe.” Chloe wasn’t entirely
sure how to answer her, after everything else they had discussed. This was also when Chloe first realized Max hadn’t really said anything about her time in Seattle except to hint that maybe something had happened causing her to develop a phobia of being near streets.

“Well,” Rachel said, “I guess it’s time for us to go our separate ways.”

“Well,” Max added, “I’ll probably catch the same bus as you guys and ride it to the station. But I did want to say something to you.” Chloe felt a little strange watching the two interact so openly given Max’s apparent earlier fear of Rachel. “Thanks for sticking up for Chloe,” Rachel looked taken aback. “I know she doesn’t think people should stick up for her much, but everyone needs that sometimes and Chloe’s always been the kind of person who needs reminded that other people do give a shit.” What am I supposed to say to that?

“I’ll keep that in mind, Max.” Perhaps it was hearing Max talk about how she thought Chloe needed taken care of sometimes. Perhaps it was even the contemplation of just how right or not the girl was. Whatever the cause, Chloe realized as they stood waiting for a bus that she had no idea how Max was taking care of herself. I mean, unless she’s paying with cash and raising eyebrows there’s no way she’s got a room somewhere.

“Max? Where are you sleeping at night?” Since they met up just outside of the old Caulfield residence, Chloe had seen Max nervous, scared, even a little upset. Chloe hadn’t seen her embarrassed, though that all changed when Max began to turn red and returned to not matching anyone’s eyes. “Where are you sleeping?”

“Well, I got a motel room the night before last but…” Chloe waited. Max didn’t seem willing to continue, so she eventually bumped her shoulder against the other girl’s, lightly. “I sort of slept outside somewhere last night.” Chloe sighed. “Look, I get it, it’s not safe. But I can’t exactly whip out the card my parents gave me for emergencies. They’ll see where I am and come right on down to get me and I’m not ready to go home yet.”

“Fine, but I don’t like it.” Max didn’t miss a beat, this time.

“I don’t like you sleeping in a junkyard,” Max responded, “but you haven’t promised to talk to Joyce yet, so…”

Touche.
Chloe wasn’t sure how much longer the two of them had before Frank was supposed to show up when she sat down the old, filthy shoe box of scavenged and salvaged tools. Glancing at Rachel, Chloe held a hand up. Two filthy hands connected in a loud high five before she glanced down at the box. *I’ll be keeping this. See, David? I didn’t need your Overcompensator to fix this thing. I just needed Rachel and a pile of junk to dig through.* She would have loved to have had her father’s tools, but swinging by the house just hadn’t seemed doable with the morning’s available time.

“Rachel?” the girl raised an eyebrow at her. “Your chariot awaits.” Chloe let the hood shut carefully. Rachel reached up momentarily and pressed a hand to Chloe’s cheek, giving her a rather amused look. Chloe did not even stop to think about the streak of filth Rachel likely left on her face but she did do her best to return Rachel’s gaze with confidence instead of the slight embarrassment she felt.

“I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again,” Rachel continued. “Badass.” The two split away from the front of the truck and made their way to either side of the cab. Chloe first slid that little box of scavenged tools onto the seat and then eased herself in, more than a little aware of the fact that most of it was torn open beneath the old, ratty pirate flag. “Alright, MacGirlver. Show me what you’ve got.” Chloe nodded once to Rachel before sliding the end of the screwdriver into the ignition. The mechanical beast roared and shuddered beneath her hands and a great puff of exhaust was more of an announcement that it was going to work than even shuddering of the frame as the engine started.

Once it was running, she glanced at the gas gauge and nodded to herself, resisting the urge to brag until such time as the vehicle actually ran. She shifted the vehicle into drive, grinning. The truck reacted to the gas pedal perhaps a little more eagerly than she expected, as if it was relieved to run again. Chloe had to steady herself as the truck jerked forward and then she was in full control, putting it as through its paces as could be done in a junkyard. After a few seconds and at least one unnecessary donut Chloe eased off the gas and, laughing, turned to Rachel to finally allow herself just the slightest bit of gloating. For a moment, Rachel was looking like she, too, was enjoying herself. Then, her face grew suddenly serious and Chloe followed her gaze. Frank’s RV was pulling up to the entrance of the junkyard. Still in gear, Chloe eased the truck toward the entrance too, parking mere feet from the RV.

“Okay?” she asked Rachel, as she matched eyes with Frank through the windshield of the RV. He looked upset. “Rachel, are you okay?”

“Yeah,” she replied, finally, pulling Chloe’s eyes back to her. “Let’s do this.” They climbed from the truck. The sound of the RV door opening, followed by whistling drew Chloe’s eyes. Frank was shaking his head as he approached the truck.

“Price, nice wheels.” Frank was trying to be dismissive and casual but there was an edge to the tone of his voice. *Maybe because of Rachel?* Chloe thought. *I brought somebody new to him, that*
probably means he has to put on his macho face. Frank gave the truck a quick glance over before coming to a stop against the nose of his own vehicle. “Well?”

“Hey, Frank.” Chloe glanced sideways to Rachel, who was doing her best to look calm. It was evident then, more than any time before, that she was not calm at all. “Glad you came. Welcome to my humble abode.” The door to the RV clicked against the wall of the vehicle and a long leg stepped out. Chloe froze in place, as she had been about to approach Frank. Rachel grew rigid beside her.

“Hate to tell you kid,” she had only heard Damon’s voice once before but it had been something of an unforgettable situation. It was reasonable that she recognized him by his voice even before he shut the door to the RV behind himself. “But your house is kind of a dump.” The man’s appearance, unforeseen and unexpected took away even her will to mock the joke. Rachel seemed more and more off put as Damon approached them and it was all Chloe could do to try to keep her cool. Okay, fuck this. Pull it together.

“Frank,” Chloe asked, trying to lock eyes with him. Suddenly, he’s doing a fairly nice Max impression. “What’s he doing here?”

“Hey,” Damon interrupted, his tone no longer anything remotely resembling jovial. “I thought we were cool after you helped me out with the whole Drew North thing. You want to be cool right? Don’t you?” The way he approached, the threat in his tone and that inherent in his words got her hackles up, especially with Rachel standing silent and uncomfortable beside her. She picked a hell of a time to lose her tongue.

“Hey, we’re cool. As long as I can talk to Frank without you interrupting.” What she thought was a fairly neutral response was met with narrowing eyes and a sneer. Behind Damon, Frank shook his head.

“I told you, she’s like this.”

“Shit,” Damon replied, “Frank was right about you.” The man reached out quite suddenly, seizing her by the wrist. “You’ve got this whole tough girl vibe. I dig it. How’d you like to work for us, full time?” Beside her Rachel suddenly came to life, which was fine since the moment the man who beat the shit out of Drew North and then broke Mikey’s arm grabbed hold of her, Chloe’s mind locked up. Hating herself for the fear, Chloe couldn’t do much as Rachel pushed Damon off of her and to the ground. She stumbled forward, and Frank reached past Damon to steady her.

“Don’t you fucking touch her,” Rachel warned Damon. Having been dropped to his knees, the
older of the two men looked up, and then with a frustrated grunt rose back to his feet. *Shouldn’t that be my line?* Chloe couldn’t help but wonder. For a moment Damon and Frank shared a look. Chloe tried to tell herself that Frank’s sudden worry, sudden discomfort was exaggerated. If she could just find her tongue again, everything was going to be alright. *This got turned on its head, fast.*

Why the hell is it you chicks think it’s alright to hit me, but if I lay a damn finger on any of you, it’s a whole other story?” No response came. No one moved. One second turned into two, then three and the man seemed to let his question become rhetorical. He gestured back toward the uncharacteristically silent Frank, who seemed to be becoming more and more upset. *Dumbass, if I can see it, you know he damn sure can.* Then again, if Frank was upset, actually *this* upset, shouldn’t she be worried? “Frank here says you’re asking about a client of his. Why?” *Down to business.*

“Yeah, why does it matter?” Chloe knew that she had to tread a fine line, given the man’s temper, but somehow becoming soft and demure in front of Damon Merrick seemed like the worst thing she could do.

“Why does it matter?” The man began to yell. “It matters because you two geniuses are sticking your noses into my business. Now, for some reason, you thought Frank here was a big softy. You haven’t got a Fucking clue. That doesn’t matter, though, because now you’re dealing with me.”

“Hey, hey,” Frank said, as Rachel took a step back. Chloe lost track of her out of the corner of her eye but did not dare turn to look. “We’re all just talking here, guys. Let’s calm down.”

“Right,” Damon said, lowering the tone of his voice. “We’re talking, so let’s talk. I wanna know right now why you give a shit about this woman.”

“Why do you care so much?” Chloe asked, not sure she could or should give the man any ground.

“Because fuck you that’s why,” Damon replied. Before Chloe had time to process the response, Frank was talking again.

“Look, none of this matters. All that matter is that you stop asking questions. Got it?” Apparently getting Damon to lower his voice was enough to calm Frank down slightly. He was still on edge, of course, but no longer looked like he needed a drink. Without waiting for a response, the pair turned to walk away. It was a completely unsuccessful conversation and it was enough to make Frank seem a lot less trustworthy in the long run but at least the whole thing was over. Chloe turned to apologize to Rachel, only to see her step toward them.
“You tell me where she is, right now.”

“Rachel, stop.”

“Wait,” Damon stopped in his tracks and turned. Frank slowed and eventually stopped. For a moment, Chloe had a moment of self-delusion, believing Damon was going to finally give them the information they wanted just to end this conversation once and for all. Then he started to stalk back to them, his eyes narrowed and focused not on Chloe but Rachel. “Oh, no fuckin’ way.” When Damon Merrick laughed, it made Chloe shiver. Frank followed until the four were yet again only a foot or two apart. “Rachel fucking Amber, the district attorney’s brat. Your dad’s a piece of fuckin’ work and now you make so much more sense to me.” That was when his hand started to move. Chloe had time to take a couple steps back, pulling Rachel with her before the man freed a long knife from his jeans.

“Hey, hey,” Frank said, following Damon forward. “Hold on, man, they’re just punk kids.”

“No, no, no Frank. This one is the D.A.’s daughter. What’s going to happen now,” Damon’s voice promised all kinds of horrible could ‘happen now’ despite Frank’s attempt to calm him down without touching him. *Oh shit.* “Now she’s going to fill me in on what daddy’s doing and how he’s connected to that mouthy little whore everyone keeps asking questions about.” Chloe matched eyes with Frank as she moved to stand between Rachel and Damon. Frank reached out and grabbed her, pulling her aside.

“Hey,” Chloe protested.

“Price, stop,” he whispered, insistently. “Just fuckin’ think.” Then, Frank looked past her to Damon. “Look, man, she’s a kid, she doesn’t know shit.” Instead of listening, Damon took a step forward, knife out, pointed insistently, almost warningly. That was all that it took for the situation to go from shitshow to nuclear meltdown. At first, Chloe thought that Rachel was going to slap him. Instead, when Damon staggered and dropped to his knees for a second time, Rachel pulled back her hand and in it she clasped a large chunk of cement, as if from an old cinder block. “Oh, fuck,” Frank exclaimed, echoing Chloe’s thoughts perfectly. Frank stepped back and pulled Chloe with him, so that they were behind Damon.

“You stupid fucking bitch,” Damon yelled, reaching up once to test that he was not bleeding from the side of his head, eyes momentarily crossing from the resulting pain. Chloe didn’t have time to wonder when this all got so out of control, when they moved on from ‘just talking.’ Once more frozen in place, she could see the exact moment Damon recovered his senses. His pupils were large, eyes wide, face flushing in rage, in embarrassment presumably at having been knocked
down by a teenage girl. As Rachel tried to regain her composure, he scrambled forward on all fours, fingers digging into the dirt as he got into reach of the knife. In that second she could see Damon plunge the weapon into Rachel’s stomach or leg or maybe even her throat, she could see herself being forced to either die beside Rachel or run.

Instead, Rachel took two sudden steps forward even as his fingers closed around the knife. She raised the stone in her hand and he the knife. Chloe opened her mouth to call out, but quite unexpectedly, as she jerked herself free of Frank’s slackened grasp, Chloe watched a hand close around Rachel’s shoulder and pull her once, harshly backward. Rachel collapsed into the dirt as Damon lunged upward, his knife missing her by mere inches. Behind and slightly to the slide, Chloe had only a second to see Max herself sneering down at a shocked Damon before the girl brought a familiar looking baseball bat down once.

The sound of the bat slamming into the man’s skull was absolutely disgusting in retrospect, but that did not seem to matter to Rachel, who turned onto her side to see who had pulled her down. It did not matter to Frank, who was calling out for someone (Max or Damon? she wondered) to stop. It sure didn’t seem matter to Max who watched Damon go slack and dropped to the ground with a smile that looked like it belonged on Damon’s face, not on her own. A half second of silence followed the sound of the dealer’s collapse before Max called out, in victory.

“Batter up, dumbass.” Instead of dropping the bat, when Frank stepped around Chloe, Max raised it higher.

“Calm the fuck down,” Frank called, looking as if he had only just realized he was outnumbered. Rachel was already climbing to her feet when Max stepped away from her and toward Frank, planting her feet on either side of Damon’s unconscious (I hope) form. “Look, I get it, it’s over. It’s fucking over, kid.” Max did not drop her impromptu weapon. The sweatshirt hung half off of her, likely to restrict her ability to swing it but she looked in that moment as Damon had a second or two ago, capable of anything. “I need to get him out of here and make sure he’s alright. Unless you want to crack me over the skull with that thing too.”

“Oh, don’t get me fucking wrong. If you ever lay another hand on Chloe, or for that matter, her,” Max gestured vaguely toward Rachel who was backing a step or two away from her, “then you’ll get to be the one who tells all your hella scary friends how you got beat up by a little girl with a stick. You understand?”

“You’re a crazy fucker,” Frank replied, but it seemed to be agreement enough for Max to step aside and lower the end of the bat toward the dirt. Rachel looked as if she wanted to cross to Chloe and the truck but did not.

“Good,” Max replied in a voice that did not remind Chloe at all of her childhood friend. “As long as
you never forget that then you and I are gonna get along well.” Frank seemed to slow, regarding her just briefly with the same look that Chloe could feel on her own face before he grabbed Damon and slowly eased him up. The larger man groaned but his eyes did not open and Chloe let out a breath she did not realize she had been holding when it became clear Damon was alive. “Rachel,” Max said, and then she pointed the bat at Chloe. As if it was a magic word, Rachel and Frank passed each other, going in opposite directions. Max turned to watch Frank, not Rachel, who crossed to Chloe and reached up immediately to take her by the shoulders.

Looking past the girl who was trying to speak to her, Chloe watched Max actually pull the door to the RV open for Frank. The pair shared some sort of look, some sort of whisper and then the door slammed shut behind Frank, earning an audible “Fuck you!” from inside the RV. The bat clattered to the ground and its wielder’s face eased. Max turned her back to the vehicle and began to approach.

“Wait,” Rachel called, suddenly, toward the vehicle. Bolting across the short distance, she began to bang on the door. “Wait, you need to tell me about her. Where is she? I need to find her.” The engine started, drawing Chloe’s eyes to the windshield where Frank was hurriedly shifting into gear. Rachel ignored her when she called for the girl to step back, but no further injury to anyone was dealt as the RV began to back up, toward the road. It was only then that Chloe began to realize that she was shaking, that her stomach was turning and that they had come very close to someone other than Damon getting hurt.

For a moment, Rachel stood in silence beside the RV’s tire tracks, then she turned, reached for the discarded baseball bat and stormed off, past Chloe, past the truck and deeper into the junkyard.

“Wait, Rachel?” Chloe started to turn, before a hand closed around her wrist. She shot back around only to see Max, calmly shaking her head. As Rachel vanished around a corner, something that sounded like glass shattered. “What the fuck? What the fuck was that?”

“Chloe, breathe.” Max no longer had the whole ‘angel of death’ thing going on, but she was also not showing signs of the meek, anxious persona she sometimes took on. Then again, Chloe thought, actually following the girl’s advice. She’s shaking like a leaf. It was true. As much as Chloe’s arms and legs felt unstable and she worried that taking even a step was a poor idea, Max was literally shivering, even to the point where the hand that released Chloe’s wrist almost tremored. Chloe decided not to say something about it.

“I just, I saw what was going on and I had to do something. He saw her coming, he didn’t see me coming.” That’s not- that doesn’t answer anything. Max turned her head and looked in either direction before pressing her back against the old truck. Chloe’s phone vibrated in her pocket, and she ignored it. Something metallic--and thankfully in the opposite direction as her father’s old car--took a brutal beating from the bat in Rachel’s hands as Max slid slowly to the ground, the thespian’s rage a soundtrack to the scene. For one brief second, Chloe thought Max was going to
pass out as she wrapped her arms tight around herself, closed her eyes and leaned forward, head resting on her knees.

“Hey,” Chloe said, kneeling. “I kinda need you to stay with me. Don’t go fainting on me now.” Max shook her head without lifting it, but it was message enough for Chloe to calm down. Conflicting urges to go after Rachel or comfort Max rose up and instead of helping her make a decision either way it just reinforced that today was a weird fucking day. Around the same time that frustrated screaming in the distance gave way to silence, Max’s shaking calmed as well and Chloe found hers had, too. While likely mere seconds, they might have all sat like that for hours, for how it felt.

Eventually, the sound of footsteps drew Max’s gaze back up and Chloe’s as well. Rachel was approaching from the back of the truck and though her jacket was dragging on the ground behind her, she looked far more calm, calmer even than Chloe felt. Shit, what do I even say? I’m sorry my idea sucked? I’m sorry I almost got you killed? I’m sorry I wasn’t the one who stepped up and did something? I don’t fucking know. She didn’t look livid anymore, at least.

“You know,” Rachel said, “If you do make it to Blackwell, you should look into the theater classes. You’ve got improv downpat.” It took Chloe a second to realize she was talking to Max, but the girl on the ground sat up more fully and started to laugh. As she answered, Max retrieved her bag and opened it briefly. She pulled out and examined first a camera and then her laptop, as if checking each for damage. Once satisfied, she put it back.

“Yeah, well,” Max said, “I had a couple friends who taught me everything I know.” When she was done laughing (that’s the adrenaline, Chloe reminded herself as she fought the urge to join her) Max stood up. “And I’ll think about it. I think Chloe would do better in those, but that’s a whole other story. I- uh, I’m sorry you didn’t get what you wanted out of them.” Chloe shook her head, but again this wasn’t directed at her, so she stepped back.

“Yeah, well,” Rachel echoed the girl as she threw the coat over her left shoulder. “How did you know we needed a superhero, anyway?” Chloe had tried to broach the subject before but Max had not been in any shape to talk. At least now that everyone was somewhat calmer and Chloe’s heartbeat did not sound louder than the people talking around her, it was time to get down to the bottom of that question, though.

“The thing is,” Max said, sounding somewhere between amused and embarrassed quite suddenly. “I felt shitty about the idea of you sleeping in a junkyard, so I sort of caught the next bus out this way and intended to spend a bit of time trying to convince you that, you know, you should talk to Joyce.” That makes sense, Chloe did not try to hide rolling her eyes at Max. “So, I get here and there’s these guys acting like they’re hot shit. I kind of listened in a little bit then went to find something solid.” Is she actually apologizing for eavesdropping after that? “I just meant to try to scare them a bit, or maybe bust out a window on that ‘free candy’ machine of theirs but when I got
back shit sort of hit the fan.” Chloe nodded, thinking privately that that was a fair assessment. *Also, at least someone appreciates my art. Even if Chip doesn’t.*

“So, taking stock of the situation,” Rachel said, “You’re covered in dirt, had to piss off the big bad drug dealer in town, didn’t get to eat breakfast, have a meeting with Wells in half an hour, we didn’t find out a *damn* thing about my mother *and* no one managed to vandalize Frank’s RV?”

“In my defense,” Chloe said, “I did that last one back at the mill.”

“Point,” Rachel replied, nodding curtly. As if punctuating the moment, Max’s stomach growled loudly. Chloe couldn’t help but laugh. “So the morning was an entire wash?”

“Not quite,” Chloe replied as both of the others seemed to straighten themselves up, knocking dirt and dust from their jeans. “We do have a sweet-ass ride that can get *you* to Blackwell and *you* to your father’s office on time if we go in that order and no cops pull us over.” Chloe patted the side of the truck. “It’s not what you’d call strictly legal to drive it, but neither is knocking Damon out and making Frank wish he wore his brown pants.” Max’s smile at that was a lot more natural than the look she wore standing over Damon’s prone form. Chloe tried not to think about that. “But I *do* think there’s enough gas to get you guys into town and get back.”

“You know,” Max said, shouldering her bag. “I’m sure if you call the guy who owns the place, he’ll sell it cheap.” Max turned an appraising eye on the vehicle. “Rachel?” Max told her. “You jump in first, I think I get shotgun.”
Chapter Four: Prometheus' Gift

Alright, Max. Chloe shifted from one foot to another, staring at the diner from just across the street. You win, asshole. For a moment she contemplated the last time she actually felt trepidation about walking into the Two Whales and couldn’t really place it. Knowing me, Chloe thought as she openly jaywalked, it was probably back when I got my first F on a Chemistry test. The temptation to check her phone, to look for something, anything to distract her from the inevitable conversation rose up but instead she pulled the door to the diner open and walked in.

The customers were pretty typical fare for a weekend around lunch time. A pair of cops sat up at the bar, a couple of groups that she was fairly sure were all fishermen littered the booths and (Oh, I must be some sort of psychic, Chloe thought) Mrs. Grant sat at a table in the far corner of the dining area. Let's hope I don't summon other members of Blackwell staff with my thoughts. It only took one particular scan of the room to see her mother cross the room with a pot of coffee, bound for a table seating a man wearing a hat that literally had fishing lures hanging from it. As soon as his cup was full, her mother turned to greet the ‘new arrival’ and Chloe tried to tell herself that the pleased look on her face was real and not put on for anyone’s sake.

“Have a seat,” she finally said, gesturing to an empty booth close to the door. Chloe tried to offer the blonde a smile to match her own, but all she could really feel was a combination of dread and frustration that she had let someone she had not spoken to in weeks ‘talk sense’ into her after about a day back in town. “I can’t really take a break, but I want to talk.” Chloe nodded and sat down, not really saying anything. There was no pretense of privacy to be had in this plan, but it had the added benefit of being a conversation she could have with her mother without Sergeant Dildo interrupting to try to whip her into shape.

It was only a minute or so later, as Chloe sat turning her phone over in her hands, that her mother returned with two glasses of coke and then, to her surprise, sat down opposite of her. The doors to the kitchen opened and out stepped one of the cooks she worked with. Lewis? Chloe asked herself, then shrugged the question off. Whatever his name was, he was red in the face and Chloe couldn’t help but wonder how hot it was back there. Across from her, in that outfit that Chloe felt a little bit of bitterness toward, her mother settled back in the seat.
“A friend of mine told me I was being a bit of a dumba- a bit stupid. Made me promise I’d come talk to you now and not later,” Chloe tried to smile again, but there was some small degree of guilt that the first thing she said to her mother was a lie of omission. It’s not like I can say, ‘oh by the way, Max ran away to come back here but really doesn’t want her parents to know yet.’ “So, yeah.”

“Friend huh? Was it Rachel? The girl from Principal Wells’ office and the play?” Chloe blinked.

“You heard, huh?”

“ Heard?” Chloe tilted her head. “Honey, I was there.”

“What?”

“Well,” Joyce said, pulling from her apron a small, folded flyer that Chloe recognized immediately as advertising The Tempest. “I walked out after my shift to find this under my wipers with the time and date circled. All things considered, I thought maybe it was my daughter trying to find a way to talk to me and since she’s suddenly become so shy about answering that phone of hers,” Chloe stopped spinning the phone in her hands. “Maybe this was her reaching out. Imagine my surprise when there you are, on stage and then afterward, I couldn’t find you.”

“I didn’t put that there,” Chloe told her. “I-I didn’t even know I was going to be on stage until like, half an hour before? Rachel sort of volunteered me.” Okay, that’s weird. Her mother folded the flyer up and instead of discarding it, she slid it right back into the apron.

“Well, whoever did it, I’m glad. I would have hated to miss my daughter’s big debut.” Chloe only narrowly avoided rolling her eyes, but it still felt like a Herculean effort feeding into an epic victory. “So,” Chloe didn’t enjoy the tone of her mother’s voice when she continued and again feeling like something of a psychic could swear she saw where this was going. “This Rachel, is she a, very close friend?” In a moment of awkward panic, no change of subject came to mind, but Chloe did glance down at her hands as she answered.

“I don’t know,” Chloe replied. That seemed like the most honest answer she could give without giving into the urge to turn and leave the diner. While doing so might have adhered to the letter of her promise to Max, it hardly honored the spirit of it.

“Well, maybe next time you come in here, you bring her with you. Or better yet, bring her home for dinner some time.” No, that’s a cheap tactic, Chloe thought, desperately. Trying to swing the
“I mean, I had dinner with her parents last night, so that seems fair,” Chloe told her.

“Is that where you stayed last night, then?” Again, the potential implications of the question were pretty far reaching. It might have been possible to play off their friendship as only a friendship if it weren’t for the fact that her mother had apparently witnessed the very public promise between the two. *I haven’t actually had time to think about it, I haven’t had time to think about any of it.* Chloe couldn’t help but think back on Rachel’s parting comment as she got out of the truck only a short time ago, that if Chloe didn’t think she could leave yet, after all, Rachel understood. *What she didn’t say is if she would stay.*

“Yeah,” Chloe admitted, finally. “She got some really bad news after the play and couldn’t really talk to her parents about it. So I stayed in their guest room.” Joyce seemed to sigh, shaking her head, though there was half of a smile on her face at the same time.

“That’s what I don’t understand about the way you’re acting lately,” Chloe swallowed the retort on the tip of her tongue (“Yeah? And how’s that?”) “This is who you are. Someone who, having all kinds of problems of her own, would go out of her way to take care of a friend. You and Max were always like that with each other, too, you know?” *Shit! Why is she bringing Max up? Does she know?* Chloe tried desperately to keep her face neutral. “So if that’s still who my daughter is, how is it that things went so wrong between us? Why can’t we go back to the way things were?” *This is unfair. She’s making it about me and her and it’s not that simple. Besides, she’s the one who brought that asshole into this.*

“David is an asshole, mom.” She could see the brick wall fall into place behind her mother’s face and knew that there was no value in taking that route. *Besides, I promised Max I wasn’t coming here to fight and if I work this out then she’s going to have to listen to me about this sleeping out in parks bullshit.*

“Chloe, come home,” her mother asked, quite suddenly shifting the subject even as her long nails sounded against the table. *She’s getting annoyed. I’m not doing this right, either.* Chloe closed her eyes. “Chloe?”

“Well, yeah. I can’t exactly stay where I was the other night. I just, I need time to figure out *how.*”

“What do you mean, how, Chloe?” *Okay, okay, fine. I’ll try this her way.*
“Mom, David is an asshole.” Her mother let out a frustrated sigh and started to speak. “But it’s more than that. He’s got a superiority complex and he’s a sexist pig and for some reason it feels like you’re okay with that.” No response came, so Chloe continued, aware she was, at best, being humored. “I… I have a problem with the idea that you’re okay with that. I have a problem with how he behaves. I have a problem living under the same roof as him and I know that in a couple weeks of if I come back, he’s going to be treating me like some sort of fresh military recruit and running the house like a military unit.” This time, when she looked up, she did not see the brick wall. Good, finish it.

“I’m not in the military. I won’t be treated like I am. If I make stupid choices they’re mine to make and yours to punish. Maybe even his if you say they are and I will hate it but I can’t make myself come back right now knowing I’m going to be talked down at, condescended to and openly insulted and my mother won’t have my back!” Suddenly, what started in her mind as a controlled response was becoming anything but if the lump in her throat was any indication.

“Honey, you’re exaggerating about David.” the response came in mothering tones that tried to hide the hurt. It did not succeed and Chloe was not sure whether she should be upset about that or not. Maybe she had to hurt her mother to make her understand she was being hurt.

“You know what, mom? Maybe I am.” Chloe looked up. “But whether I am or not, I’m not coming back for a couple of days. So do me a favor. For the next two days, pay attention to what he says and does. Count how many times he goes off on a rant about women always being or doing something. Count how many times he assumes superiority or talks down to other people, especially women. Count how many times he says someone is lying or plotting something without you being able to see any proof. Think about it.” She clenched her fist around her phone. “If I’m full of shit, I’ll come back right off the bat. If you watch, actually listen and see something, you have to say something or I’m not going to trust you to have your own back, much less mine.”

Chloe wasn’t able to really read her mother’s emotions when she looked back at her face and that was probably only partially due to watering eyes she refused to acknowledge. From behind the counter, Lewis or Simon or Duncan (or whatever the damn cook’s name was) called out for her mother as a couple entered the restaurant. I really can’t read her right now, Chloe thought feeling somehow disgusted with herself as her mother answered the man and started to stand up.

“Will you be spending this afternoon with Rachel, at least?” her mother asked. The question was so far from an answer to anything that Chloe had just said that the disgust with herself changed and turned outward. She couldn’t help it, she felt contempt for her mother. It made lying by omission about Max much easier as she nodded in response. “Good. I don’t want you to be alone right now.” There was one more moment, a glance back at Chloe before Joyce hurried to the table to greet the newcomers. Chloe leaned forward and pressed her forehead to her crossed arms. Son of a bitch!
She might have sat like that for seconds or hours, but eventually her phone began to vibrate and ring, loudly since it was on the table beneath her head. Feeling a little more in control of her emotions, Chloe answered it without bothering to check who might be calling. It was really only going to be one of two people, as anyone else just texted her. One of those people had just walked away from the table and left her feeling actually disappointed in her mother for the first time in her entire life. *I swear I tried, this time. I swear I did.*

“Hello.”

“Howdy,” Max’s voice greeted her half hearted answer. There was a tone of caution in it. *Like she’s talking to someone breakable.* “Finish your coke. I’m at the stop across the street.” *And that’ll be why. She was probably watching the whole damn thing.* Chloe did not bother to answer and after a second Max hung up. Instead of following her advice and finishing her drink, Chloe took her mother’s distraction as an opportunity and slipped from the restaurant after leaving a couple of dollars on the table. The issue was that as soon as she hit the bottom step of the diner, she could see the bus stop and there was most certainly no one sitting at it. *Right,* she thought, wiping at her eyes, *I guess I’ll just wait for her there.*

As soon as she reached the stop a head peeked out from behind it and it occurred to her that Max might have been hiding to avoid being seen by her mother. *Oh.* Chloe opened her mouth to say something, but two thin wires trailing from Max’s ears told her that she was probably listening to music. Instead of removing them, Max reached out and grabbed her hand, quickly and decidedly hurrying down the road. It took Chloe a second to match pace, but her legs were longer, she was taller. In the end she had the feeling that she could keep up with Max at any speed. *Endurance, though, that might be an issue.*

Eventually, the pair turned a corner and Max led them off the sidewalk, back from the road. The act made more sense than it had that morning, but Chloe was no longer thinking about that. Instead she was grasping at threads of memories of a dark, warm summer night, when they were both a lot smaller, about the sound of music and fair rides, people laughing and bells ringing. She could almost picture Max leading her suddenly ahead of their parents, determined to beat them to the ferris wheel. Somehow when she opened her eyes she could not unsee the image and it was hard to remember this was almost a different person leading her away from the diner. Slowly, she started to smile again.

When Max stopped she finally pulled her earbuds out and, laughing at the look on Chloe’s face, leaned up against a tree. Chloe wasn’t entirely sure how to take the laughter but she did reach out and pluck an earbud from Max’s lax grasp, curious as to what she was listening to. *Wait,* Chloe thought as she listened. *Isn’t this Toto? Hold the Line?*

“Howdy,” Max’s voice greeted her half hearted answer. There was a tone of caution in it. *Like she’s talking to someone breakable.* “Finish your coke. I’m at the stop across the street.” *And that’ll be why. She was probably watching the whole damn thing.* Chloe did not bother to answer and after a second Max hung up. Instead of following her advice and finishing her drink, Chloe took her mother’s distraction as an opportunity and slipped from the restaurant after leaving a couple of dollars on the table. The issue was that as soon as she hit the bottom step of the diner, she could see the bus stop and there was most certainly no one sitting at it. *Right,* she thought, wiping at her eyes, *I guess I’ll just wait for her there.*

As soon as she reached the stop a head peeked out from behind it and it occurred to her that Max might have been hiding to avoid being seen by her mother. *Oh.* Chloe opened her mouth to say something, but two thin wires trailing from Max’s ears told her that she was probably listening to music. Instead of removing them, Max reached out and grabbed her hand, quickly and decidedly hurrying down the road. It took Chloe a second to match pace, but her legs were longer, she was taller. In the end she had the feeling that she could keep up with Max at any speed. *Endurance, though, that might be an issue.*

Eventually, the pair turned a corner and Max led them off the sidewalk, back from the road. The act made more sense than it had that morning, but Chloe was no longer thinking about that. Instead she was grasping at threads of memories of a dark, warm summer night, when they were both a lot smaller, about the sound of music and fair rides, people laughing and bells ringing. She could almost picture Max leading her suddenly ahead of their parents, determined to beat them to the ferris wheel. Somehow when she opened her eyes she could not unsee the image and it was hard to remember this was almost a different person leading her away from the diner. Slowly, she started to smile again.

When Max stopped she finally pulled her earbuds out and, laughing at the look on Chloe’s face, leaned up against a tree. Chloe wasn’t entirely sure how to take the laughter but she did reach out and pluck an earbud from Max’s lax grasp, curious as to what she was listening to. *Wait,* Chloe thought as she listened. *Isn’t this Toto? Hold the Line?*

“Classic Rock fan?” Chloe asked. “I thought it was all indie folk with you.” Max’s smile faded slightly. Confused, Chloe offered the earbud back.
“I’ve gotten a taste for a bit of everything. Someone got me into a lot of classic rock a couple of months ago. Helped me get through some shit.” The change in the tone was sudden and very off-putting. “Sometimes I need different music for different moods. If I was angry I wouldn’t be listening to fucking Toto.” Her grin was a weak imitation of the earlier one.

“And what kind of mood brings out Toto?” Chloe asked her, genuinely curious as Max started walking again. Though, where to?

“The kind that keeps you from sleeping,” was the only reply she came back with. Chloe didn’t pursue it any further, but noticed that the mood had more or less soured.

“I’m s- uh, how did the tour go?”

“Blackwell’s nice,” Max finally said, her voice sounding more open and friendly. “I like it.”

“You would,” Chloe replied, shaking her head.

“What’s that mean?” Max asked. “Besides, it looks like it has a pretty nice science department. Why aren’t you a bigger fan?”

“I don’t know,” Chloe said, drawing even with Max for a moment. “It’s not as if I suddenly hate the stuff. I even managed to get into a physics course this semester and that was pretty cool, but,” she shrugged. “It’s that place. It’s fucked: pretentious but screwed up and pretty much just exists to do whatever the people giving it money want.” Like the Prescotts. Max didn’t respond, but Chloe looked up to see a sign at the end of the road and knew where Max was leading her, now. Up ahead was a small park whose border ran up against a larger national park. We used to sneak into that park through the woods. Like every weekend. Max loved it out here. The idea that this might be where Max slept the night before snuck into her head and she pondered how best to bring it up. Maybe give it a second and it’ll come up naturally? As they passed through a gate and into the park, she again was hit with a wave of nostalgia.

“You mind if I light up?” Max asked. “I need to chill out.”
“What?” Max paused, turning back with an appraising glance.

“Don’t play dumb, Chloe,” the photographer replied. “It really, really doesn’t suit you. I know I’m a fucking wreck sometimes and this helps.” The two walked for a moment in silence as Chloe decided whether or not to pursue any of the lines of questioning in her head. “Oh, right, I meant for you to have this.” Clutching the joint between her lips, Max reached into her bag and pulled out a photograph that Chloe remembered her taking in the truck, offering it to Chloe.

Chloe took the picture, smiling at the rendering of Rachel pressed up close against her as she drove. She looks happy, Chloe thought, taking in Rachel’s grin at the camera. We’d just missed out on getting Frank to tell us anything about her mother and she still looks happy. As her eyes passed over her own face, she had to admit she looked happy, too. Maybe I have shit to be happy about, right now.

“Thanks,” she told Max, pocketing the picture before taking a hit of the offered joint. “You know, I never figured Max Caulfield for a stoner.”

“Yeah, me either,” she replied. “Guess I’ve had some bad influences.” There was some air of humor in the response. “But if you think I’m shit right now, you should’ve seen what I was like before I got my vaporizer. Wish I could’ve brought it with me but, I can really only carry what’s in this bag and I wanted a change of clothes and my camera. Chloe nodded. “You have that look on your face,” Max told her. Chloe raised an eyebrow. “You want to know something, just ask.” Oh, so she’s suddenly an expert on my looks, huh?

“What really made you come back to Arcadia Bay so suddenly? Tiny little shitstain of a town.” Max nodded as if it was a fair question and made for a patch of trees away from the main path through the park. Not that it hasn’t been deserted so far. Max turned, pressing her back against one as she exhaled a stream of smoke.

“It wasn’t sudden,” she replied, sounding very serious. “I didn’t want to go in the first place, especially with what happened to William. I am so sorry about him, Chloe.” Chloe shook her head, though she wasn’t entirely sure what she was trying to say with the gesture. “I thought about what it would be like to come back a lot. I missed you. One day, I guess I just had enough of pretending like Arcadia Bay wasn’t home, like you weren’t home.” Chloe felt strangely unnerved by the last part.

“C-come on,” she tried. “Seattle couldn’t be all that bad. You had smoking buddies and, what, probably a boy?” Max shook her head.
“No boys,” she replied. “Besides, even if I wanted them, it’d be a bit hard. The downside of skipping a couple grades is that you’re younger than everyone around you.” Then, before Chloe could say anything else, Max continued. “I mean, yeah, I have a couple friends back there. I’m gonna miss the hell out of them. They were nice. But they’re gone now. Lots of people are gone now and I want to come home.”

“So, uh, not to be debbie downer again, but like I said this morning, this is probably a bad way to convince your folks to let you go to Blackwell.” Max nodded.

“I felt kind of backed into a corner,” she offered Chloe a hit, Chloe shook her head. “I didn’t make the best choice, but I think I made the best choice I could. They weren’t listening. They didn’t understand it. It’s a bit late to take it back now so I guess I have to double down.”

“I understand that,” Chloe replied. “Sleeping in a junkyard, remember?” Max nodded, again.

“How did that go? It didn’t - well it didn’t look so good.”

“I don’t think she really listened.” Chloe’s phone went off, interrupting the conversation. Half expecting it to be a message from a distraught Rachel, she opened it. “It’s Frank,” she told Max. “Damon Merrick is going to be okay, but he’s pissed off.” By way of response she simply sent: Sera? Very quickly, as if Frank was still holding the phone he responded. “He knows where she’s going to be, not where she is.” Max leaned close, to read. Frank was not forthcoming and after a moment stopped responding entirely.

_Frank_

_Let me think. You’re asking me to do something that could come down pretty bad on me. Like, the wrong-end-of-Damon’s-knife bad, Price._

Chloe closed the chat, cursing and sent a message to Rachel as Max took another hit. Rachel’s response was immediate and probing, despite theoretically being in a room with her father. _I bet that’s not going well_. It felt horrible, but eventually Chloe had to tell her she had no new information. By this point, Max had moved away and was no longer reading over her shoulder.

“So,” Max started, “about Rachel.” Suddenly, Chloe might have been back at the diner sitting across from her mother. The very idea that a similar discussion was about to take place made her flush and she tried to tell herself it was from annoyance.
“Yeah,” Chloe started, looking to cut the conversation off, early. “I’m not entirely sure what’s going on there. And yeah, it might be something more than just friends. Is that really so weird?” Max laughed, openly at her. It was definitely enough to leave Chloe feeling frustrated.

“I meant ‘what’s going on with this woman you two are looking for?’ Still, it’s good to know even the great Chloe Price is able to get struck by cupid’s arrow like the rest of us mere mortals.” Now it was impossible to deny precisely why she grew red in the face. An almost petty impulse rose up, the temptation to ask Max why Rachel seemed to intimidate her. Stop it. She’s not even trying to give you shit for real. It’s probably just part of the big anxiety thing she was talking about.

Chloe needed a few minutes to recount most of the tale to Max who accepted it all with little more than a muttered, ‘well shit.’ You know, she can be as nervous as she wants to, but this girl is pretty damn cool about shit like what happened in the junkyard. I mean, maybe not in the moment, but now…. She couldn’t help but think that Max was precisely the kind of person she and Rachel needed help from dealing with this shit.

“I think you need to talk to Frank again,” Max finally said. It hadn’t occurred to Chloe that she might have been turning the problem over in her head, but that did strike her as a very Max thing to do. “I’m thinking, if he knows something you need to know, make a deal with him.”

“I don’t know. I used to think he wasn’t much of a problem, but now I wonder if he’s not kind of, you know, dangerous.” Max held out her hand.

“Lemme see your phone?” Chloe tilted her head. “Don’t worry. I just think his number would be good to have if I move back here.” Tentative to believe Max had changed the subject so quickly to securing her own drug supplier in town, Chloe pulled up Frank’s number and passed it to Max, watching her program it into her own phone. “There,” Max eventually said, shoving it unceremoniously back into her hand. “Now, onto the problem. Try this: text him and ask him if there’s some way you can find out what you want to know without his boss knowing it was him that told you.”

“If there is, don’t you think he would’ve told us?” Max chuckled.

“I don’t think that guy strikes me as the ‘deep thinker.’ Besides, he’s probably been a bit distracted with his boss being hella mad about getting his ass kicked by a little girl.” Chloe almost smiled at this. That’s true. Things must suck for him right now. Still, she thought as Max momentarily wore that dangerous grin again, the same one she wore standing overtop Damon. It’s not the whole thing where she looks proud of beating the shit out of him, I get that. But that smile looks like someone who enjoyed it. That’s weird.
“Why does everyone I know nowadays use the word, ‘hella?’” Instead of answering, Max insistently pressed Chloe’s phone into her palm. “Fine. I promised her: any means necessary.”

“I’ve made that promise a few times. I get it.” You know? I bet she does get it.

Me

Frank, is there a way you can tell me what I want to know without your boss knowing it was you?

Frank

Price, you’re being stupid about this. Stupider than usual.

Me

I think it’s ‘more stupid’ but I always sucked at English.

Frank

Where are you now?

Me

Carlin Park

Frank?

Frank?

When Chloe filled Max in, she legitimately cracked her knuckles, in a way that Chloe had seen herself do in the mirror a hundred times. Shaking her head, Chloe asked what in the world Max was thinking. Instead of immediately responding, she once more opened the bag over her shoulder and looked through its contents. Chloe waited patiently, though she did take a second to identify the laptop, a small notebook, her camera and a can of some sort that she could only guess was mace. Max is packed lightly, I see.

“I’m thinking he’s coming,” Max finally answered once she shut the bag, “I’m thinking I have nothing else to do until I go back to Seattle except hang out with my best friend, hang out with my home.”
“You’re weird as hell.”

“You’re weird as hell.” Max’s prediction was right. Not bothering to care about such things like the lack of a road, Frank’s RV barreled down the path into the park half an hour later and rather than wait for Chloe to lead the way, Max stepped out from their hiding spot and flagged Frank down. The brakes made an unpleasant sound as he slammed on them and then gestured through the window for them to join him. Chloe glanced sideways at the girl, wondering if she was going to be willing to get into a RV with a man she had threatened a few hours ago. Max was the first to the door of the vehicle when Frank threw it open.

“Get in,” Frank told them by way of greeting. He had thrown aside his signature hat and was running one hand nervously through hair that was thinning far too early.

“No thanks mister,” Chloe responded. “I’m not looking for any free candy.”

“Listen, if you want to see this woman, you have a really limited timeframe, now get in.” Max was climbing into the RV before Chloe could respond and that left Chloe no choice but to follow her in. Frank, for his part, shot no special look toward Max. “I see the other one isn’t here. She seemed like the one who wanted to know what’s happening the most.”

“I can text her. She could be here in maybe half an hour tops.”

“Price, you might have an hour to see this woman.” Chloe shook her head and glanced at Max, who was strapping into the front passenger seat without another word. Chloe watched her pet the puppy resting between the seats. “It’s now or never.”

“I’ll text her on the way,” Chloe finally said. She didn’t bother to strap in anywhere, instead approaching and crouching next to Pompidou as Frank turned the RV around and aimed for the edge of town. She pulled her phone out. “Where are we going?”

“To one hell of a fire walk.”
**Aristeia the First**

Disclaimer: Anything familiar to you, I do not own. This is entirely a work of fan fiction for personal amusement and fulfillment. I make nothing from this and own none of it.

Note: A friendly warning. This chapter contains descriptions of acts of violence and a brief if detailed description of the results. As with most of the story so far, themes of mental health and emotional stability are dominant in portions. I would advise readers to proceed carefully and take a break when and if they think they need it while reading. I hate to say it, but this is still on the fairly lighter end of what is possible here and as of this chapter we’ve officially gone down the rabbit hole.

---

**Chapter Five: Aristeia the First**

“I want to know what the hell is going on,” Chloe said. She let her eyes drift past Frank, who once more refused to respond to Max. The girl had been relatively quiet since climbing into the RV but there was no hiding some mix of anticipation and anxiety in her face. There was also no hiding the way her hands shook. _Must make taking pictures a bitch_, Chloe thought. The inane observation passed and at Frank’s continued silence she almost lost her cool. Max reached out to her. “What?”

“Take this,” Max said, holding out her small MP3 player. “You need it more than I do right now.” _I doubt that_, Chloe wanted to respond. _Your voice is shaking worse than your hands._

“It’s alright,” Chloe said, “I mean, no offense, but our tastes in music might be a bit apart.” Max shook her head and held up the music player so Chloe could small screen, which looked to be loading something titled ‘playlist 2.’

“Just trust me on this one,” Max said. “Besides, whatever’s about to happen one of us needs to be calmed the fuck down and it’s not gonna be me.” _Why does that feel like a lie?_ Chloe took the music player anyway and, seeing that she was getting nothing from Frank and only irritation from Max, she stood and carefully made her way to a seat back in the “kitchen.” Strangely unable to look away from the filthy dishes in the sink, (_it’s like roadkill, you shouldn’t look but you just do_) Chloe slipped the earbuds into place. It took a second for her to find the play button but the first song launched immediately into fairly hard hitting drums and a guitarist absolutely shredding. It was far closer to her type of music than she would have expected out of Max. _Killswitch_, she mused. _That kind of makes sense._ Squinting down at the screen, she found herself wishing it was backlit as the back of the RV was a little darker. Eventually she snorted despite herself. _Of all of their songs, ‘This Fire Burns.’_
Shaking her head, Chloe leaned back in the seat and closed her eyes. For a moment there was no change but after several seconds she found herself far less upset with Frank and more pissed at anyone who stood between her and Sera. That’s right, she told herself. That’s right, I made a fucking promise. I’ve got this. We’ve got this. Grinning despite herself as the song changed, Chloe decided to get down to business. So, I find this woman, I tell her Rachel wants to talk to her. If she really wants to meet Rachel, well that should be enough to get her to listen and wait. After that, it’s all about Rachel finding a way out to the fucking mill. There’s nothing I can do about that now. So the next question is, what’s waiting for us there? Frank is freaked.

As if he could hear her thoughts, up at the front of the RV, Frank slammed on the brakes. Chloe grabbed quickly to the edge of the table as the RV slowed down significantly. Once her balance was assured she jerked the earphones out of her ears. There were voices loud enough she was sure Frank was yelling at a driver who had cut them off or something. She didn’t bother to turn around, just cocked her head to one side and listened with the music pumping into the other. Pretty quickly it became evident that Frank was not yelling at anyone outside of the RV. Slowly and carefully, she turned her head around just enough to watch from the corner of her eye.

“You’re a piece of fucking work, you know that, kid? I’m doing enough al- I’m risking my fucking life here.”

“Yeah? Chloe’s done it a couple times over now, how’s it feel to be a bigger bitch than a couple of teenage girls?” Max staring across the way at Frank with Pompidou curled up in her lap, his head perked up at the noise. Holy shit, Max. It wasn’t quite possible to make out her expression but with the tone of voice Chloe had to assume she was glaring daggers at him.

“You just shut the fuck up and let me drive, alright? You’re here because you’re with Price. Don’t make me think this is all more trouble than it’s worth!” Max shook her head and for a second instead of responding, stared straight down at the dog in her lap. Chloe wanted to get a better look at the situation but the one thing she was sure of, inherently, deep down in her stomach, was that she was not supposed to be hearing any of this. Did Max actually hand me this thing to make sure I wouldn’t be able to listen in? Or am I just being paranoid about her right now? She felt instantly that the thought was pretty shitty, given that Max was doing all of this just to help and was clearly fucking terrified of something.

“Listen, Frank. I want to know what to expect because it’s my job to look out for her. Not yours. You need to look out for yourself. I get that, I get that better than you think.” Chloe swallowed and strained to hear Frank. Carefully she pressed pause on the mp3 player and turned more completely away from them both. “When shit hits the fan, you’ll need to look out for yourself. I don’t. I only need to look out for Chloe.” That makes no sense, Chloe thought.

“What do you actually think you can do against Damon? He’s going to be there waiting you know and if you think he was pissed before you haven’t seen anything yet.” Fuck. Damon Merrick is
“Everything I need to handle that, I’ve already got and if all else fails, I have no problem stepping up to home plate again.” Frank made a noise that sounded like the abandoned lovechild of a groan, a growl and a sigh. She’s so cavalier about that kind of thing but I was there. I saw her after Frank left. She almost lost her shit. “Seriously, if he so much as touches her, I don’t care. I’ll do whatever I have to. You’ve got a really nice looking bat back there. Use that to collect from the kids at Blackwell?” Frank grunted. “No, I bet you have other people do that for you. That’s the difference here. I’ll do whatever I fucking have to. I don’t care, at this point. So work with me. Tell me what to expect.”

“You know, I can’t decide if you’re full of shit or actually fuck-crazy.” Max laughed and Chloe shivered, beginning to feel a little sick to her stomach.

“What’s waiting on us at the old mill?”

“Damon’s going to kill Sera. Very soon.” Okay, yeah, I think I need to puke. Careful not to move much, Chloe breathed slowly through her nose. She turned her head to look straight at them, the silent earbuds leading down to a paused player. When Max prompted him to go on, Frank did. “I think he’s being pressured.” And who has the power to pressure Damon Merrick. Chloe blinked and as the realization hit her, she closed her throat tight against the urge to gag. Who has the power to pressure Damon Merrick and wants to get rid of Sera? There was only one one answer to that question which made any sense. Chloe turned away again, pressing one hand to her mouth.

“When we get there, go ahead and go in like he’d expect. I’ll handle the rest of it.” Chloe could hear the pressure shift in the seat and then the tiny clicking of the puppy’s nails against the floor as he jumped down. A quick glance showed that Max was curled in on herself in that way she so often sat when upset. Frank’s silence broke when she buried her face against her knees. Chloe didn’t try to go to her and help: she knew if she moved, she was going to be ill.

“Why the fuck are you like this?” Frank asked. “What are you going to do when talking about this shit does this to you? You talk a big game kid, but face reality here. You caught him off guard last time. He’s going to be pissed this time.” Chloe wanted answers to most of those questions but nothing was forthcoming. The RV shuddered as Frank turned a corner and drove off of cement and onto dirt. “It’s because of Price, isn’t it?” A strange voice in the back of Chloe’s head, the one that had whispered an echo of an idea into her mind the day before rose up and quieted Chloe’s thoughts. Holding her breath, Chloe waited.
“Yes,” Max answered, tone devoid of all emotion. “Damn right. I’m going to be around from now on.” The sound of Max’s seat turning made Chloe look determinedly down at the table. “That means no matter what’s going on, she and her friends are off limits. This is important to Rachel which means it’s important to Chloe. That means it’s important to me. We’re going to do it, no matter what and I can think about these kinds of things.” Chloe dared to glance back.

“Kid, you don’t have a damn sense of- of self-preservation or whatever, do you?” Max sat straight up, looking Frank in the face until he turned his head and matched eyes with her.

“No, I don’t.” Sometimes, when people she knew well spoke, she could get an idea as to how genuine they were being, how truthful. Some people could be read like books and others couldn’t. Since coming back to Arcadia Bay, Max Caulfield had been one of those people who just couldn’t. She was confusing and self-contradicting, a total mess of nerves and confusion one second and willing to jump a drug dealer in a junkyard the next. For the first time since she looked Max in the eyes two nights ago, Chloe heard and recognized absolute truth from her mouth and it was almost enough to disgust her.

“You’re making me doubt this choice, kid.”

“The name’s Max,” she told Frank. “Not kid. I’m getting tired of that. You get us there and I’ll handle the rest of it.” As Frank replied with his refrain of “Crazy fucker,” a dam broke and Chloe stood, hand pressed to her mouth and hurried to the bathroom. She managed to mostly shut the door before her meal from the diner made a sudden, burning reappearance which made her eyes water.

“Oh what the hell?” Frank called from the front. Chloe ignored him, retching again. She was rewarded with a minute of relative silence before the RV pulled to a stop. Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit. The RV remained quiet as the engine shut off and that sound was only disturbed by the door opening and shutting. The door to the bathroom, on the other hand, received a soft knock a few seconds later. Chloe looked once into the cracked mirror above the sink, flushed the toilet and turned to open the door.

“MP3 player?” Max asked, holding out her hand. Finding herself, for once, the one not able to match Max’s eyes, Chloe handed the device over, forgetting to press play to make it look as if she had been listening. The jig was up anyway, it seemed because once Max had it back she reached out and tilted Chloe’s head up, forcing her to match the photographer’s gaze. Max’s eyes weren’t dead, but they were like a solid wall of stone: cold and unforgiving as death. “You were a lot better of an actress last night.” Holy shit, was that really only last night? Chloe asked herself, unable to even pretend to be embarrassed at being called out.
“What the hell was any of that about?” Chloe asked Max as she turned and marched toward the front of the RV. Pausing for a second to scratch Pompidou behind the ears, Max picked up her bag, staring out of the windshield at the burnt ruins of the Mill.

“Don’t worry about that,” Max told her, trying to sound a little more relaxed and failing. She had returned to a shaking voice, one which had been conspicuously absent when she was pissed at Frank. “I just figured Frank needed to be handled a certain way. So I did my best to handle him.”

“There was more than that going on,” Chloe insisted. Max loosed a small wire from her bag. Instead of answering at first she hooked one end of it into the MP3 player. “Why do I feel like that’s the first time I’ve heard your voice since you came back? Why does that fuckin’ scare me?”

“You’re just a little fucked up by everything going on,” Max told her. “So am I. I really really want a beer.” Chloe could agree that that was possible and she could even agree that a beer might not be the worst thing in the world. “Or a smoke. No time though.”

“No time?” Chloe asked as Max plugged the other end of the line into a small device and hung it from Frank’s rear view mirror. Max began to fiddle with the radio in front of her. The station she set it on was silent, devoid even of static, which made no sense until Chloe realized that the little device hanging from the mirror sent her music over a radio channel. “But there’s time to rock out?”

“No,” Max told her, next playing with the music player. “I keep a small folder of sound effect loops on here to…” Max glanced up, laughed and then glanced back down. “To fuck with people.” Chloe watched in irritation as Max turned the dial on Frank’s volume up all the way. She’s gonna blow out his excessive “Look At The Size of My Dick” speaker system. “Okay,” Max finally said, standing up. “Let’s go.”

“What are you doing?” Chloe asked as Max pushed past her, ducking low. The girl looked once around the RV and then her eyes landed on a baseball bat beside the door. With a smile that threatened to make Chloe ill all over again, Max grabbed it and opened the door to the RV.

“We’ve got like, two minutes to get into position.” When Chloe asked her what was happening, what that meant, Max just lead the way out of the RV. Chloe was beginning to become irritated but then followed anyway. What little foliage there used to be around the mill was burned away. The building itself was basically a blackened husk. The door Max lead her to was mostly still in tact, but parts of the roof were missing or, presumably collapsed and in other sections the wall was down to beams. Is this how fires normally work? Momentarily distracted, she did not think to wonder when Max raised a finger to her lips as they entered.
“Toward the stage,” she told Chloe. Feeling a bit bitter about it, Chloe started to take the lead. It was, apparently, unnecessary.

“How do you know where the stage is?” Chloe whispered, insistently as Max held her finger to her lips and began, painfully slowly, to walk toward the doorway separating the bar from the stage. A booming voice echoed from the other room, angry. The end of the bat Max was carrying lowered softly to the ground.

“No, you listen here you stupid, self-righteous fuck!” Chloe shook her head. Damon Merrick is pissed. “I did everything on my end. I got the bitch, I shot her up with the drouge du jour and now I can make her disappear for you. But you’re going to keep up your end of the bargain. I want to see a photo of the cash. I want to see you burn the evidence and I want a mother fucking name.” There was a pause, during which Max slowed even more and Chloe slowed to match her pace. “That so, Amber? Because I’ll be honest with you. I would just as happily leave her body outside the police station as make it disappear. Boy would people start asking questions then!” Another pause. Max inhaled once and passed across the doorway between the two rooms, pressing herself to one side and gesturing to the other. “Alright then, I’ll be awaiting your correspondence, asshole.”

Chloe exhaled slowly, trying to hear everything going on one room away over the sound of her heartbeat and finding it difficult. Okay, okay, focus Chloe. Think about what’s happening here. She pressed her shoulder carefully against splintered and charred boards. You’re at the Mill with Frank and Max. Sera is in that room and she’s about to be killed, Rachel’s on her way and you—what?

In another situation Chloe would want to shake Max and make her tell her what the plan was. As it was, though, she had none of her own and no room to complain. There are way too many questions. I need to tune this shit out. We have to rescue Sera and get out of her in enough time to warn Rachel off. Because, fuck this.

Frank and Damon started to talk but as soon as she heard their voices they were drowned out. This time, the culprit was not her racing heart but the sound of sirens in the distance. Sirens which were getting rapidly louder. Oh shit, Chloe thought. There weren’t a ton of reasonable excuses she could come up with to give the police for their presence there. When Chloe matched eyes with Max and saw a mischievous smile blooming, she understood precisely what Max had been up to with Frank’s stereo system.

“Son of a bitch!” Damon’s rage radiated through the room as Chloe could imagine firing having done hours ago. Wait a second, what happened to that fire? Why isn’t this place gone? She shook her head. Misinterpreting it, Max held up one hand, placatingly. “Go take a look.” Only a couple of seconds passed and the bill of Frank’s hat came into view, followed by the man himself. Wide eyes met with Chloe’s own and then with Max’s, before he stepped through the doorway. For a moment, the three looked at one another. Chloe felt her own bewilderment echoed in Frank’s eyes. Max was simply grinning, and made a “come on,” kind of gesture in Frank’s direction.
“Damon, you need to see this shit,” Frank called, stepping clear of the doorway. Chloe and Frank understood what Max, the youngest and smallest of the three of them was planning at the same time, judging by their simultaneous looks of utter horror. Oh god, this is like some sort of slapstick cartoon shit. Chloe stepped back from the doorway, intent on convincing Max to run, but it was too late. Damon was in fairly good condition, despite having taken a bat to the skull only a couple of hours before. He moved fast. That meant that when he passed through the doorway at a run, he had no time to react. The immediate effect was satisfying and utterly gruesome.

Bolting headfirst into a swinging baseball bat apparently had its downsides. Chloe felt the blood splatter on her face and across her shirt, but could not in the moment stop herself from watching the way his head turned with the force of the blow, the way his nose and jaw shattered or his eyes rolled up into his head as he collapsed to the floor. Dude, that one could have actually killed him. She looked up at Max and instead of the look of terror she might have been wearing herself or that horrible satisfaction from that morning, Max’s face was contorted in concentration as she tried to make her shaking hands loose a bandana of some sort from her sweatshirt’s pouch. While Chloe stared down at Damon, who did not move, Max wiped the baseball bat’s handle down as it leaned against her.

She’s actually wiping away fingerprints. Holy shit.

“God damn it, kid!” Frank yelled as the moment passed. “I mean, for fuck’s sake!” The sirens continued to blare. Chloe could not speak, but she also couldn’t tear her eyes away from Damon Merrick’s shattered face or the blood that was beginning to pool beneath it. Unbidden, the urge to joke about how sporty Max had gotten came and it felt so out of place, so improper that Chloe laughed once or twice, nervously, unable to stay still and stable. The sirens dulled and went silent as Max dropped the bloodstained bat to the ground.

“It’s what had to happen,” Max told them both, emphatically. “He’s going to be eating his dinner through a straw for a while but he’s alive, she’s alive and we’re alive.”

“Are you, are you fucking sure?” Chloe asked. “That he’s alive?” She didn’t want to reach down and check, somehow the thought was disgusting and violating. Instead of answering, Max stepped over his body and hurried through the doorway. Chloe followed after a second. The room no longer looked as large as it had three nights ago, full of people. The stage had mostly collapsed, rather like the stairs to the second level back in the entrance. Right in front of it, though, tied with greying ragged ropes to an old wooden chair was Sera. She hung limp and Damon had clearly struck her in the head himself, judging from the blood running down her cheek from a wound. It was still easy to recognize the woman and more than that it was easier to see Rachel in her now. Oh, fuck, Rachel!

Chloe dug her phone out as she rushed across the floor. It took a second, but she managed to text Rachel to stop, to not come to the mill before she pocketed her phone and knelt opposite of Max.
beside Sera. The woman didn’t respond to either girl’s attempts to wake her. Looking up at Frank, she couldn’t help but hope he knew what to do. Frank approached them, dragging Damon’s unconscious body with him. Hanging from his left hand was a familiar knife, the one Damon had drawn on Rachel hours before.

“Take this, cut her lose,” Max reached for the knife but Frank drew his hand back and gestured emphatically toward Chloe. Chloe took it and watched as Frank dropped Damon back to the ground, not bothering to lower him. As Chloe worked the blade against the bindings around Sera’s arms, Max pressed her back into the chair so she would not fall. The woman mumbled something but her eyes did not open. “You, - Max. Take these.” Chloe looked up, halfway through cutting the ropes around Sera’s ankles. Max reached out and Frank passed her, of all things, the keys to his RV.


“You get her into the RV, you two get away from here now.”

“You-then what are you going to do?” Chloe finished cutting the rope and Sera slumped more completely against Max, who was struggling to transfer the woman’s weight to her shoulders.

“Just leave the RV somewhere out of the way, like that fucking junkyard of yours.” Frank turned to look down at Damon Merrick. “Price drives and you, you psycho bitch, you remember to feed my dog or so help me God you’ll need that fucking bat.”

“Aye sir,” Max replied, sarcastically. “Chloe, a hand?” Realizing she had not yet moved, Chloe did as she was told and rose, putting one of Sera’s arms around her shoulder and grabbing the woman by the waist as she tried to lift her up. “Fuck it,” Max finally said. “Gonna need help.” With a groan, Frank approached and nudged Max insistently out of the way. Between Chloe and Frank it was actually fairly easy going to get Sera out of the building. Carrying her up the steps into the RV and through to the bedroom at the back was more difficult than expected but Max being there to open the doors for them was moderately beneficial. Sera was dumped unceremoniously onto the bed. Frank was halfway out of the bedroom when Max reached past Chloe and grabbed his arm.

“Wait,” Frank spun around, angry. “No, just listen. This is what I meant about looking out for yourself.” Chloe glanced at Max. It was hard to read her face, hard to read her emotions. She was a jumble of all of them. Or is that me?

“What are you talking about, asshole?”
“I can make it look like we knocked you out, too. You and your boss can stay buddies and everyone lives.” *Lives? What is she talking about.* Chloe turned back to Frank, whose face hardened.

“No fuckin’ thanks, I know how you rough people up. Besides, do you think you could actually do it in cold blood to someone who has isn’t hurting you?” Max shrugged, then shook her head and then shrugged again.

“Who cares? This is better than what you’re planning.” When Frank did not respond, instead jerking his arm from her grasp, Chloe became even more confused. Still, Sera did not wake up. “Don’t look at me like you think I’m stupid. I know what you’re planning next. It doesn’t have to be like that. You don’t have to.”

“Yes,” Frank said. “Yeah I fucking do. You put me in this situation.” He turned next to Chloe. “Both of you, and your little friend. Now I have to do what needs to be done because no one else here has the balls or lady balls to get it done.” Confusion began to lessen.

“You can come with us, confess everything you’ve done to the cops, cooperate with them, tell them about Mr. Amber and get a reduced sentence. Or we could do what Max said: we can make it look like we knocked you out.” Frank shook his head again, but Chloe now knew the score.

“Please?” Max asked, and it sounded near to begging.

“Why the hell do you care, anyway?” Frank asked her. “You would have brained me just a couple hours ago.”

“Yeah,” Max agreed. “But you thought you could put your hands on her. That was the wrong decision.” Max seemed to be trying to joke but Frank shook his head. “It’s like you said, it’ll be my fault. I don’t want it on my conscious.” *Has she even considered that it’ll be mine? Have either of them? I’m the reason both of them got wrapped up in all of this.* Chloe didn’t know whether to feel angry or guilty, all she knew was that her phone was ringing insistently in her left hand.

“Yeah, no. I was wrong. It won’t be on you. This is between me and Damon.” With that Frank left the back room and then the RV, with Max in hot pursuit. Following, Chloe reached out and stopped her just before the RV’s door could shut in her face. The phone continued to vibrate. The things Max said to her, to Frank, to the door over the next few seconds, Chloe would probably not repeat
for the length of her entire life, but the general gist of the situation was clearly that Max was angry that no one could ‘just fucking think.’ Chloe’s phone was ringing again when Max calmed down enough to pass her the keys. Chloe took them and lowered herself into the driver’s seat when she finally answered the phone.

“What the fuck is going on?” Rachel asked, by way of saying ‘hello.’ Chloe wanted to answer her, wanted to respond but no words came. She sat there long enough that Rachel started to call her name. Slowly, and with a softness that her rage just seconds ago might have made seem impossible, Max reached out from the passenger seat and pressed her hand against Chloe’s. Chloe turned, with Rachel’s panicked voice in her ear and felt that soft voice in the back of her head speak again.

*I knew it,* it warned her. *It’s true.* There was a certain tenderness for just a second in Max’s eyes, unlike her so far since her return. It was one Chloe had seen before in her mother’s eyes when she looked at her father. A stranger and shakier, more fiery look had passed across Rachel’s face the last time Chloe saw her. It was, somehow, the most terrifying thing she had seen or heard all day. Max took the phone from her hand.

“Rachel?” Max said. “This is Max. Chloe’s okay. We’ve got your mother and right now, Chloe is going to start the RV and drive us to the junkyard to meet you.” Chloe could no longer hear Rachel’s voice clearly but she still heard panic. “Yes, we have her and we have Frank’s RV. She’s been hurt but I think she’s alright, just unconscious. Chloe is fine, just a little shell shocked, but she’s going to start the RV right now and get us out of here.” Chloe shook her head at the warm, coaxing tone, surprised that it brought her back to her senses. It took no time at all to figure out which of the four keys on Frank’s keyring was large enough to fit in the vehicle’s ignition. Chloe put the vehicle into reverse.

“Oh,” Max told Rachel, “I’m going to give you back to Chloe, now.” That same, coaxing, calming ‘everything is fine’ voice, again. Chloe wasn’t sure but she might have preferred to hear Damon Merrick roaring with rage. She slammed the gas.

The Mill was blackened dirt, charred timber and twisted, rusty sheet metal. It was so different than the greenery, live trees and relative life that surrounded and even invaded the junkyard when Chloe pulled into it. It was so strange to imagine that other place, the one of violence and destruction so close to this one, which she could not help but associate with hope, with warmth. Chloe did not respond at first when Max asked if they were at their destination. Instead she looked at the form rising to its feet in the back of the old pick-up left near the entrance and felt relief as she watched Rachel leap from the bed of the truck.

“Chloe, are we there?”
“Yes,” she finally called back, shaking her head hard to make herself focus.

“Good, because someone’s awake and pissed off and isn’t listening to me.” A loud, discordant, ‘fuck you!’ sounded in response. “No,” Max said from the back. “Merrick clocked you pretty hard, just stay calm. We got you out of there.” Chloe heard the woman say something in response but she found she couldn’t give a fuck as she got out of the seat and hurried to the door of the RV. Rachel was waiting at it when she opened it and she rushed quickly up the steps between them to embrace Chloe. Chloe hugged her back, an instinctual response, grasping, seizing desperately on Rachel, a lifeline, a piece of reason in the middle of chaos. The girl’s jacket shifted and came halfway off. Chloe could not help but be reminded of Max’s embrace that morning, though now she was on the other side.

“She’s in the back,” Chloe told Rachel, who finally released her. Chloe stepped aside. “Sera,” she called, “Rachel’s coming.” The girl, after discarding the leather jacket, was past her in a second and Chloe followed her as she threw open the door to the bedroom. Sera sat against the back wall, a hand to her forehead as Max moved back from the bed with a blood-soaked bundle of cloth, to give Rachel room. For a moment, Rachel stood frozen on the verge as the older woman tried to focus on her, clearly dazed. Knowing that it was what she would want from Rachel if she were in her shoes, Chloe gave the girl a nudge.

“Holy shit,” Sera managed before she sagged back against the wall and loosed some sort of laughing sob. Chloe almost wanted to mirror it.

Holy shit is right, Chloe thought, looking down at the blood down her front before raising her head to try to read Rachel’s twisting face. What now?

----

Notes: Well folks, this story has already come a good way. I have enjoyed it so far and hope others have and will continue to. So, very recently, as in yesterday, I believe, the new episode of Before the Storm released. I wanted to tell you, flat out, that there are two direct references to that new episode in this story. They should not give away any major plot devices and are not overt or obvious here in this chapter as being references without having seen it. One of them is simply the existence of an object mentioned early on in the episode. So, if that bothers you, I advise you to play the new episode before reading any further. If not, know that I don't intend to spoil the new episode. I will have more to say about it and how it affects this story later, but for now, I welcome you to read on. I see some sleuths are starting to catch onto a certain aspect of this story. That's really nice. Awesome that people are starting to ask questions, too. I hope it's enjoyable. I really do. I've found that I feel a lot better when I get to write, and that's part of why you're getting two chapters (maybe even three, if all goes well) this week. That's enough of me babbling. Enjoy.

Disclaimer: Anything familiar to you, I do not own. This is entirely a word of fan fiction for the sake of amusement and self-fulfillment. I make nothing from any of this and claim to own none of it.

---

**Chapter Six: The Hero’s Journey**

_This would be so much easier if I didn’t have to worry about Rachel at the same time._ Chloe briefly caught sight of her reflection in the glass of the door. She ran her hand through her freshly colored hair, half imagining that it would come away blue. _Seriously, I want to talk to two people in this entire town right now and neither of them can answer their texts? I should have stayed there last night._ Instead of open the door, Chloe turned her back to it and stepped aside. Nervously, she opened her phone. There were plenty of unread messages waiting: Steph, Mikey, Drew, Eliot, even one from Victoria Chase. She would care about all (okay, most) of them eventually, but right then she wanted to hear from Rachel or Max. _The last time I saw them, I left them alone together for like, the first time. I’d be lying if I told myself I didn’t know why that made me nervous. I just want to know why neither of them are answering._

Exhaling, Chloe turned and entered the diner. It was still early enough on Tuesday morning that a bit of the early bird crowd was present. The majority of the Two Whales’ patrons at this point were well over sixty and a handful of them were dressed as if they had just come back from or were about to go fishing. Chloe knew she would stick out like a sore thumb: blue hair, ratty blue jeans and Rachel’s leather jacket. _I’m gonna have to give that one back_, she thought, feeling a tiny bit disappointed. _Rachel likes it too much. If she hadn’t been busy talking to Sera I don’t think she would’ve let me put it on._

Chloe sought out her mother and found her quickly, filling cups of coffee at the counter. The nerves she had been feeling about the encounter faded quickly as her mother first noticed her and
then her hair. A rueful smile and shaking head was her first reaction and Chloe felt the smile forming on her own face. Perhaps it was everything she and Max went through two days before or seeing Rachel reunited with her biological mother, but Chloe felt at peace with their last discussion, even if it lacked a sense of closure. She sat down before she could be directed, once more, at the booth closest to the door.

She busied herself while she waited for her mother to have time to talk by staring at her dim, quiet phone on the table. As if summoned by her gaze, a message arrived, causing the phone to vibrate. And they say a watched pot never boils. Chloe opened it quickly, unsure whose text she wanted more. I don’t think it would have mattered, I’d be disappointed it wasn’t the other one, she told herself as she opened Max’s response.

Max

Yeah, I’m alright. I left pretty early this morning, before Rachel or her parents were up. They’ll never know I was there. I was just finishing up some business in town.

Relieved, Chloe decided not to question what kind of business Max might have in Arcadia Bay that didn’t involve her. Maybe it’s something to do with Blackwell. Chloe looked up at the sound of clicking heels approaching. She did so just in time to see her mother slide into the seat opposite her and deposit a glass of coke on the table between them. Chloe gave her best smile, despite a slight resurgence in her nerves and took a sip.

“So,” her mother started, nails tapping against the table. “The hair.”

“The hair,” Chloe agreed finally.

“I like it..” Feeling almost a little surprised, Chloe continued with the plan. Not Max’s plan, not Rachel’s plan, just her plan. It felt good to get up to her own antics.

“So, I think there’s something you should know,” Chloe started.

“Oh,” her mother interrupted, brightly. “Is this the part where you finally tell me where you and Rachel have been hiding Max all week?” Chloe did manage to catch and lower the glass that slipped from her hand before she spilled coke all over the table and onto the floor, but it was a close thing. The only thing that cut the surprise in the moment was annoyance at the smug, ‘mothers know everything’ look on her face. It was the same one she wore when she first asked if Rachel was a ‘very close friend.’ “Chloe, I love you dearly but you can’t lie for crap. Your face
“Screams ‘guilty!’” If she only even knew what we’ve been up to.

“How did you even find out?” Chloe asked.

“Well,” her mother started. “Two things. First, as soon as Max went missing, her dad called me to tell me she’d probably be by.” Reaching across the table, the woman took the glass Chloe had just almost spilled and took a long drink. “Second, if Max wants to stay hidden so badly, she probably shouldn’t go to school plays and stand around the crowd beforehand. You know she was sitting right beside Rachel’s parents, right?” She was? Chloe wondered. Shit. Small world. Her cheeks reddened as she reflected that yeah, her mother could have easily seen Max at The Tempest. “So, spill.”

“Well, the night before last she and Rachel stayed where I’ve been staying,” Chloe admitted. “Then last night, I told her to sneak into Rachel’s place with her and get an actual decent night’s sleep.” The woman’s face contorted into concern and Chloe saw a hundred questions in her eyes. “Look, I know you want to know where I’ve been and all that, but trust me, it’s not as bad as where she was sleeping before. I think it was probably in a park or something stupid.” The tired sigh this was met with meant two things: one, the gamble worked and she had managed to shift the subject away from herself. As for item number two….

“That seals it. We can see about getting her home tomorrow, call her up right now and get her to come back to the house tonight.” Chloe sighed and leaned back in her seat. “Are you- what, are you not coming back?” For a moment Chloe took her mother in. Her hair was, of course, pulled back and partially obscured by the hat but a few strands hung down and it made her look tired. Not tired like someone who needed a nap but someone who was getting weary of life around her. It did not set well with Chloe.

“I, kind of have to. Gotta start school so I can get back into Blackwell next year and I can’t keep sleeping in a tru-” her mother leaned forward and Chloe let the statement trail off. “Anyway,” she continued quickly. “Max is going to the bus station in a couple hours to go back home.” Her mother shook her head.

“No, not like this. You get her here, right now, you understand me, Chloe Price?” Chloe knew her mother was a little confused by the grin on her face in response but she saluted and held up her phone. “Good,” the waitress continued, sounding confused by her happy compliance. Let her be. This is my plan, this is her plan. Not Rachel’s and not Max’s and damn sure not Damon fucking Merrick’s. Upon thinking of him, Chloe had to push the thought and associated feelings away. As her mother got to her feet and returned to work, the clicking of silverware on plates drowned out the digital imitation of a typewriter her phone emitted with each press of a button.
Me

I told mom you were here. She already knew. Saw you at Blackwell during the play. Dumbass.

Max

Shit. Well, I knew it was a gamble but I wanted to see Blackwell before the tour.

Me

She says she wants you to come stay at the house tonight and go home tomorrow.

Max

I don’t think that’s the best idea.

Me

Then come to the diner at least.

Max

I do think that’s the best idea. I’m getting waffles. I’m like five, ten minutes out by bus.

Chloe grinned to herself and finally gave in. She backed the phone out to the home screen and called the number two on her speed dial. Leaning back, she watched the early birds getting their worms and her mother move back and forth from tables to counter to kitchen, stuck in an endless loop that Chloe felt was unfair to her. I wonder if it’s actually any better when she’s on the grill? Finally, the ringing was interrupted.

“Hey,” Rachel greeted, quietly. Okay, she’s definitely still upset about everything, but who could blame her? Relieved that Rachel sounded alright, she decided to rib her a little.

“Oh, you’re not dead after all?” Chloe asked. “I was starting to think you were poof, gone into thin air.”

“Yeah,” Rachel continued, in the same down tone. “Yeah, sorry. So um, everybody’s kind of pulling a disappearing act on me today. Max was gone when I woke up and S-Sera left a message
saying she was going to be leaving town.”

“Did she give you a number to call her at least?” Chloe asked, leaning forward slightly.

“Yeah, I just, I guess I was hoping she’d stick around a few days, but I get it.” Sighing, Chloe wished they were having this conversation in person. “Well, I mean, she wants to make sure she can get clean again, I guess.” That bastard Merrick, I don’t think I actually care what happened to him. It had been scary in the moment and the dreams of her father and Max standing over Damon Merrick as he bled out talking with her and with each other about one’s ‘lot in life’ were disturbing, but if there was someone who deserved to get his nose broken, Damon Merrick was the man. And if he never shows up again? What then? Then I guess I know not to fuck with Frank.

“Hey, Rachel?” Chloe started. “I really wanna see you tonight, after mom gets over me being back home.”

“Yeah,” Rachel replied again, and this time there was something like a relieved laugh to accompany it. “I do too. You going to take Max to the station?”

“Well,” Chloe said, glancing up as the door opened. Not her, yet. Too soon still. “I think plans might be changing. Mom might try to talk her into staying at my place tonight.”

“Cool. I think I really didn’t get the chance yesterday to actually tell her thanks.” Chloe nodded. Answering noverbally when she could not be seen was a weird habit, one she couldn’t entirely explain. “At least this way I could do it in person.”

“That sounds alright. I’m sure she gets it, though.”

“No, by the sounds of it the two of you got into some crazy shit for me.” Not me. All I really did was tag along for the ride. Actually, I kind of hate that part. I should have done more but I just stood there scared and stupid. If Max hadn’t been there I’d probably have been one more body for Damon Merrick to bury. “Chloe?”

“Sorry, Rachel. I’m just a little--”

“Yeah, me too,” Rachel assured her through the phone. “Look, I’m going to go make some
breakfast now that there’s no one in the house. I really can’t wait to see you.”

“I can’t wait to see you, too.” There really was no need for any other form of goodbye and the few seconds of silence before she hung the phone up were not awkward. They were actually kind of warm. The door opened again and admitted Max, who, strangely enough, looked a little more like her old self. She had not bothered with any kind of makeup, her hair was pulled back a little too tightly (Chloe had never enjoyed having her hair back like that, herself) and she had discarded the grey hooded sweatshirt. *And that would have something to do with the blood on it,* Chloe told herself, feeling a little guilty at having had to put away one of Rachel’s old shirts.

“Hey you,” her mother greeted, cutting across Chloe completely. She decided it was best not to show that that miffed her. Max turned a smile on Chloe’s mother that smacked of the silly, goopy girl who moved away from Arcadia Bay. It simultaneously warmed Chloe up slightly and made her want to roll her eyes. It was probably at least mostly an act. She didn’t interrupt as Max returned her greeting and eventually the two shared a quick hug. When Max was finally allowed to sit down, Chloe offered her a closed fist. The look she shared with Max was different, it was guarded on her end. A suspicion was starting to build in her mind, one that had gone from 0 to 60 in the span of one day. Upsetting as it might have been in the moment, and maybe even in retrospect, Chloe had to admit that she had no proof and could face the problem if it arose. Max pressed her fist against Chloe’s and then turned immediately to her mother.

“I’m starving. I have my emergency card and I’m about to call my mom and dad. So can I use this to get breakfast?” Max asked her, quite suddenly. “I mean, a lot of breakfast.”

“You can keep your money, Max and you should call your parents. I think they’d really like to hear from you.” Chloe nodded, as if in agreement with her mother which made Max turn a raised eyebrow on her. “So, what’s it gonna be?”

“Belgian waffles,” Max said immediately, in a voice that sounded like a congregant confessing their sins to a priest. “I’m starving.”

“How long has it been since you actually ate anything?” Chloe asked, realizing suddenly how valid the question was. She leaned forward and this time it was no raised eyebrow Max shot at her, but pure irritation.

“Now if that isn’t just the right question, Chloe,” her mother added, waiting with her hands on her hips.
“I mean, when was the play?”

“Three days ago,” the Prices answered in unison, in matching tones of concern and disbelief as Max lowered her head.

“So, like, I got something out of the vending machine when I toured Blackwell.”

“Max,” Chloe exclaimed, pounding the table. “That was two days ago, for shit’s sake.”

“Chloe, language, Max, call your parents then eat your damn breakfast.” Max grinned across the table at Chloe as her mother walked away.

“You got in trouble,” Max taunted.

“Yeah? Well at least I’ve already talked to my mother about me running away. How’s about you pull out that fancy phone of yours and start dialing. Or do I need to do it for you?” For just a moment or two, they shot volleys back and forth at each other over the table and it was like old times. Except it really wasn’t like old times. They were older, they had both seen things that neither of them even imagined back during the ‘old times’ and there was, she had to admit, a whole world of questions and answers and things that needed understanding between them, now. But it’s Max, a weird ass Max who might be keeping secrets but still Max and she’s really back.

Eventually, Chloe did her best to pretend to be paying attention to her phone instead of Max’s conversation with her mother. The half she could hear though (and she was listening) consisted mostly of apologies and promises (‘this will never happen again, it was stupid’ and ‘I’ll tell you everything when I get home, I swear. I just kind of hung out with Chloe and another girl and took a tour of the school,’) and uncomfortably honest sounding regret. Just when Max was starting to sound as if a lump was growing in her throat, the subject changed to how she was getting home.

“No, what do you mean? I promise it’s no big deal, I’ll just take a bus out. There’s one leaving in two hours and another in five.” Chloe lifted her head and watched Max’s face contort in confusion. “What do you mean you’ve already handled it, mom?” Chloe looked over at her mother, whom she suspected knew something they did not. “You-what? Well she’s busy, I think-” At that point, Chloe watched her mother set the pot of coffee down on the counter and walk over to her.

“No she’s not,” the woman insisted, holding her hand out. Max deposited the phone in it without matching her eyes. “Hello, Vanessa,” she said, without hesitation. “Yeah, everything should work
out fine. I already took care of a ride, you just tell me what time to get her there and we’ll handle the rest.” Chloe blinked. *Why does that give me the worst feeling of existential horror?* “Yeah, that’s more than enough time. I’ll have her there with time to spare. Oh, of course, Vanessa.” Chloe and Max shared looks, Max’s embarrassed, Chloe’s confused. A bell from behind the counter signified that an order was up. “Oh don’t even, you know Max would have done the same for Chloe. Those girls were never gonna let each other down.” *Mom looks amused.* “Alright, you take care now, I’m gonna hand you back off to Max. Tell Ryan hey and not to worry. His little girl’s in good hands.”

From the time Max said goodbye to her mother and looked up at Chloe with a look of terror on her face to the moment two large plates piled with Belgian Waffles were placed in front of the girls, Chloe did not say a word. The look of horror was comical and though Chloe wanted to know the source, had a thousand questions to ask, she instead cut into the waffles and took that eager first bite. Other than a couple of granola bars and a coke at the diner a couple days prior, this was Chloe’s first meal since the Amber family dining room table was put permanently out of commission. She closed her eyes and savored the sweet taste on her tongue after swallowing. In that moment, nothing Max could say could ruin her good mood.

“Mom says David’s going to drive me to the airport in Portland in a couple hours.”

“Oh god damn it.” Chloe sat her fork down. *Except that. Son of a bitch, son of a bitch, son of a bitch.* “Well, obviously it’s going to be us, I’m not leaving you alone with David.” Chloe pushed the plate aside and opened her phone.

“What’s up?” Max asked, concerned.

“Just updating Rachel. I’m gonna try to see her tonight if I can.”

“Oh,” Max replied, sounding a bit like the wind had gone from her sails. “Yeah, I sort of snuck out this morning so her parents didn’t see me. I didn’t get a chance to say goodbye.” Chloe nodded absentely, finished her text and sent it before digging back into the waffles. “Hey, Chloe?” Mouth full, Chloe looked up at her letting her eyes do the question asking. “You alright on that front? I mean, I really thought you’d stay with us. I think she wanted you to.”

“Yeah,” Chloe replied when she had time to finally swallow. “I wanted to, too, but I also needed a little air. Time to myself. I mean, we kind of slept in Frank’s RV the other night. It doesn’t get much closer quarters than that.” Max shrugged in agreement and went back to her breakfast, tearing into the waffles like she might have done when they were younger. It was almost comforting to watch, even though Chloe knew David was hanging over their heads. *At least Max can get on a plane and fly away from him at the end of the drive. I’ve basically got to come back*
home and the only way I’ll get to see Rachel is if I can convince mom to let her come over tonight.

Rachel

Try not to get too pissed off at him or Xena might go all Warrior-Princess on his ass.

Me

Don’t tempt me, Frodo!

Rachel

Nerd.

Chloe looked up from her phone to Max, who was stationed on the bench beside her as the two waited. Max clutched her bag closely to herself. The photography nerd’s right leg bounced up and down with nervous energy and, when Chloe looked, she could see that Max was mouthing something. She watched blatantly for a couple of seconds, which was all the time she needed to realize that whatever Max was saying as she stared at the road, it was repeating. In a way, the sight of Max staring blankly at the road and mouthing something over and over disturbed Chloe and it didn’t get any better when Max stood, shouldering her bag and started to pace the same few steps over and over.

“Max, you alright?” Goosebumps were rising on Chloe’s arms.

“Yeah,” she answered, suddenly and almost defensively. “I’m just thinking.” The feeling of someone walking over Chloe’s grave left.

“You know,” Chloe started, thinking that this was about seeing her parents again. “Your mom and dad were always pretty cool. I’m sure they’ll calm down after like, a month… two tops. Vanessa keeps a chill head.” Max turned, brow furrowed and looked her in the eyes for a second before bursting into laughter. Okay, maybe I shouldn’t have said anything.

“No, no, sorry,” Max said at seeing the look on her face. “It’s just, I was sitting here thinking about getting in on scholarship to Blackwell.” Chloe rolled her eyes, making damn sure Max saw it when she did.
“I kind of feel bad actually,” Chloe said quietly, as if admitting this out loud for the first time. “I was using Rachel’s laptop to write Wells an email last night.” Max furrowed her brow again. “Yeah, I know. Weird. It was weird. I basically decided to do whatever it takes to get back in and Wells can help. I just told him I’ve been handling dad badly and I was sorry.” Max nodded, encouraging her to continue. “And maybe that’s true, maybe it’s not but it feels shitty. It feels like I’m using him to get back into school.”

“So what?” Max replied without hesitation. Chloe shook her head, wondering how Max could say something like that and get away with it. “Chloe your dad loved it that you got into Blackwell. He was happy. I think he’d be happy if he could help you get back in.” Chloe felt like arguing at first, remembering a series of confusing dreams that involved mostly talking to her father from the back seat of their old car, in its state both before and after the crash. When he asks questions about Max and Rachel it leaves me more confused about everything than usual. I hope these dreams go away, soon. Chloe opened her mouth to say that maybe Max was right, but a familiar sounding engine drew her eyes just a bit down the street and she groaned as David’s blue muscle car came roaring toward them.

“Here we go, Max.” She rose to stand beside her friend and threw an arm around her shoulder. “Cheer up, David’s only going to be able to be horrible to you for a couple hours. I’ve got a lifetime with him.” Max seemed to stiffen slightly at the embrace, so Chloe lowered her arm, trying not to do it so quickly as to make it more awkward for either of them. David pulled to a stop as Chloe tried to predict what he would do first—comment on her hair or give her shit about running away. If he even thinks about telling mom I should get some kind of buzz cut, he’s got a fight on his hands. The passenger window rolled down.

“Well, Chloe,” David started, “It’s good to see you’ve come to your senses.” Okay, so it’s the whole ‘running away’ thing. “You two get comfortable. I’m going to go talk to your mother for a second.” Surprisingly, if anything, as David stepped out of the vehicle, Chloe judged him to be in an unusually good mood. “I guess you’ll be the first one to hear the good news,” he started as he drew closer to them. “I’ve found a job.” I guess that’s a good thing. At least he won’t be spending all day at the house.

“Where at?” Max asked him, quietly.

“Oh, right,” the man replied. “My name’s David. You can call me Mr. Madsen.” Chloe rolled her eyes unabashedly as David extended a hand. “And that’ll make you Max.” You can call her Ms. Caulfield, Chloe thought, biting her tongue against the retort. After a second, Max shook his hand and Chloe spotted what he did not: Max was nervous around him. As she lowered her hand back to her side, it shook. I mean, he’s an asshole but, scared? I never said anything that should make her scared of him. “As of Wednesday I should be the new daytime security guard at Blackwell Academy.”
Mother fucker! Chloe immediately snapped at the sick, twisted side of her mind that laughed in response and added, Yeah, well when two people love each other-. Unable to form any response to that, Chloe stepped aside and let David past her, presumably to tell her mother the good news. Right, well fuck me. My options now are to either never go back to Blackwell and break promises to both Max and Rachel or to actually willfully put myself in a situation where David has more power over me.

“Earth to Chloe?”

“I need a drink,” Chloe responded, automatically. “I need a drink and I think I made the wrong choice agreeing to come home.” One of Max’s hands closed over her shoulder.

“Chloe, you can’t go on living in a truck in the junkyard.” Chloe shook her head.

“Maybe not,” she said as she crossed the sidewalk and opened the passenger seat door, sure that David would take it as an offense if she did not sit up front with him. “But I might be willing to try. I’m going to miss that truck.” Max eased herself into the back seat and responded, forcing Chloe to turn back and look at her while messing with her seatbelt.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that.” Max offered no further comment, even when prompted. About the third time that Chloe asked her what she meant and Max changed the subject to something else entirely, David reappeared in the doorway of the diner. Chloe was treated to the nauseating sight of her mother sharing a kiss with a man whom she, on his best days, disliked. And I’ve got to spend like, four hours stuck in this car with him.

For the most part, David was cordial enough as they passed through the streets of Arcadia Bay. Chloe was expecting plenty of shit to get thrown her way, but the one thing she was not in the mood for was anything to be heaped on Max, especially given her apparent serious discomfort with the man. Wasn’t she the one telling me he probably wasn’t that bad just a couple days ago? However, it was as if Arcadia Bay was the grounds for some sort of truce, because they had not been on the freeway long before Sergeant Moustache started in.

“You two make quite the little pair of runaways,” he said, quite out of the blue. Chloe was put on edge immediately mostly for the fact that the statement included and was directed at Max, who for the most part had been silent for the last two or three minutes. When neither of them reacted, he looked up in the rear view mirror. “What, am I talking to myself or something? Is this thing on?” Chloe turned toward him.
“Cut it out,” she said, feeling rage enter her voice from the very outset. One quick look backward showed Max to be engaged in a staring contest with the floorboard. David looked as if he was going to fire back at her, but Chloe thought that perhaps even he had enough brain cells to recognize that people might be going through shit, and when he glanced over at her, she gestured back at Max. He examined the girl once in the rear view mirror and turned his gaze back on the road.

“Don’t get me wrong,” David said. “I’ve been there. I ran off from home once, too.” 

Oh really?

Was it to join the military against your evil, vicious liberal mother’s wishes?

“Why?” Max asked, her voice rising just high enough to be audible over the sound of the roadway. Instead of laying into her, David cracked his neck and explained.

What twisted alternate reality did I fall into?

“When I was about to graduate high school, I told my dad I was going into the army.” Chloe snorted. She was rewarded with a cold glance, before he continued. “Anyway,” as if her response was some sort of severe interruption, he spoke louder. “My father wasn’t having any of it. Every man in my family who had served in the military had flown planes, as far back as they could trace. If I wasn’t going to go to college and get a good job like he told me to, I was sure not going to disgrace the family name by being some sort of common infantry man. Elitist prick.”

Oh wow, oh, never before has someone described themselves so accurately without knowing it. In a greater test of willpower than even Damon Merrick could have assigned her, Chloe neither laughed nor erupted on David, instead she looked pointedly at the road and tried to keep a straight face. “Well, I hated the hell out of flying. I still do. It takes the order of a superior officer to get me on a plane. So, I decided, “screw it.” I took off with the intent on spending a week or two away. I figured it would change his mind. You know, ‘love me or lose me.’”

To be fair, he’s stopped being a dick long enough to actually tell a coherent story. That has to be some sort of record. Chloe turned back to Max to see that at some point the girl had lifted her head and was eyeing David’s reflection in the mirror with a bizarrely calm gaze.

Why do I have a bad feeling about this? Also, why do I keep imagining David as Mr. T. It can’t just be that I want someone to stab him with a syringe and knock his ass out. Max shifted her open bag from her lap to the seat beside her and adjusted herself in her seat. It was like she was preparing for something.

Then, before David could change the subject, she spoke.

“One day, my mother told me we were moving a few hours up north. I was going to leave my school, my house, my best friend.” Chloe grew still, unsure if she should look away from Max or not. The decision was robbed from her when the girl slid her eyes from the rear view mirror to Chloe’s own and exposed regret and grief to her. “I made some promises and I broke them and sometimes I still hate myself for it but it happened. We moved to Seattle and I made a couple friends. Nice people. Cool people, but it wasn’t home. It wasn’t Arcadia Bay and they weren’t my best friend. They weren’t the people that loved me.”
“You had your parents, a roof over your head and you were in the big city. What more did you really need?” She told you what more she thinks she needs. You’re just too fucking stupid to get it. Perhaps the vitriol was her transferring the feelings the conversation was stirring up in her to David but, Chloe was rapidly becoming uncomfortable with the whole thing and they had only just gotten on the road.

“Why didn’t you just go into the air force? You fly on planes now if your superior officer orders you to. You’d still be serving your country. You’d just be doing it in a different way. What more do you need?” Chloe waited to see aggravation rise up on David’s face and sure enough, it set in. For a second, she expected some comment about ‘being a smartass.’ Instead, after a moment or two of audible grumbling, David grunted.

“Point taken. You’re doing it wrong, but I get the need to decide your life. When I did it, I was almost a man. You’re still a kid. Your parents are looking out for you. You might feel powerless right now, but it’s no call to go acting like a delinquent.” Wow, that’s a real subtle shot, David. Who else in this car might you be talking to? God, I wish my little girl brain was smart enough to figure out this mystery. Where is Nancy Drew when you need her?

“I like delinquents,” Chloe said, defensively. “They’re some of my favorite people.”

“You know,” Max said, ignoring her completely. “Maybe when the only option left to you is delinquency, it’s everyone else that’s doing something wrong. Not you.” Oh shit, Super Max to the rescue. Chloe watched David’s jaw work up and down as if he wanted to respond and then he turned his attention to the road. Chloe glanced back several seconds later to see that Max had dug her MP3 player from the bag. Fair enough, Chloe thought, as it hit her that Max’s apparent nerves around vehicles might be heightened on a freeway. Beside her David was looking askance in the mirror.

“She- she gets kind of nervous around a lot of vehicles,” Chloe told him, hoping that he was in a good enough mood as a result of his getting hired at a place where he could theoretically torture Chloe day and night for the foreseeable future to let it go. “It’s not her slighting you.” David scoffed, but he did turn back to the road. Okay, maybe this is the start of a long period of silence and I can space the fuck out. The naive hope was shattered only a minute or so later.

“Since we’re alone,” David said, as if truly injured by Max playing music instead of talking to them, “I guess now’s as good a time as any.”

“For what?” Chloe asked, nonplussed.
“Joyce and I have been talking.” *And nothing good ever comes from that.* Chloe braced herself for whatever bad news he was going to hit her with. “We’ve come to a-” his voice dropped and he sighed. “An agreement. Now that you’re back there’s going to have to be a change in attitude, immediately.” Chloe closed her eyes. *Yes sir, no sir, I’d like to drop and give you twenty but I hate your fucking guts, sir.* “From both of us.” What? She opened her eyes again, to see David glancing over at her.

“I don’t like some of your behavior and I won’t tolerate it.” *Yeah, yeah, the cannabis panic.* “But there are things your mother doesn’t like and won’t tolerate and I am going to have to respect that.” The urge to laugh bubbled up, but it was humorless. *Holy shit, did mom actually stand up to fucking David?* “It’s all about respect, Chloe. If I want your mother to respect my rules, I have to respect hers and I- I guess that extends to you.” *I can almost hear mom. Holy shit, she gave him an earful!* Chloe grinned which seemed to upset David immensely. *He doesn’t like people smiling and happy around him.* He opened his mouth to respond but quite suddenly jerked his eyes back to the road.

Chloe followed suit and had just enough time to see a car too close to their nose, with brake lights showing before she was thrown forward. Forced to slam the brakes, David looked almost wildly left and right before jerking his wheel suddenly to the right. Even riding their breaks, they overtook the car that moments before had been in front of them easily. *Holy shit, that was a close one.* David began to hurl insults out of his driver’s side window. While Chloe watched, the man in the car next to them rolled down his passenger and they exchanged what Chloe always thought of as *Road Pleasantries* over a cacophony of horns that filled the air like thick wet fog.

She glanced back to see if Max was alright and her heart dropped. Beside her, David was roaring in a genuine rage she could not remember having seen from the man. It was enough to make Chloe unnerved, but seemed to be the straw that broke the camel’s back for Max. *There’s a reason I don’t like this asshole.* Restrained by the seatbelt, Max was not able to assume the familiar position of burrying her face against her knees and pulling them up against her. Instead, with her MP3 player abandoned in her lap, Max’s arms were wrapped around herself as best as they could, though they ended in tightly closed fists. Just as tightly shut were her eyes, giving her ultimately a look more of pain than panic, but the rapid breathing was obvious even from the front seat and even with Max otherwise still.

“Hey,” David called, but this time it was quieter, too quiet by far to reach the other driver. “Hey,” Chloe turned her head to see him looking in the rear view mirror. Pissed off, she opened her mouth to chew him out and David reacted quickly. His right hand shot from the steering wheel and she jerked back. This was how Chloe first learned that she actually experienced some fear of physical violence from David Madsen. It was not violence that drew his hand from his wheel, though. Instead, with an open hand held up to shush her, David spoke again, apparently unaware of Chloe’s severe reaction. “Hey, Max.” *Nothing doing, though. Max remained shutdown, save for the rapid breathing.* This time, David barked. “Max, listen to me, right now.” Max’s head snapped up and eyes somewhat like a panicked dog about to bite met David’s in the mirror.
“I know it doesn’t seem like it right now, kid, but you are safe.” Chloe blinked. “I don’t know where you went or who you were with, but you’re right here now. The trouble is over. So I need you to take a deep breath. Four seconds in, four seconds out. Can you do that for me?” Max shook her head, with the same angry eyes. “Yes you can. Yes, you fucking can. Listen, you breathe now and the rest comes later, understood?” Despite her denial a second ago, Chloe could hear the slow, loud intake of breath. “Good.” He was still barking like a drill sergeant, but it did work to get Max’s attention. “Good, now listen. Wherever you went, it’s over now. It’s in the past.” Max laughed, loudly. “It’s over,” he repeated, emphatically. “Chloe, talk to your friend.”

“Hey, Max,” she said, by way of compliance. Max had closed her eyes again but once the strange laughter passed, she had gone back to trying to breathe as instructed. Slowly, Chloe watched her fists unclench though her arms did not drop to her side. “You remember the secret pirate fort we built right up on the border of Carlin Park and the national forest?” After a moment, Max nodded and opened her eyes to show she was focusing. “I went back up there a year or so ago. Most of it’s gone now but someone left our flag hanging.” This earned some sort of echo of a smile, but the sadness in the smile was not encouraging. Chloe realized why the topic was not the best choice a second later. *I can’t really talk about a lot of our more recent history with David in the car.*

“That’s why I thought to do this,” Chloe told her, gesturing to her hair. “Captain Bluebeard.” That did the trick, earning a real chuckle from Max, not one that sounded crazed or angry. She covered an eye with one hand. “We could go in search of some booty to burrrrrrrrrrrry, when you get back.” Max shook her head, grinning.

“You can definitely rock the blue hair,” Max told her. “No matter what anyone says.” Her eyes shot briefly toward the back of David’s head before returning to Chloe. For a moment, Chloe saw that sight in them, the one that unnerved her so much earlier, but it was buried just as quickly and this time Chloe could bear it. It was a trouble deferred and it was so much better than seeing Max in pain.

“You know, I was looking for a change with this for a long time,” she ran a hand quickly through her hair. “I just stopped caring at one point. I stopped caring about everything.” Chloe did her best to get more comfortable in the seat, turned halfway around. *I need to talk about this but I don’t want to talk about it in front of David.* She looked Max in the eyes. *Maybe she needs to talk about it.* “I stopped caring about a lot of shit.”

“Me too,” Max replied. Frank’s question echoed in Chloe’s mind, as to whether Max had any sense of self-preservation or not. *Okay, at least this is distracting her,* Chloe thought, noticing that Max lowered her arms, slowly. “I don’t care about a lot of things but I have to, you know, keep up appearances.”
“Losing you and dad all at once hurt like hell.” Chloe exhaled. “I didn’t think anything mattered anymore. Not until I met Rachel and then, out of nowhere there you were, too.” Max reached for her bag, setting it on her lap and digging into it.

“Rachel’s important. You need to hold onto her. Hold onto that.” Chloe shook her head and then shrugged. *God, please don’t do this, Max.*

“When you come back, we’ll all get to know each other better. Properly.”

“I know this may not mean much, not anymore but,” Max let out along breath. “I promise to come back.” Twisting together, several emotions battled for control but Chloe put them firmly under her foot and nodded, trying to keep her face impassive. Curiosity and trepidation slipped through, anyway, as Max pulled something dark and red from her bag. “I wanted to give you this later, before I left, but this seems like the time.” With some difficulty, Chloe reached back and took the red bundle of cloth. She faced front, drawing David’s eye as she unfurled it and wanted to cry, herself, for the first time in what felt like forever.

It was a sweatshirt, one that was just barely in the realm of possibility for fitting her, but one she had worn time and time again. A gift from her father years ago, it had been her favorite for a long time until classmates at Blackwell had begun to tease her for its ratty state. She looked back at Max, who matched her gaze almost forcefully. If she opened her mouth to say something, she was going to cry instead and that was *not* okay; not in front of this Max right now and definitely not in front of *David fucking Madsen*. Instead, she swallowed against the lump in her throat and nodded.

“That thing looks like it’s been through hell,” David commented.

“That thing is Long Max Silver’s buried treasure,” Max replied, as if she did not care how it sounded. “Buried in a closet in Seattle for a year and a half.” *God, damn, has it really only been a year and a half?* “Because I knew that in the end, you would really want it back.” Defeated, Chloe pressed her face into the fabric as her eyes teared up and for several seconds, she fought against allowing it to go any further. When she was in control again, she lifted her head. “Chloe, check the pocket.”

Chloe did as she was bade and reached into the pocket that stretched across the front of the sweatshirt, beneath the logo of the lion and just above one large hole. Something thin and crisp-edged brushed her hand and after a second, Chloe secured and removed a tri-folded piece of paper. She was unfolding it in curiosity when David looked at first her, then into the rear view mirror and spoke.
“Is that the title to a car?” Chloe unfolded it, feeling jolted.

“Chloe’s been practicing some skills her dad taught her, and she’s had her eye on an old junker she thinks she can fix up,” Max lifted her chin higher as Chloe turned around, quickly enough that her neck hurt. “I made a couple phone calls and the guy was so happy to get anything for it, he literally took a hundred.”

“You had a hundred dollars on you and didn’t eat for two days?”

“Oh, stow it with that,” Max told her. “I had like three hundred on me and an emergency card. Birthday money saved up for a few years. I saw a chance to spend it on something important.” Chloe glanced at David, curious as to his reaction. He leaned over and for a second she thought he was going to grab the title from her hands to examine it, but instead he reached down and popped open the glovebox. After a second he came up with a pen.

“You’ll probably need to sign that and we can see about getting you to the DMV and getting the car towed to the house tomorrow.” Feeling stunned, Chloe took the pen and, where he pointed, she signed her name. She looked back at Max.

“Actually,” she said, quietly. “It’s a truck. An old, absolute piece of junk truck.” David grunted. “And I’m going to turn it into a Frankenstein and make it live.” Best not to tell him you’ve already got it running. Not right now, at least. “As for you?” Max raised an eyebrow, with a more genuine, soft smile on her face. “Your next birthday is going to be a fucking legend. I promise that.”

“Hey, language,” David called.

“English,” Chloe said, as if confirming the answer to a question. David looked irritated as he turned back to the road. God damn it, Max. She felt absolutely silly and childish, but Chloe stowed the title back inside the sweatshirt, gave the lion on the front one more look and then settled it on her lap, where it stayed until they reached the airport. She moved that sweatshirt only to allow herself to get out, hours later and share one last hug with Max, one in which Max again showed too much strength for a girl her size and nearly squeezed the life out of her. Not even the prospect of hours alone in a car with David dampened Chloe’s admittedly mellow mood as she watched Max pass through a set of double doors and disappear from sight,shouldering her bag.

Chloe ignored David’s calls for her to get back in for a moment. She watched and waited until she was certain that Max was not going to come walking back out refusing to leave and then settled herself into her seat, buckling her belt and securing that sweatshirt once more on her lap. She didn’t
have anything else to say, so she leaned her head against the window and closed her eyes, not
letting go of Max’s gift. That evening, if all went to plan, she would have a lot to say to a couple of
people and she would see Rachel. Maybe, though, she had done enough for the moment. Maybe she
could actually get a little rest.

*Maybe everything is going to be alright.*

----

Zujge O sayz xkskshkx:

Znoy oy tuz muujhek lux muuj. O igt gjj corr iusk nusk gmgot. Nuvklarre, kbbxe vxuhrks zngz
sgqky lux sk iusky cozn g vxusoyk.

Cngzkbkx lxqtxynov jkbkrvy cozn Inruk corr hk jollkxxtz zngt gteznotm kryk O’bk kbbx ngj
cozn nkx gjj zngz’y uqge hkgayk O's yzorr nuotm zu hk znk raiqkyz vxuyot ot Gxigjog Hge.

Cnkt eua mkz urjkx, znk znotm eua lkgx znk suyz oy naxzotm znuyk eua igxk ghuaz. Ol eua ju,
eua payz ngbk zu nuk eua igt yzorr ykz oz xomnz.

End Part 1
No Below
Part Two

Chapter Seven: Antigone in Exile

The golden hour of Arcadia Bay’s mornings used to be something she didn’t see very often. Nowadays, with her sleep so irregular, it might seem likely that it would lose some of its beauty but it had not yet. She opened her eyes. A pale-gold glow splashed across the ceiling and, she knew by the warmth, across herself. Quiet, steady breathing tried to lure her back to sleep, but it was not her own. She turned on the bed, carefully beneath the red sheet. In hastily scribbled letters, the wall bore the phrase, “I’d rather have a life of ‘oh wells’ than a life of ‘what ifs.” Her eyes, still a little hazy, trailed down from the text to its author in the bed beside her. This was the beauty of the golden hour.

In her sleep, one arm over her eyes, Chloe was bathed in the light of the sun. She looked, for that quiet moment, like the bronze statues of ancient Greece would have looked in their hayday. God damn, girl, you’ve got it bad. Rachel stifled a half delirious laugh but not even the worry of the coming day could wipe the smile off her face. Still, there was shit to do before lunch and the post-lunchtime festivities. Chloe-Watching is actually a lot of fun, and all, but I need a shower. Taking some care not to wake the girl, she allowed herself to brush Chloe’s hair back, just once. Rewarded with little more than Chloe turning over in her sleep, Rachel rose and crossed to the window above Chloe’s desk. If she was awake, that would have resulted in a far cuter reaction.

Rachel was not a fan of climbing in and out of windows. With the air starting to cool just slightly in the mornings and in the middle of the night, she was back to her jacket and that did nothing to help her balance as she climbed out onto the roof. She fell down (unfortunately loudly) on all fours as her foot was momentarily hooked on the windowsill before she could get lose. Carefully, she waited until she was sure she was steady and crawled toward the edge. Her palms stung from the impact. It was certainly not too terribly cold this morning, even for being into early September, but the downside was that the sound of vehicles starting suggested some of the early risers of the neighborhood were out and about. I need to get down from here right now. The last thing she needed was to be spotted on someone’s roof first thing in the morning. It was a little more difficult getting down than getting up but Rachel found herself a solid enough looking grip on the edge of the roof and lowered her feet to a small lattice structure up against the wall. It didn’t look like it was strong enough to hold her but having snuck in at least three times suggested otherwise.
When she finally hit the ground, Rachel took a moment to wipe her sore hands against her knees. *I’ve never been the most athletic, but getting up is way more of a workout than getting down.* She shot one last look at Chloe’s open bedroom window. Chloe was visible in it, leaning over her desk to look out at Rachel, rubbing at her eyes. Instead of speaking and giving herself away, Rachel blew a kiss and hurried from the yard, digging her phone out.

*Okay, so I’m not a ninja like you, Chloe. I hope I didn’t wake up her mom. Or step-douche, for that matter.* Rachel let the worry slide off her.

Making for the nearest bus stop, nearly a block and a half away, she opened her phone. At least six separate missed messages (most of which had been sent well before she fell asleep too few hours ago) waited for her. Four of them were from her father, the last of which began, “I am your father and you will…” Rachel did not bother to open that particular conversation. As she crossed a still quiet road, she opened the messages from her mother.

*Mom*

*When are you coming home? It’s been two days. I’m not trying to upset you honey, but I’m really worried about you.*

*Sera called, Rachel. She wanted me to tell you that she thinks she’ll be able to leave the rehab center very soon. I love you, please call me.*

She felt a tinge of regret at both missing her biological mother’s call and at her mother’s worry. Still, Rachel could not exactly continue on without going back to her house. It was not due to any particular affection for it, right now. In fact, she was rapidly reaching the point where leaving it for good was not only appealing but it was becoming a possibility. *I wouldn’t have to wait a couple of years if I just up and left this fucking town.* There was, though, a reason to remain and that reason was hopefully going back to sleep so she would not be grumpy by the end of the day.

*Me*

*I’ll be at the junkyard when the time comes. Mind picking me up?*

Not expecting an immediate response, Rachel put her phone away and waited rather impatiently. There was plenty to be said for having mobility. Chloe had a provisional license and could technically get away with driving them both around together but she hadn’t really *intended* to wake Chloe up. *She really, really does not do well without a full eight hours.* Grinning despite herself, Rachel climbed onto one of the few busses their little town had running, especially that early in the morning. The ride was fast and she wasn’t surprised to receive no response from Chloe before she stepped off the bus. *Sera should be out in a couple of months and then we can figure out what’s going on there,* Rachel thought, looking over her mother’s message one more time.
This stop was, at least, much closer to her house than the last one had been Chloe’s. Just down the street, the house rose up above its neighbors. Really, Rachel had always been aware that they lived somewhat richer than most of the town, even through the veil of a pair of private schools a town over and then Blackwell Academy. The word some might use was affluence, but after seeing the difference between her home and even Chloe’s, she was more inclined to believe it was opulence. Not inherently the root of all evil, that opulence was not what made her heartbeat pick up as she approached the front door. It was the concern of who waited behind that front door. They’re always up first thing in the morning. Both of them. She tried not to think about it, given how nicely the morning had started, minus the whole climbing out of a window.

Not even the emergence of a mental image of Chloe as an ancient bronze statue of Athena put her smile back in place. Filing that thought away for another time, Rachel pushed open her front door. For a moment, there looked to be an empty path between her and the stairs up to her room. Like a soldier behind enemy lines she bee-lined straight for her objective and like far too many since the beginning of time, the enemy was laying in wait for her. It wasn’t his voice which announced that he was watching, it was the sound of ice in a glass, first.

“So you do remember where you live,” her father slurred at her from his favorite chair. Rachel turned, stopping at the bottom of the steps. “Have you also remembered how to answer your phone?” His voice rose in anger. Hair sticking up at odd angles, he looked as if he hadn’t showered in a little longer than herself. “Well, young lady?”

“Drinking at seven in the morning?” Rachel asked, placing a foot on the bottom step. Almost subconsciously, the man’s hand shook the rocks in his bourbon. “Careful you’re not becoming an alcoholic. I hear addicts tend to turn up dead in this town.” She did not let herself watch the end of the change in his face but could imagine the slurring man becoming enraged. “Besides, it’s going to cost a lot to get hooch in the can.” The sound of him setting the glass down on the table beside his chair was all the answer she got before she turned and climbed the remaining stairs. Coming from their-- her-- bedroom, her mother stopped, her face twisted into a look of dignified concern.

Feeling almost as angry at her--after all, she let him stay even after what he had tried to do to Sera-- Rachel tried to look away from her, to her own bedroom door. This was the best she could do to send a message that none of this was okay, not what her father had done and not what her mother was doing by letting him stay in the house instead of telling him to hit the road. She has got to have more spine than that. I know she does. She felt her mother’s hand reach out and rest on her shoulder and shrugged it off immediately but turned around to face her, to look into that face trying to mimic grace. Rachel had never done much more than roll her eyes at that habit of her mother’s but right now, she was angry, seething. Her shoulders rose and fell in time with her breath.

“Rachel,” even looking into her daughter’s livid face did nothing to temper the woman’s urge to maintain this prim and proper facade. “You really need to answer me when I try to call or text you. It’s not alright for me not to know where you are.”
“You’d have just told me to come back and as long as he’s here, that’s not happening,” she responded, turning the knob on her bedroom door. “I’m getting some shit and getting out of here before he decides I’m too much trouble to keep alive, too.” The urge to tell her that, if she had any common sense she’d put him out on the curb along with his precious sherry was not a productive one.

“Rachel, this is still your home.”

“The guy who tried to have my ‘bio mother’ killed is downstairs having a sunrise bourbon,” she said by way of rebuttal. For not the first time she thought she saw agreement in her mother’s eyes, underneath that stupid mask of the good, affluent housewife. All she could tell for sure was that her mother looked exhausted. She was still capable of feeling plenty of empathy for her mother, even pity, but something was wrong about her father still being in the house and it made her angry. Imagine being confident enough that you’ll be exonerated in your murder for hire scandal that you can start drinking at seven in the morning. Rachel turned the knob and opened her door. Actually, maybe he’s just scared shitless. I hope it’s the second one. He’s got a lot more time to drink himself to death now that he doesn’t have one of those pesky jobs to worry about.

Without looking back at her mother Rachel shut the door, smiling an ugly smile to herself. I guess I won’t be sneaking any breakfast from the fridge. She set aside a change of clothes and then brought down a couple of bags from her closet. A couple months ago Rachel had taken them back from Chloe and unpacked her own supply, leaving more than a few shirts and pairs of pants hanging in Chloe’s closet. This time she emptied most of the room of clothing into each of those bags and packed away a pair of letters from Sera and her copy of A Midsummer Night’s Dream on top of that. With one last look around the room Rachel tried to think of anything that would be immediately necessary. Failing that, she carried the clothes set aside and her packed bags into the bathroom across the hall, locking the door behind her.

While the water warmed up, she stripped away two day old clothing, feeling a little bit of disgust. At least it’s not super hot outside anymore, she thought, digging her phone from her discarded jeans. Underneath the earlier messages from her mother, she added one more line to the conversation.

Me

If you can, I would like to see if it’s not too late to apply to stay in the dormitories this year. It’s a better alternative than where I would end up going.

Rachel didn’t bother to say that she was fairly certain if she went to Joyce Price (soon to be Joyce Madsen) and asked to sleep on their couch, she would almost definitely agree. The only problem with that was that David would go out of his way to make sure that she did stay on the couch. He had made it no secret what he thought of the two of them sharing a bed the first and only time she
had been caught sleeping beside Chloe during one of his ‘impromptu’ drug use checks. Sometimes, Rachel thought as she stepped into the shower, I think Chloe is a bit dramatic about the guy. Other times, he does something incredibly creepy like come into her room unannounced in the middle of the night. Rachel understood exactly what he thought might be happening, but, it had not. At least, not yet.

When she stepped out of the bathroom, having added a brush from the drawer beneath the sink to her bag, Rachel took one last look down the hall and left the house. Her father was still in his spot downstairs but he did not try to speak to her as she descended the stairs. She responded to the sound of ice clinking against glass with the front door slamming shut. Her phone vibrated in her pocket. She did not check it, yet. Pausing to let a car go past her first, Rachel crossed the street in the early morning light and made for the edge of town.

It used to be I didn’t have any kind of problem finding somewhere to hang out, Rachel thought, as she ducked into the cement structure that she and Chloe sometimes used as a hangout in the middle of the old junkyard. Home, school, play practice, maybe a party, it didn’t matter. Now nothing. With the school year only three days away from staring, she at least had that to look forward to and if they had rooms left (don’t they usually keep two or three open, whenever possible?) she might have a dorm room to look forward to. For the moment though, all she could think to do was to base herself here. Rachel took a second to slide the impromptu door, a tall, rusted piece of sheet metal, back over the entranceway. I mean, what happened? Deep down, though, Rachel knew the answer.

She had never been close to anyone before Chloe. Everyone before that was an ‘activity friend’ someone she hung out with in the context of some shared activity like the play, or a club or even in one case a quickly aborted attempt at a girl’s soccer team. Instead of upsetting her, the idea that Chloe might be her first close friend was at least comforting in one way: at least she had one now and, to top it off, Chloe was probably far more than a friend, not that either of them had gone out of the way to put a name to it. Rachel looked around once. No one’s touched a damn thing, she thought with pride as she trailed her eyes over the various items they had salvaged together from the junkyard to decorate their little hideout. Once, only once, some jock from Blackwell had actually wandered into the place after a party. Rachel, once she found out, had decided to make his life a bit of a living hell for a couple of days and managed to secure relative safety for their special spot. She still wouldn’t tell Chloe how she did it and that, she was pleased to say, annoyed the girl spectacularly.

I wish I could have just stayed there, she thought as she lowered one of her bags down onto an old, busted bench and set about trying to kick dirt and leaves into a far corner of the structure. But since David the Dictator can’t find Chloe’s stash, he’s in a really shitty mood. I don’t know what would happen if he pulled another surprise inspection and found me in the same bed as her. Especially how we fell asleep last night. She glanced at the plastic taped over one of the ‘windows’ of the structure and glanced about. Come to think of it, sleeping out here would be a lot warmer like that, too. She did, however, take a second to dig a sleeping bag loose from her other bag and stretch it out in the cleaner corner of the room. After a quick glance at herself in the filthy mirror set against one wall, she eased herself into the bag, clutching A Midsummer Night’s Dream.
I can’t believe I’m probably going to have to sleep out here, she thought, settling a now far more empty bag behind her head for use as a pillow. I mean, Chloe was fine to do it, but she’s Chloe. She’s kind of a badass. Rachel popped the book open. Okay, so I read this a couple years ago, but if this is what the fall production is going to be, I probably ought to refamiliarize myself. Especially with Helena, she pondered, or, maybe Hermia? Whatever the case, in that way she found herself a sleeping bag in the middle of a junkyard reading Shakespeare and trying not to wonder just when her life got so damn weird when her phone started to ring.

“Hey, sleeping beauty,” she greeted instantly. “Sorry for waking you from your eternal slumber this morning.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Chloe responded, though Rachel could hear her smiling. The sound of the truck’s engine starting in the background made Rachel pay more attention. “So, where should I meet you? We’ve got to go secure the package if we don’t want to be late.”

“I’m at our spot, in the junkyard.” Chloe did not respond at first, though Rachel could hear her backing her ride from the driveway.

“It didn’t go very well going home, then, did it?”

“Not at all,” she responded, shifting in her bag and laying her still-open book down on her chest. “I don’t think I’ve got one of those right now. I’m trying to get a room at Blackwell.” Chloe whistled on the other end of the line.

“That bad?” Rachel told her that unfortunately, yes it was.

Sitting up on top of the bag, Rachel continued reading until she heard the familiar rattle of the old, half-salvaged truck. Before she hid her bags beneath couple of old metal signs, she freed a small, green folder and a cloth bag about the size of her fist. No honking came, but she still had to slow down and remind herself to slide the sheetmetal back over the entrance before getting into the truck. A little eager despite some trepidations, Rachel threw the door open and slid in rapidly. On the seat between she and Chloe was a similar folder, this one black. She stacked her own on top of it and then moved them both to the other side of the seat as she scooted closer to Chloe. Before she could actually greet her properly, they had a first.

For a lot of people, it might have been a small first but she knew better. The one thing that was clear to her by now was that when Chloe felt she felt more than anyone Rachel had ever known. It was part of the reason she wanted the blooming punk to join her for the school’s play this time around. So, when Chloe leaned toward her and placed her lips against Rachel’s cheek in place of a
greeting, she smiled, widely. Maybe some of their yearmates at school would consider this silly, childish, but neither of them had gone out of their way to put a label on their relationship. This might not be a label but it was a stage forward, a confirmation of sorts and it was as comforting to her as it looked to be embarrassing to Chloe, who looked once into the rear view mirror and, pink in the face, began to back them up through the exit.

Consider that a good sign, Rachel told herself as she pressed close enough that Chloe could rest an arm across her shoulders. So she did. They talked about nothing in particular during the trip from the junkyard to the school, though Rachel thought about asking Chloe how it felt to be coming back onto school grounds for the first time since her suspension (if one discounted The Tempest.) Instead, she allowed things to be light, to be almost as calm and warm as those first few moments after she had woken up that morning. That being said, when they finally managed to find a spot in the absolutely packed student lot, the tone began to change a little.

“Wow, this place is busy,” Rachel mused, stepping down from the truck. It shifted as Chloe got out behind her.

“Yeah, well, not everyone gets here as early as our target does. They’re probably all moving people in.” Rachel followed Chloe toward the dorms. Looking down at her phone she could see that the only message she had from her mother was a query about where she was, not at all an answer to her request for the woman to look into getting her into a dormitory room. To that end, Rachel put her phone away and kept an eye out, which is how she spotted the blue-uniformed man with the thick mustache staring at her from up against a brick wall. She nudged Chloe and gestured toward David, who was currently glaring daggers their direction.

“Oh, right,” Chloe said, giving the man a wave and a far too wide smile. “I forgot to mention.” Rachel waved too as Chloe continued forward, pulling from, of all things, her jacket pocket, a small wrapped package and passing it over. Rachel unwrapped it and, upon realizing she held what amounted to a bacon sandwich, she raised an eyebrow at Chloe, even as her stomach growled in recognition of food. “Mom says, ‘next time, just tell her to come down for breakfast.’ David says, ‘Grrr, Gronk angry, Gronk smash.’ Rachel smirked, looking for signs of embarrassment on Chloe’s face but maybe, just maybe, she’d already had her fill of being embarrassed over that. “Weirdly enough, when someone falls down on the roof, it’s kind of loud.”

“Woops,” Rachel added unconvincingly before taking a bite. Up ahead, Dana and her father were pulling open the door to the dormitory. Chloe sped up a bit to catch the door behind them before it could shut and Rachel followed, wrapping up half of the sandwich and storing it away. Fuck it, who’s going to hate on cold bacon?

“Oh hey, Rachel,” Dana greeted. Her familiar smile was tinted by no small degree of pity, but Rachel did not acknowledge that. “How you doing?” I’m going to have to get used to people feeling sorry for me. The idea made her stomach turn and she understood better why the girl in front of her
had trouble making friends with other Blackwell students.

“I’m alright,” she replied, glancing back at Chloe. Chloe was technically between her and Dana, as well as the girl’s father who was carrying a fairly loaded down box toward the stairs. Chloe, however, was still rather closed off toward most of the school even though Steph and Mikey had long since firmly opened doors on that front. In fact, as a result of them, Chloe had even brought Rachel into a new ‘activity circle.’ “Chloe and I are visiting someone who just moved in.”

“Oh cool,” Dana glanced next at Chloe and, more unsteadily, greeted her. “How goes, Chloe?”

“Everything’s pretty good,” the girl responded, following Dana up after her father. “I’ve been allowed back in, this year.”

“Oh yeah? Are you going to do the play? Mr. Keaton absolutely waxed poetic about you, last year.” Rachel grinned at the back of Chloe’s head.

“If Rachel gets her way,” Chloe responded. “The jury’s still out on that one. What about you?” She’s gotten way better about talking to people she doesn’t know, after all. I know she still hates it. If that doesn’t scream ‘most improved actress’ I don’t know what does. They reached the second floor, passing someone on their way down who Rachel did not recognize. Another new dorm student? Once Dana and her father disappeared into her room, Rachel was left with the cool feeling in the pit of her stomach and the uneasiness sneaking in as Chloe walked down the hall and knocked on the door to room 222.

Okay, Rachel, pull it together. It was not exactly true to say she had been looking forward to this moment. Despite appreciating everything that the room’s occupant had done for her or for Chloe and even enjoying their conversations via text from time to time, she could not help but feel a little off-put when Max opened the door to her dorm room, looking more than a bit frazzled. Look, maybe you’re right about her or maybe you’re wrong but it doesn’t matter. This is Chloe we’re talking about. Besides, the last time Max was in town was really intense. You’re probably reading into it a little much. Rachel tried not to let the hug the girl shared with Chloe before letting them both in bother her.

“Rachel,” Max said. “How are you doing?” It was a genuine query backed by what looked like a genuine smile. For a second, it was easy to forget that this was the girl that knocked Damon Merrick on his ass not once but twice without much hesitation. Rachel had seen what happened to the her after those moments of violence, but even with that severe reaction kept in mind--including the whole passing out in Frank’s RV shortly after Rachel arrived, thing--she couldn’t help but think that Max was a lot more than just a photography nerd and possibly a lot more than Chloe’s childhood friend.
“I’m alright, I mean, considering everything that’s going on,” she added. It was hard to imagine opening up too much to Max about how things had been since she turned in her father. That being said, she already had, at least a bit in texts. Maybe it was harder face to face. “The trial’s coming,” she told the girl, her face grim. Behind them, the springs in the tiny twin bed assigned to Max cried out in protest as Chloe flopped emphatically onto it, overtop disturbed covers and a bit of laundry.

“Hey,” Max said, suddenly.

“These beds *suck,* ” Chloe responded as she turned over onto her back. Rachel found herself rolling her eyes in unison with the brunette opposite of her.

“They’re not supposed to be used like a trampoline, Chloe,” Rachel answered, trying to gesture her over. Met with only an extended tongue, she contemplated a few ways to react that might leave Chloe rather speechless and filed those, too, away. “So, got the papers?”

“And the dice,” Max answered, gesturing to a small bag and a folded pile of papers on top of her mini-fridge. Rachel turned her head slightly and did her best to read Max’s face. Immediately, it screamed of someone who was uncomfortable. *Why? Because of me? Because of being in the dormitories? That’d take some getting used to. That will take some getting used to.* When Max had retrieved the bag and paper, as well as a tall, metal bottle of water from the fridge, she turned toward Chloe. “So, your friend’s fine to have me join in?”

“Yes,” Chloe answered. “We held off on starting a new campaign, you know, after *someone* ended the last one.” As the girl sat up, drawing the beanie on her head down farther over her bright blue hair, Rachel looked pointedly away. “You know,” Chloe continued, tauntingly, “someone whose mage *wiped the party.* ” Rachel now spoke over her, rather emphatically.

“So Max, how was moving in? Ready to go?” Max snorted and then agreed amiably enough. She was halfway to putting the paper and her dice into her messenger back when she suddenly hurried to her desk and closed her laptop.

“Okay, yeah, now I am.”

“Let’s go,” Chloe said, rising from the bed looking and sounding as if she had been robbed of her fun in teasing Rachel. Perhaps to drive her point home, Rachel reached out, wrapped her arm around Max’s and lead her from the room ahead of Chloe. *Just let this not all blow up in my face, please.*
At least if Max is crazy for Chloe, then today can still be called a session of Luncheons and Lesbians, Rachel thought. And Mikey, but at least we’re all playing for the same team.

---

Avkhf, P tbza yltltily:

P't npun av kv h sva ilaaly pm P jhu thrl myplukz dpao vaolyz. Yhjols jvtlz av tpuk mpyza, zpujl Rhal dvu'a il hyvbuk mvy huvaoly flhy, iba aol vaolyz thrl zluzl, avv. P ullk av avbjo ihzl dpao Myhur av nla zvtl nyllu huk P ullk av nla zvtl uhtlz myvt opt. P kvu'a ruvd dov aol ivvrplz pu Hyjhkph Ihf dlyl. P't wyvihisf npun av nla ylhssf apylk ylhssf mhza hyvbuk wlvwsl P kvu'a ruvd zv dlss. P't npun av ohcl av nla vclv aoha. Aol upnoathylz dpss zavw. Aolf zavwwlk pu Qbul, aolf'ss zavw aopz aptl, avv. Iylhaol.
Chapter Eight: A Modern Day Symposium

Chloe didn’t particularly mind the beach. It was, all in all, kind of nice, especially if you were there with friends. This time though, as she stood looking down at her boots in the sand, she had to admit she was not having as much fun as hoped. The sun was high enough overhead that it should have been warm but Chloe felt cool, inside and out. Exaggerated ruts in the sand showed the path she had been taking back and forth for longer than she could place. Each time the water rolled away from the shoreline, she approached it, drawn by a force she could not name.

Then, each time it crashed in, a panic sent her back in retreat. Her legs were beginning to ache and there was no sign of anyone who was supposed to be there with her, anyone who might be able to understand her fear. Overhead, a few birds flew inland. The air was unnaturally still, as if there was no wind to speak of. Occasionally, instead of the unnameable passionate lure that drew her toward the sea each time it retreated from her, she rushed forward in rage, only to backpedal quickly seconds later. It was hard not to recognize the behavior as absurd, as wrong and pointless. At best, she was wasting energy. At worst, anyone watching her would be losing faith.

The water came rushing back toward shore and she turned, retreating with her eyes clenched shut, heart rate rising. Something bumped unceremoniously into her knees, forcing her to open her eyes and walk around it to escape the soft wave chasing after her. She felt wet sand beginning to cake her boots and the ends of her pants legs, making all movement feel unnatural and slightly hindered. Looking down not at that sand, but at the object she bumped into, Chloe felt disconcerted. She was standing next to the largest D20 she had ever seen in her life, sleek and purple-black with bright red numbers, which seemed to glow. Nearly to her waist in height, the blazing red 20 beamed its light into the strangely darkening sky.

Chloe looked around to see who had rolled with such luck. As if she had always been there, though, Steph was leaning against the die, pulling her beanie down over long, dark hair and raising an eyebrow at her. For some reason, Chloe felt like Steph was out of place. Her father should have been standing there instead, but that seemed like a really rude thing to say. Reacting to something on Chloe’s face that Chloe could not quite imagine, Steph gave her a soft, almost apologetic smile, gesturing to the die.

“You critted,” Chloe told her with a grimace as a bright red wall of light rose between them from
the number facing the sky. “Bad news for some poor sap.” Steph nodded, silent, though the 
apologetic smile did not fade away. “I’m that poor sap, aren’t I?” Chloe sighed and turned back 
toward the water.

“Un-for-tu-nate,” Steph emphasized, as if she were a fellow sufferer of the cruel GM hand of fate 
instead of the one rolling the dice. Chloe mimicked her, leaning against it. The water never seemed 
to reach the die, as if it provided some sort of natural force that kept it back.

“I’m guessing I failed my saving throw, to top it all off?” She was joking when she asked but 
Steph’s response did feel a little like a jab in the ribs.

“Yeah, you did.” The sound of a breeze through trees rose around Chloe as she turned back to the 
water even though there was neither wind nor trees.

“Every time the water comes in, I feel like it’s going to crush me,” she told Steph, feeling foolish at 
the confession. “Like, it feels like it’s going to shatter every bone in my body.” A raven sounded to 
her right, making Chloe’s head turn. Instead of a bird, though, she saw Rachel and Mikey passing 
within reaching distance of the die, chatting animatedly to each other about whether he should roll 
an attack or just back away. Together, they passed the die, making Chloe’s stomach knot up all 
over again. They were going to the water even though the wave was about to push back in. She 
reached out and just barely grabbed hold of Rachel’s shoulder. With a confused expression, Rachel 
shrugged her off.

“Chloe, your fears are holding you back,” Rachel told her, her voice calming and placative. She 
took time to pat Chloe’s hand, an expression far more affection than patronization, but eventually 
she followed Mikey to the water, making some comment about his glasses being filthy.

“I guess,” he told her, chuckling, too. “At least they’re not rose colored, right?” Chloe turned her 
head to Steph.

“Hey,” Steph said, standing up straight to raise both hands, as if in denial. “Don’t look at me. I’m 
with you, fear is pretty natural. It keeps you alive. It stops you from doing stupid shit like running 
into a burning building or some dark cave swarming with Kobold.”

“I guess,” Chloe agreed, lifting herself up to sit on sleek, dark die between them. It felt safer than 
being on the ground. Steph seemed to mirror her. “But I really wish I could be like them.” She 
gestured to Rachel and Mikey who had stopped talking long enough to kick their shoes off and 
allow the water to flow over their feet. “That seems like a lot more fun of a way to live.” Steph 
nodded amiably enough and then sighed.
“You’re afraid of being like her, though.” Even as she spoke, movement over one of Steph’s shoulders caught Chloe’s eyes and she followed Max as she rushed for the ocean. She was dressed for a burning hot summer’s day at the beach, unlike the rest of them. Even Mikey and Rachel weren’t in bathing suits. It was way too cold for that. Chloe dropped to her feet as Max ran into the water with abandon. Her hair streamed behind her for a moment and then settled as Max stopped, up to her waist in the water, laughing as she tried to stay standing in the waves. Why couldn’t she see, why couldn’t the others see?

In the distance, a huge wave had formed and was approaching them at an unreasonable speed, a wall of water on the horizon. Chloe shook her head and when she pointed to it, Rachel and Mikey retreated toward the die, carrying their wet shoes, laughing. On the other hand, Max dove straight into the surf. Chloe took a step toward the water and then a hand came down, vicelike, on her shoulder. Turning back, Chloe was treated to the sight of Rachel, livid.

“Sometimes you roll the dice, sometimes you disengage and live to fight another day, crawl another dungeon, save another village.” Chloe glanced back at Steph. “Other times, you stand between two burning villages and, well, then what do you do?”

“I don’t know. Why does it have to be bullshit metaphors?” fear and irritation were rising. Chloe had to break free of Rachel’s grasp and go drag Max out of the water before that monster wave hit her and pulled her out to sea. That would mean abandoning Rachel to that wave, though and if she were washed out of Arcadia Bay by anything, Chloe might as well just dive into the water and never climb out. Angrily, she turned back to Steph, but she and Mikey already had their backs to the ocean. Over her shoulder, Steph threw something back toward Chloe. She watched the smaller, normal D20 fly through the air and then roll unnaturally through the sand, past her and toward the water. If it reached the surf, she would never see what it landed on. As she reached down toward the die, the sound of wind was replaced by the familiar noise of a window opening, but there was no window to be seen around her. Chloe knew someone was leaving her.

“Hey, Chloe, you with us?” Chloe’s head jerked up from the die in her hand, where she had been staring before she became lost in remembering that morning’s dream. Glancing briefly around Steph’s kitchen table, she smiled. “I knew you didn’t get enough sleep.” Rachel sounded a mix between concerned and exasperated.

“Someone keep you up all night?” Steph asked Chloe, looking up from behind her screen. “Don’t worry about sparing us all the juicy details. I’m sure Mikey won’t mind.” To Chloe’s left Mikey rolled his eyes behind his glasses. Feeling slightly embarrassed herself, she glanced at the boy who had grown both more broadly shouldered and taller over the summer and then back to Rachel. Beside Rachel, Max was looking rather pointedly down at her character sheet, though she wore a smile.
“Anyway,” Chloe finally decided on saying, “Sorry about that. Spaced way out for a minute.”

Glancing up at Steph, she asked, “Is it my turn?” Steph nodded quickly, mercifully willing to give up on her earlier teasing. *Shit, I think I spaced through Mikey introducing his character.* “I decided to go back to a barbarian for this one, but-” she said, before Mikey could look too excited, “this is no puny elf! I am Dre’na, the savage Orc Barbarian from the northeastern hills. I am a deserter from my people’s army because I got *bored* of smashing dwarfs over the head so someone *else* could make a killing off of their gold. Now, I’m out to *get mine* and I’m perfectly fine using this great club my father carved for me to get it done. I haven’t decided what my subclass will be, but if we’re caster heavy I’ll probably go berserker. People won’t really have time to worry about a mage melting their face off if a huge Orc woman is about to break those faces.”

It was always kind of awesome to see how much Steph actually genuinely enjoyed game mastering, even though Chloe had been doing this just long enough to see that it could be really stressful from time to time, especially in non-combat situations. When Chloe finished her introduction and began going over her stat distribution, Steph was still grinning, though she looked relieved when Chloe remembered to produce a spare copy of her character sheet for her to reference. Chloe glanced over at Rachel, waiting for the big reveal. *She’s been laughing about this whenever I asked for like a week.* Beside her, finishing a drink from a brown longneck bottle, Rachel pulled her sheet from the folder in front of her and Chloe closed her own on top of the paper containing the mechanical information for Dre’na the Orc Barbarian.

“I am going to be playing a Cleric named Che,” Rachel said, turning to fix a look on Chloe who opened her mouth to object. “I agreed after *someone* made a big deal out of a simple TPK, to not play a mage this time. I didn’t say anything about not playing a caster.” *Damn it,* Chloe conceded, shutting her mouth. Beside Rachel, Max pumped her fist. “Che,” Rachel continued, looking and sounding smug, “is a human Cleric of the great god Hephaestus, the lord of smithing, forging, invention and-“

“Fire,” Mikey finished in time with Rachel. He sounded half miserable as he said it, but Rachel just fixed a beaming smile on him from across the table, one of pure innocence and good will. Steph fought not to look excited at the idea, but it did not work. *Evil GM is plotting evil,* Chloe noted of the look.

“*Yep,*” Rachel said, as if Mikey had been asking her a question instead of lamenting the potential of another character dying in quite literal friendly fire. “She is from the northern mountains where a lot of mixed dwarven/human/halfing settlements are.” Chloe made a mental note that her character might have wandered up that way at one point. “And she is definitely going to try to keep any unnecessary violence in check, but sometimes to craft a sword you need to crack a few eggs.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Steph told her, matter-of-factly, and then happily accepted a spare character sheet from Rachel. “Last but not least, the newcomer. Hit us with it, Max.” Max unfolded one of her sheets, sliding the other toward the GM screen before she started to read.
“Well,” Max said, “I couldn’t really decide on a class, so Steph told me what supplemental books she had access to and I picked one of those up a few weeks ago.” Chloe nodded to herself, eager to see a bit of extra flavor added to the party. “So, I decided on playing a Chronomancer.” *Not sure I’ve heard of one of those, but sounds cool enough.* “Early on that basically just means I’ll be able to make people slow down or maybe even freeze for like a turn, maybe throw some pretty magic bolts at them but if I survive and level up, I think this thing is hella powerful.”

“Absolutely, hella,” Steph said, as if humoring the word. “I’ve also never GM’d for one, so we’ll probably have to get a little experimental at first as we try to figure it out. Have patience with me?” Max nodded in agreement. “So tell us about your Chronomancer.”

“Well, he’s kind of a scrawny thing,” she said, “born in the capital city but he moved off for a few years. He never really had to work for food and kind of lived really richly. But he spent most of his time reading and uh,” Max paused, and Chloe could hear a lot of her own hesitation from when she first started playing. “Oh, his name is Jule. He’s mostly just got his spellbooks and a staff to whack people with. If he loses that he has a couple of spells that can help up close and personal but he’s going to get really hurt if he has to.” Steph nodded.

“Awesome. Combat’s going to be kind of different than before, now. We don’t usually have so much crowd control. Between the Druid and the Chronomancer, you should be able to have some fun. Though, I can’t wait to see Mikey’s character and Chloe’s interact.” Chloe looked sheepishly back at Steph. “What?”

“When I was spacing earlier, I might have missed the Druid being introduced.” Mikey shook his head, but it wasn’t out of any actual irritation.

“TL;dr,” he started, in that way he had of using textspeak in actual conversation, “Dwarf Druid of the northern hills. A roaming band of *Orcs* destroyed his town.” *Of course,* Chloe thought, nodding. *Steph won’t try to use her homebrewed Character Points to try to tease arguments out of us.* Chloe actually enjoyed the idea of those Character Points. It was Steph’s way of trying to make them play out their characters’ motivations and personalities more deeply by offering a point that could be exchanged for a reroll on an important roll. Mikey thought they took away some of the risk, but preferred the roleplay element over the whole ‘nearly dying a thousand times at level one’ thing, as he put it. “I’m not sure how that will play out, but what’s an adventure without a little drama.”

“There’s going to be plenty of drama,” Steph said, leaning forward. Her ‘GM’s Voice’ was in place and Chloe grinned sideways to Rachel. She wasn’t sure when she started to get so into this again, but she had. The fact that Rachel and later Max agreed to come along with her was pretty awesome, she thought for not the first time. “Last but not least, now that we’ve heard about everyone’s characters, does anyone have any thoughts about the party, before we get started?” Max, who had just pulled a face that suggested the contents of the bottle in her hand was not water, sat her drink
down and spoke.

“I’m just glad there’s no spunky bunnygirl mage.” Chloe’s head snapped up and she tried to promise the most horrendous, torturous death that she could imagine in the look she shot past Rachel, to Max. Looking like a small child viewing a mountain of presents beneath her Christmas tree, Steph gestured for Max to go on, excitedly. Rachel was, on the other hand, watching Chloe, her expression clearly announcing she was biding her time, waiting for this to mean what she thought it meant, to use it against Chloe. “Well, I mean, the only other campaign of any type of game like this I’ve ever played, there was this friend,” Chloe groaned and lowered her head to the table. “And she demanded that we include a race that was basically bunny people. This friend loved Hip-Hoppy, her spunky bunnygirl mage.”

“Just stop,” she all but wailed at Max.

“Oh god,” Rachel cut across her, excitedly. “Don’t stop, go on.”

“Please,” Mikey started. “I know we don’t know each other well, but Max, I implore you to continue.” He continued to pose as if he was exaggeratedly begging.

“What was her catchphrase?” Max asked Chloe, who instead of responding began to shake her head emphatically. “Oh right, ‘Did that hurt? I don’t carrot all.’” A peal of laughter sounded from behind the GM screen, where Steph was now hiding her face. Mikey and Rachel were clearly in agreement with the game master and when Chloe raised her head, Max was smiling innocently down at her character sheet.

“Fuck this,” Chloe said, emphatically. She crossed the kitchen in two or three steps and secured a beer from the refrigerator. There was something to be said for being basically left alone more often than not in your home, as Steph didn’t seem to hesitate to keep the fridge stocked with beer. Though, how precisely she got it in a town small enough it was unlikely she could get away with a fake ID for long, Chloe never knew. She just enjoyed providing beer money. “Okay, okay, so weren’t we going to play this game?” she asked, hearing the laughter beginning to die. When she sat down, Chloe’s half-hearted annoyance was squashed beneath the hand which came to rest on her right knee.

“Alright,” Steph said, pulling herself together. “No more of that,” she said, “not until we break for the bathroom or dinner.” Chloe groaned, resisting the urge to hide her face once more. Beside her, Mikey muttered something about ‘carrot cake’ for desert. “Now, my friends. We fade in on the acropolis of the capital city at dusk, where you’ve all been summoned as able bodied men and women capable of providing help to the city in a dark time. To the east, a great host of men approach, the light of their torches making dusk into morning. You have heard that the forces opposing the crown family were growing in number, but it seems that propaganda was trying to make it seem less scary than it really was, because an army is marching on the capital.”
“Oh-ho, ominous,” Mikey declared, pushing his glasses up and looking eagerly down at the back of the GM sheet as he sometimes did, like he thought if he stared hard enough then he could see through it somehow to Steph’s stacks of notes. “So they’re just rounding up everyone out in the streets who look capable of fighting?” Steph nodded.

“Yes, and that brings us to the obvious question. What were each of you doing when you were rounded up?” Steph looked first right at Mikey but then her eyes shifted down the line of them to Max. “What about Jule, where was he when the guards came?” Far from looking put on the spot and unable to guess, as Chloe sometimes felt when Steph turned those GM Eyes of hers on her character, Max contemplatively worked couple of fingers through her hair before she answered.

“I think what I was doing at that point was sitting outside of an inn in the city reading. I really didn’t want to spend much money to get a room, but if I sat outside of it under a torch, it would look like I was a customer of the inn just looking for some fresh air.” Steph nodded and Chloe had to admit it at least sounded like she was trying to establish a character. When, after a second Max had not continued Steph took the reigns.

“So, you’re sitting out there reading, Jule and these two guards in like, leather armor basically come up to you, size you up and tell you to come to them, what did that look like? What happened then.” Max again took the question in stride.

“I think Jule probably decided to come with them, but not without question. In fact, I think he sort of just kept asking them questions until they roughed him up anyway or something.” Steph nodded and Chloe had to admit it at least sounded like she was trying to establish a character. When, after a second Max had not continued Steph took the reigns.

“And what about you, Che?” Chloe turned toward her, watching with a crooked smile as Rachel’s face contorted in concentration.

“I guess I was spending the evening touring the acropolis,” she said, eager to move along and get the focus off of her, as she could sometimes be when sessions first started out. “A couple of the stalls in the open air market have some really cool blacksmiths running them, so I’d probably be there looking at the hammers and spears and stuff. Most of those big weapons are more paladin territory but I am a priest of Hephaestus. I can’t help but admire the craftsmanship.” Steph looked a little impressed and amused by the tone Rachel was taking as she got into character. Better, Chloe thought, Though that’s a hard act to follow.

“So, Che, as you were looking at this really cool iron warhammer, the atmosphere was starting to change, lots of people talking kind of excitedly and then kind of nervously, guards bringing civilians up onto the acropolis and people were starting to look east. When a guard approached you
and told you that every able bodied person who looked capable or educated was going to have to
stay in the acropolis, what did you do?” Rachel was a lot more confident this time, Chloe noticed.
She got better and better about roleplaying like this each time they met. It was probably a side
effect of the general ‘being Rachel Amber’ thing she did, where no matter what she put her mind
to, she eventually did it really well and people had fun watching.

“Frankly?” Rachel started, affecting a sort of snooty tone. It had taken Chloe a while to get used to
actually roleplaying but once Rachel got used to it she fell into it fairly easily. Probably because
it’s a lot like acting in some ways, Chloe realized. That makes sense. “Normally I wouldn’t let them
stand in my way, but if Hephaestus could deal with being brought home drunk on a donkey to his
horrible family, I could sit up here and shop for a nice dagger for a while, right? Plus, it’s getting
really bright out that way and that makes no sense. The sun sets in the west so why would the east
be getting brighter?” Steph laughed.

“Good shit on keeping up with your mythology,” she added, to which Rachel bowed her head for a
second. “Yeah, I think that makes sense.” Chloe gulped, realizing that Steph was looking pointedly
at her. “Well, then, Dre’na? What were you doing when things got kind of tense on the streets of
the capital city?” Okay, well, fuck it. Play her like she was you if you weren’t always scared.
Chloe nodded to herself, grinned crookedly at Steph and answered.

Time passed fairly quickly after that. Things usually went quickly during sessions of their
campaigns, especially before the first break. Max fit into the group like a cog in a machine,
surprisingly and her character ended up playing off of Mikey’s fairly well so that Chloe and Rachel
spent a lot of time amusedly watching the two volley back and forth in-character jibes. However,
almost three hours after they all sat down to start playing, none of the characters were amused or in
a mood for banter even though, generally speaking, the players were in good spirits.

“Alright, Che, your healing spell last turn worked like a charm. Jule has not only gotten back up
from being completely unconscious, but he’s cast a spell on the undead soldier hurrying after you.
They’ve frozen in their tracks, but you know from experience it will only last a few seconds.”
Rachel nodded, palming her D20. “Tell us, Che. Gor has clobbered his foe to death. One of the
guards assigned to keep you prisoner is bearing down on Dre’na and the other is right in front of
you. What do you do?” Chloe couldn’t help but match the huge grin on Rachel’s face. When she
was genuinely amused and enjoying herself, how the hell did anyone not catch Rachel’s mood?

“Dre’na could knock that other asshole’s head off if she wants. So, instead, I’ll cast sacred flame
on the skeleton right in front of me.” Steph nodded and that was all the signal Rachel seemed to
need to roll. Chloe leaned forward, trying to catch sight of the D20 as it grew still. “Eighteen,”
Rachel declared, and Mikey pumped his fist.

“You’ve rolled more than high enough to hit so go ahead and roll a d8 for me.” Several weeks ago,
before Chloe agreed to start doing semi-regular sessions of this, she wouldn’t have thought that the
sound of dice rolling was especially pleasant. Now, though she associated it with the sessions, with fun moments in which the dice rolls and player intent worked together to create really fun story moments that usually left people laughing. As Rachel’s d8 rolled across the table, landing on a six, Steph pulled a moderately impressed face. “It’s just enough to do the job. The magic sinew holding the skeleton together burns away under your holy light. What does it look like?”

“Fire from the forge of Hephaestus pours out of her holy symbol, a steel hammer and just consumes the bones whole.” Steph nodded and Chloe had to admit she could appreciate the mental image of a skeleton being burned to ash by the holy fire of a god. Rachel looked to be enjoying herself. As Chloe considered what to do, Steph turned to look at her expectantly.

“There’s a skeleton in tattered leather armor bearing down on you and unlike Che’s, he can move. He’s got a scimitar in his hand and it looks like he’s ready to use it. What do you do?”

“Simple,” Chloe answered, well into the groove of her character. “I’m already Raging so I’m going to be doing plenty of damage, I raise the great club in my hand and bring it down hard on his head. I’m going to attack recklessly too. This is the last guard we’ve got to deal with, I’m so done with being someone’s prisoner.” Steph nodded.

“Make your roll and I’ll remember that Gor cast Guidance on you.” Chloe did as she was bade and rolled the d20 twice and then a small four sided die. Looking down at her notes, Steph nodded briefly. “Your highest was a sixteen, plus two. It hits.” Chloe dug into the little pile of dice in front of her to whip out an eight-sided die. “Go ahead,” Steph instructed, and she rolled.

“Six,” she told the girl.

“Excellent. Yeah, your club comes down on its head and its skull literally splinters.” The amused air quieted slightly as the party waited to hear Steph’s further description. She parted fairly distinct, shapely lips which Chloe felt a little guilty for noticing and then, with a grin, added. “It dies on impact and crumbles to the ground. The last skeleton in the prisoner section is dead. The camp is still swarming with them, but you are free for the moment.”

“Time to run?” Rachel asked.

“Time to run,” Mikey and Max responded in unison. Chloe certainly had no objection.

“We probably should tell the royal guard that these aren’t opposition forces marching on the city,”
Max murmured, her voice taking on the nasally quality of her character’s voice to suggest she was speaking as him. “Though, if they’re less worried that an army of the undead are about to attack, then I’ll be a little worried about our government.”

“Yes,” Chloe replied, doing her best to voice her character with short, quick and blunt words. “Uh, I would rather we get out and tell them so we can uh, bring more soldiers and crack more skulls!” Steph nodded.

“Then if there are no objections we’ll take a break right now and come back to the party trying to escape from this military camp.” Max sat back, cracking her knuckles, in a way that mirrored Chloe’s own habits. Where did that even come from? It must’ve been something we both saw. Amused at the mystery, Chloe got to her feet. No objection came and Steph lowered her GM’s Screen so that it covered her notes and exposed her a little more fully. “Then we’re breaking.” Though it was fun as hell, there was a certain relief when they took a break. She was neither expected to come up with anything in character nor roll the dice when the difference between a good or bad roll was another character’s life or death.

“Your guidance roll kicked ass,” Chloe said, raising her hand and receiving a high five from the boy to her left.

“You kicked ass, but, we’re going to have to pass some stealth checks if we want to get out of the camp,” Mikey observed as he bagged his dice. “That might be difficult for our barbarian friend.”

“You know,” Max said, “If we have to fight it shouldn’t be a big deal. I don’t really carrot all.” Chloe shook her head once as Mikey and Rachel burst into immediate laughter. After a second, Max dug into her bag pulled out her camera. I’m not pouting, Chloe told herself, glaring in Rachel’s direction. A quick flash from the camera washed over the three of them and then Chloe turned away. The sound of Max waving the new photo about was just audible as Mikey and Rachel quieted down. Steph sat back in her seat, surveying things as if she was proud of what was happening.

“Nope,” she said, “just nope.” Chloe crossed from the kitchen table to the refrigerator and opened it. There wasn’t a ton of food left in the fridge, leaving Chloe to hope that Steph had some sort of back up plan that didn’t involve packages of Maruchan ramen. Then again, she could probably afford to eat out every day for a month. Some half formed innuendo in a corner of her mind rose up and fell flat and Chloe came up with a fresh beer before heading toward the glass sliding double door on the far kitchen wall. “I need a beer and a smoke,” she announced before stepping through the doors. She doubted Max was going to actually try to embarrass her, that wasn’t her style. Just in case, though, she was going to make a quick escape.

“I’d come with you,” Rachel called at her retreating form, “but I have a story to hear first.” Chloe
actively ignored her this time, shutting the sliding door behind her. Judging by her phone it was only three in the afternoon when she leaned against the back wall of Steph’s home. With a tall enough privacy fence of wood and “unfortunately” absent parents, Steph was typically on her own. This meant she could do more or less what she wanted, whether that was drinking well before she should have been legally able or hosting a tabletop session all day. Standing there, with the fence up as a guard against the prying eyes of the rest of Arcadia Bay, Chloe could appreciate the privacy.

She lit a cigarette and drew deeply from it. Whatever shenanigans were going on inside, as she leaned against the wall and enjoyed a smoke, Chloe was smiling. So far, the first session had been so fun. Whether it was combat or just the party sniping at each other in conversation, it felt like friends making jokes. It felt like laying in bed during childhood sleepovers with Max laughing about nothing. It usually does, Chloe admitted, taking a long pull from the bottle in her left hand. Still, everything’s gone really well so far, but we’ve got hours still for Steph to really fuck us up. Chloe checked her messages.

Mom

How are things going?

Me

Everything’s fine mom. We’re just rolling dice and being slowly turned into bigger and bigger nerds. I think I might stay here tonight so I can hang out with Steph and Mikey. I don’t know about everyone else though. Max probably has to go back to the dorms. She’s okay. I think she and Mikey are going to be friends. They’re both huge nerds.

Determined not to answer any further messages from her mother that night, Chloe took another long drink, half expecting to empty the bottle in her hand. It wasn’t quite empty when she was done, but it was closing in on it. I probably ought to slow down a little, we’ve still got a long session ahead. Over her left shoulder, the back door to the house slid opened and closed shut. She turned briefly, expecting Rachel but instead it was Steph who stepped out. As far as Chloe knew, Steph didn’t particularly go out of her way to smoke tobacco, so she didn’t offer Steph a smoke. Chloe tried to offer a friendly enough smile and exhaled.

“So, how’s it going?” Steph asked, when she was leaning against the back wall of the couch. “Ready for your big return to Blackwell?”

“Yeah,” Chloe answered. “I’m also ready to have you in Ms. Grant’s biology class.” Steph grimaced.
“Biology’s really not my strong suit,” she confessed. Chloe turned and examined the brunette. For maybe the second time she couldn’t help but think that if Rachel was going to fall for any girl at Blackwell it probably ought to be Steph. Not only was she generally more open about being attracted to girls, Steph was just, generally, in a classical sense, attractive. Chloe wasn’t sure whether it was just the general confidence with which she conducted daily life or the dark, sharp eyes that usually plainly stated her moods but that’s how it was. “Do me a favor and if you hear me fuck up in class, let me know.”

“After class of course,” Chloe bargained. Steph snorted and shook her head.

“You’re a pain in my ass Chloe Price.” Chloe nodded this time, as if that was both normal and expected.

“Really, though,” Chloe admitted, though it felt weird to talk about this when she usually did not, “I really like physics and math better than biology. So, like, don’t expect me not to fuck up,” Steph nodded and crossed one ankle in front of the other as she leaned against the wall, looking up at the clouds very absentmindedly. Chloe would take it as the action of someone intoxicated if Steph wasn’t the game master and very clearly had touched neither a blunt nor a beer the whole afternoon. She was half tempted to pull the small, inexpertly rolled blunt from the small tin in her pocket and offer it. Instead she offered Steph what little beer remained in the bottle in her hand. She laughed and took it.

“Enjoying things so far?” Steph asked her.

“Yeah, totally. This campaign’s been fun so far. It’s like we can’t succeed an important roll unless it involves breaking a bone.” Steph laughed, putting aside the beanie on her head as she sought to half-tame her hair. Chloe counted her blessings at not having enough hair to worry about that. “What about you?”

“Dude,” Steph said, brushing the hair across her right ear back behind it, as a sort of surrender to the larger struggle. “No joke? I’m loving it.” Chloe nodded a couple of times and then discarded the cigarette butt. “Max was a good addition to the party. I mean, I know you ended up going down twice but you probably would’ve been down like four times without Jule.” Chloe had to admit that was true. When it came to healing someone who was already down, a Cleric was desperately needed. When it was a matter of slowing down the enemy when they might attack you while you were low, a Chronomancer had proven to be absolutely epic. For a moment Chloe almost felt the urge to confess the dream she had the night before to Steph. She kept quiet instead but the brunette’s dark eyes were shooting knowing glances periodically. Chloe tried not to read into them too much.

“I figured you and Mikey would get along with Max pretty well.” Steph seemed to nod and drew a
long drink from the bottle. Chloe figured it was probably empty at that point.

“She’s a good part of the party.”

“I was hoping.” Chloe said. “She’s just getting started again and she doesn’t have any friends around here. Like, no one I can think of at Blackwell was at our school when we were kids.”

“Are you thinking you and Rachel might want to crash here tonight? Mikey’s going to.” Chloe nodded, embarrassed. It was no secret among their little friend group that things were absolute shit between Chloe and Rachel and their families. Then again, Steph spent most of her time in this house alone, with her own parents gone on business. “What about Max?” Chloe shrugged.

“Probably?” she answered, though she wasn’t sure. “Or she might just go back to the dorms.”

“Don’t worry about it. We’ve got a guest room, two big couches and enough pillows and blankets to build the greatest fort ever if we so desired.” For a moment, Chloe remembered being young, eight or nine and staring out of a huge blanket fort at Max, who was asking for ‘permission to come aboard, Captain Bluebeard.’ She grinned. Steph looked toward the door.

Want another beer?” Chloe let her secure them both another bottle and in the meantime looked up at the sky. It was actually a gorgeous, bright kind of a day. “You know?” Chloe turned with the bottle in her hand halfway to her lips. Steph’s dark eyes were not quite so wide as she turned her gaze on Chloe. “Max caught on pretty quick for dealing with people she didn’t know.” Chloe was going to agree but there was something in the look on Steph’s face that gave away what she was going to say next before she even spoke. “She is pretty cute.” Chloe instantly looked about for a change of subject. It wasn’t about agreeing or disagreeing with Steph, it was mostly that there was no safe response. Still, out of the corner of her eye she watched the girl, spotting the distant cousin of lust in her’s. That could be a total clusterfuck waiting to happen. Chloe took a long, long drink. Cheap beer, but it’s cold. “Whatever happened to Hip-Hoppy?” Chloe turned her bottle upside down but nothing more came out. Without answering she opened the door.

“Nope,” she told Steph, wondering how many times she was going to have to say it that day. The sound of a camera shutter announced that, as always used to be the case, another moment which seemed completely random to her had drawn Max’s eye as the perfect photo opportunity. She and Steph received a grin from the photographer, who looked down at the new polaroid beginning to take shape in her hand before furrowing her brow in a momentary confusion that she instantly buried. Didn’t come out so well, did it? Chloe thought. When Max went right back to talking with Mikey, Chloe took a second to be both impressed and relieved. Good, I get the feeling those two should hang out.
“Chloe?” she turned toward the short hall leading to, among other places, the bathroom. At seeing Rachel return to the kitchen, Steph brushed past Chloe eagerly making for the hall. Chloe followed a step or so behind, grabbed Rachel’s hand without asking what she wanted and, earning herself a smile, lead her to out into the living room. Steph’s house was not huge, but it was rather richly furnished. It was hard to draw any kind of comparison between Steph’s place and Rachel’s except to say that they looked like they belonged to families of two different class brackets. Steph’s place looked a lot more like her own, except that most of the furniture was clean and new. “Having a good time?”

“Yep,” Chloe answered, collapsing onto the large, extra comfy couch in front of the dark, silent television. She pulled insistently and Rachel dropped into the seat beside her. Not quite content to leave it at that, Rachel stretched out, her legs ending up across Chloe’s lap. Chloe didn’t mind. She found herself tracing a hand down the still relatively recent addition of the dragon tattoo on the outside of Rachel’s calf. Eventually, though, she was forced to look up and hope that she was not about to be teased for kind of taking the initiative. *Or for liking rabbits when I was ten.*

Instead of speak right off the bat, Rachel simply stared. It was not a puzzled look or a searching one. It was the kind that Rachel gave her when Chloe did something that made her happy, or, as she put it, “amazed at you.” It was the kind Rachel gave her when they were alone and allowed to be close without having to think about anyone or anything else. It could either make Chloe uncomfortable (*in a good way, I think*) or afflict her with the proverbial butterflies in her stomach. It often, she reflected, meant that something else was coming. She found herself waiting this time.

“Who wants to pitch in on a pizza?” Mikey called from the kitchen. Rachel turned her head, looking bemused, toward the hall between the rooms.

“We literally just ate lunch before we started!”

“Yeah but that was like three or four hours ago!” Chloe shook her head, smiling at the sudden break in tension.

“Are you having fun?” she asked Rachel, forced to conclude that their moment had passed.

“Uh, duh,” Rachel answered. “I got to burn a mother fucking skeleton to death. How does it get better than that?” Chloe had to admit she was enjoying smashing things over the head instead of trying to play a charismatic character like, say, a bard again. “Plus, this girl I’ve been hanging out looks like she’s getting assertive and I can dig that.” Trying not to show the slight tinge of embarrassment, Chloe kept a straight face. *Win the battle, win the war.*
“Are you sure all you’ve been doing is hanging out?” she asked, grinning. Rachel shifted her legs from the couch to the floor and leaned in. For a moment Chloe’s breath hitched and she licked lips that felt slightly chapped almost reflexively. Instead of what she thought was coming, Rachel pressed her forehead to Chloe’s and for a moment Chloe allowed herself to look into the girl’s hazel eyes. Sometimes they can look so bright. “Why are you so damn good to me?”

“Why shouldn’t I be?” If Chloe thought for a full second, she might come up with a response to that. Instead the door to the bathroom opened and closed. She looked up to see Steph pausing, almost back in the kitchen. To her credit, the look of apology, of someone who had seen something they shouldn’t have lasted only about a half second before she fixed a smirk on them both.

“Alright, lovebirds. Let’s see if the party wants to set out.” The clearly distinct sound of pretzels pouring from a bag into a large bowl sounded from the kitchen. “Before Mikey eats me out of house and home.” It’s no biggie, Chloe told herself, though she could not help but think, in the back of her mind, that Steph was probably still crushing on Rachel, which would explain the awkwardness when she saw them a moment ago. Rachel got up without a second thought, so Chloe rose to follow her.

When they got back to the kitchen, Max was on her laptop. For just a moment, Chloe got a look at a folder on her screen. Every filename visible was absolute gibberish, Max was scrolling through them as if actually searching for a specific one. After a quick second, Chloe was spotted from the corner of the photographer’s eye, or maybe it was simply drawn by Steph and Rachel walking past her while Chloe did not. Max closed the file quickly and Chloe decided not to ask. Maybe I caught her looking through her porn folder, fuck if I know.

“Enjoying the game?” Chloe asked instead.

“Hell yeah,” Max responded. “Way more fun than when we were kids.”

“Also, we’re actually following the rules of the game, so way more complicated.” Instead of immediately acknowledging the statement, Max riffed off of it.

“Significantly less killing though, so far.” Chloe had to agree. “What happened to Sandy, anyway?”

“Moved away like the next year remember?” Max shook her head. “Yeah, no one heard from her ever again.” For one ugly moment, Chloe thought of Max’s year or so of silence and had to remind herself, as she took her place between Rachel and Mikey, that that was all over and behind them. Without asking or even looking, she reached to her left and grabbed a handful of pretzels from the
bowl between her and Mikey.

“See?” Mikey said, talking across her to Rachel. “Someone else is hungry.”

“Someone else is also drinking a little,” Rachel clarified. “This is how she always gets when she’s drinking.” Chloe just shrugged.

“When you’re right you’re right,” she agreed. Chloe had to admit, her mood was pretty high at this point. The idea that she didn’t have to go back to step-dick and leave Rachel out in the junkyard that night took the last real roadblock from having fun out of the way. There was another potential benefit that Chloe didn’t like to think about too hard. It meant she and Rachel could probably wind up a lot like they had the night before. There was something to be said for practice and Chloe felt like the one thing she needed practice with the most was just not being so awkward about cuddling. 

*Like, it’s not supposed to feel so awkward, is it? Not bad or anything, just I feel like I’m doing it wrong. Okay, Chloe, you’re overthinking shit. You need another beer.*

“Alright, everyone,” Steph said. “We all set?”

“One sec,” Max called. “Finishing an e-mail.” Chloe took the opportunity to get herself (and at Rachel’s bidding, her too,) a beer. “Alright, done.”

“Mom and dad?” Chloe asked as she sat back down. Beside her, Mikey was digging his dice out of the bag.

“Nah, a couple of people from Seattle.” Steph was starting to look at her notes. *Ah yeah, it’s time to go.*

“That girl you’re always talking about?” she asked. “What was her name?”

“No, not her,” Max answered, quickly as she closed her laptop. “Anyway, I’m good to go.”

“Alright,” Steph replied. “Then in that case, we come back to a sweeping, wide view of the camp. It’s organized, even though these skeletons seem to be completely brainless.” Chloe laughed. “Nice, neat rows of tattered tents, plenty of space between them, that kind of thing. What’s weird is when you were brought in, you didn’t see a single skeleton going in and out of them. Now, you’re loose. Che and Jule are a little injured but everyone’s gotten them both back on their feet. I think
this is where we zoom in on the group. You’re standing around, broken shackles hanging off you and there’s just like, three or four piles of bones around you. One of them is charred, another looks like it’s been gnawed on by a bear—"

“Mostly because it was gnawed on by a bear,” Mikey said. Steph spoke past him.

“Then there’s the one whose skull is split in half.” Chloe grinned, as if to say, *damn right it is.*

“It’s time to bounce,” Rachel said.

“It’s time to fuck up some skeletons,” Chloe corrected her.

“That’s my girl.” *Oh, shit.* Chloe looked pointedly down at her dice.
Chapter Nine: Hypokrites

The first thing Rachel was aware of was a soft mattress beneath her and the second was the blaring alarm clock to her right. Instinctively, she turned over, bringing the edges of her pillow up to cover her ears. A second or two passed and still the alarm sounded. Opening her eyes, Rachel was prepared to be a little grumpy at Chloe sleeping through her own alarm clock. Instead, for a moment, she felt very disoriented, as if the room she was in spun around her. Rachel exhaled as she remembered: I live here now. I wasn’t at Chloe’s last night, I was here.
The dorm room was spartan, still, save for the thick comforter brought from home which she was groggily pushing down to her feet, a small dresser and a very cheap looking desk which at this point held her laptop and bag. She intended, like Max, to eventually have a small mini-fridge in her room but moving in had been a quick and harried last minute affair in which she did her best not to be impolite to her mother, despite the fact that she had dared to bring her father to campus with her. Rachel banished the thought quickly. Starting the day pissed off was only going to get in the way of her morning plans.

Right, she told herself, peering into a mirror on the back of her room’s door. Your plan of action. Operation: Thespians. Rachel tried a sluggish grin but found that it did little to smother how exhausted she felt. Fumbling with her phone, Rachel opened her inbox. It contained a few pissy messages from her father and a couple from her mother, nothing big and nothing she was rushing to respond to. And nothing from Chloe, she thought, feeling a bit disappointed. It was silly, because within an hour and a half Chloe was going to be on campus, but part of her really felt like the perfect start to the day would be to hear from the girl. Probably sleeping in.

Me

Get your bony ass up, if you’re still asleep. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.

For a moment Rachel stood in front of her closet, gazing in at the hanging shirts. There was an image she was used to showing at school, as part of the general ‘proper Blackwell student’ face that she put on. Perhaps it was Chloe’s attitude rubbing off on her but as she looked into her closet, eyes traveling from more plain and unassuming shirts and pants to her more casual, comfortable clothing, Rachel realized for the first time that she could not be assed to dress a certain way to impress anyone. Laying out a rather ratty band tee and some fairly lived in jeans, Rachel caught a glance of herself again in the mirror. The smile on her face no longer looked so forced.

Her phone didn’t go off and she left it behind as she carried a towel, cloth and shampoo with her toward the showers. This part, I might actually have a problem with. Instead of allowing herself to feel self-conscious about showering in a room that (curtain or no curtain) had several other people in it, she focused on her unfolding plan. So, I mean, I think I’ve already gotten over the first hurdle. I got Chloe to take an improv class, for Christ’s sake. She’s going to be a brat about the play, but I think I can wear her down in the end. I just have to convince one other person. That, Rachel was forced to admit as she entered the girl’s showers, was going to be difficult. A pair of feet beneath the edge of one curtain signified that someone was already up and showering.

Someone else was standing in front of one of the mirrors hanging over the sink. Victoria Chase might have put on a face of her own when dealing with Rachel most of the year before but it seemed those days were over. Something’s a little different, Rachel thought as she observed the glare being shot in her direction. Maybe it’s the hair, maybe the general air of “fuck you, bitch” but Victoria looks different.
“See something you like?” Victoria said, her lip curling just slightly into a sneer. Instead of responding, Rachel crossed the room into one of the showers and drew the curtain shut. “Cat got your tongue?” Rachel ignored her. Compared to dealing with her father or with her awkwardness around someone who was fast becoming an actual friend, Victoria Chase remained what she had always been in Rachel’s book: small potatoes. She laughed audibly at that and heard a grumble from the sinks. *I think now that I’m not sleeping on a cement floor or in the same house as the asshole who tried to have my bio-mom killed, I might actually be in a good mood.*

Small Potatoes was, thankfully, not waiting for her when she left the showers and nowhere to be seen on her way back to room 225 which was, technically, in an adjacent hall from the rest of them. *I really don’t know what mom had to do to get them to give me one of the spare rooms, but I don’t think I can really ask right now.* She knew from having seen the inside of Max’s room a couple days before that there was a slight size difference between their rooms. *That’s probably why they used this one as storage.* Once safely back in her room with the door shut and locked behind her, Rachel slid her chosen outfit on and while dealing with her still-drying hair checked her messages.

*Max*

*I’m up. I’ll be ready. My mom called to make sure I woke up in time for my ‘big first day.’*

Rachel took the time to stow her notebook, a folder containing her character sheet and class schedule as well as locker number and combination away in her bag and followed them after a moment with her laptop. It only took a look around the room to spot the last thing stacked on top of the desk and get an idea. *Bingo!* Her copy of A Midsummer Night’s Dream disappeared into the bag at last. *Okay, a bargaining chip. If she tries to say she doesn’t want to go into the audition blind, shove this into her hands and smile at her until she realizes she lost the argument. It works on Chloe.*

Down the hall, Rachel caught a glimpse of Dana and Juliet making for the stairs, talking rather animatedly. If they were up that early, that meant they were probably on their way to the cafeteria for breakfast. *I hope Max isn’t hungry. I don’t think I could eat.* Her stomach churned, slightly, as if acknowledging her nerves and their effect on it was enough to worsen the feeling. Rachel knocked on the door to room 222. “Housekeeping. Complimentary room cleaning!” The sound of something creaking from beyond the door announced Max had probably been laying in bed. When she opened it, Rachel looked once toward the bed. It was pristinely made, in a way that Rachel couldn’t remember ever doing without being told to. The only thing out of place was the laptop sitting at the far edge, screen filled to the brim with text against a white background.

“Oh!” Even though she quickly drew her eyes to Max, the girl seemed to notice her gaze and turned back to cross to the bed and close her laptop. “Sorry, I forgot what I was doing for a second.” Rachel shook her head and inhaled, slowly. *It’s going to get easier talking to her, she told herself. I mean, look how much better it got after the nerding and the drinking at Steph’s?* This drew up a smile. The memory of a drunk Max was something she would keep in mind for as long as the slowly growing friendship existed. *She got super touchy-feely with everyone, and so goofy.* Now,
though, Max seemed to be back to herself. She put her laptop away with jittery motions, nervous energy.

“It’s no biggie, I’m not in a rush. Were you wanting to go down to breakfast?”

“If I eat something right now, I’m going to be sick,” Max told her. “It’s always like this when I’m really nervous.” Relieved, Rachel stood aside as the girl approached her, absentmindedly adjusting the strap on the old brown messenger bag across her shoulders. “You all ready?”

“Yeah, let’s do it.” Like this, she reminds me more of the girl who just showed up one day last year and out of nowhere agreed to help her best friend find some absolute stranger’s mother. The unfortunate implications of that aside, Rachel couldn’t help but feel grateful. Note to self: write Sera tonight. After two or three steps down the hall, Max stopped. Rachel was a step ahead but it was easy to hear the lack of footsteps and turn back with a querying eyebrow.

Okay, now, part one is done. You’ve just gotta get her to the display case, stick a pen in her hand and, as Chloe would say, “sling bull.”

“You’ve got this smile on your face,” Max told her, blue eyes narrowing with suspicion. “Are you up to something?” Then, swallowing both her nerves and the accusatory tone, she continued, “And am I involved?” Privately, Rachel was a little amused at the idea of Max being able to read her so quickly when sometimes Chloe had difficulty. On the outside though….

“What? Me?” The offended tone of her voice was exaggerated even in her own ears. “I’m shocked and appalled that that is your opinion of me. I just want to show my new friend around campus.” Instead of taking the bait, Max continued to stare at her in disbelief, forcing Rachel to eventually reach out, take Max by the hand and pull her insistently toward the stairs.

“Alright, alright,” Max told her, pulling her hand back insistently. It would have been a worrying reaction if not for the amused tone creeping into the girl’s voice. Maybe she doesn’t like being touched. “Lead the way, but if I end up getting pied in the face or something, it’s on you.” What does she think this is, a clown school? Her good mood strangely refreshed, Rachel did as she was told and took the lead. The morning air was slightly more crisp than expected and the ragged, torn knees of her jeans didn’t exactly help on that front. Suddenly Max’s signature hooded sweatshirt made sense. Remembering something Chloe had whispered in her ear a couple nights before, Rachel turned and leaned slightly. It was easy to miss unless you were looking for it but she spotted a small, red stain at the end of Max’s left sleeve. Courtesy of Damon Merrick.

A few students were spread out on the lawns in front of the dormitories and still more were walking toward the school. Rachel lead Max past the lot of them, waving when she was called to but not quite breaking her stride. Smile, Rachel. You’re a happy, healthy, normal teenager and not at all up to something right now. She snorted to herself, something which did not go unnoticed by
Max. Rachel noticed that unlike the day they met, Max had not bothered with any kind of makeup. *Maybe that was just a face she was putting on for comfort or maybe to look more mature in front of Wells later that day?* No one she really hung out with bothered with the stuff and Rachel could understand why. Even the small bit she usually applied in the mornings was a complete hassle. *There’s just something about smokey eyes, though.*

“Aah,” Rachel finally called, softly. Most students already on campus were inside eating or lounging about by the dorms so when she and Max turned the corner they were actually alone.

“Aah?” Max asked her, still clearly suspicious. “Aah what?”

“Some peace and quiet,” she responded, simply. “Not gonna have a lot of that for a while.”

“Uhuh,” Max replied, slowly, disbelievingly. *Paranoid,* Rachel thought her way. *Then again, ‘just because you’re paranoid don’t mean they’re not after you.’* Casually, instead of leading them toward the doors or the low cement walls near the road, Rachel pulled out her phone and walked over to the display case a few feet from the fountain. She knew the sheet would be behind the sliding glass doors but if she paid attention to it right off the bat Max would have time to prepare an excuse. Best to lead her in slowly.

“Did you get any sleep?” Rachel asked, leaning casually against the case. She paused halfway through pulling up her messages.

“Yeah, just, weird ass dreams.” Rachel nodded. “You?”

“No dreams, just glad to wake up somewhere where I don’t feel like I have to sneak off first thing in the morning.” Max’s look was sympathetic but at least not pitying. “Not that Steph’s place was bad. That was actually awesome. I really enjoyed that night.” This time, the look on the photographer’s face was a bit mischevious. *I can never read her right. Is she shy, is she pushy, what is she?*

“Yeah? Which part? The part where we rolled bashed skeletons or the part where Chloe couldn’t keep more than a foot away from you all night.” Instead of reading negatively into the comment, Rachel shrugged.

“I guess that was pretty good,” she admitted. “But I liked watching Mikey get all impressed when she was working on her tattoo idea. He gets so jealous of Chloe and Steph when they start
“Yeah, but I kinda do too. Those character sketches Steph started over dinner? They were awesome.” *Oh, we know, Rachel thought, you waxed on about it for like five minutes.*

“So,” Rachel said.

“So,” Max echoed, suddenly sounding self-conscious. At least the two of them shared that feeling when left alone with each other, but Rachel hoped it faded fast. She turned and slid the glass doors on the box she was leaning against open and pulled a pen from her pocket. She found the sign up sheet bearing ‘Fall Production: A Midsummer Night’s Dream’ at the top. The date for auditions put them only a week away. Somehow, Dana’s name was at the top of the list already. Rachel penned hers in as Max drew closer, curious. Then, beneath hers and without a moment’s hesitation, she wrote in Chloe’s. Stepping aside, she let Max see the sheet and as soon as her face reflected recognition, offered the girl her pen.

“Oh, oh I don’t know,” Max replied quickly. “I don’t think I could.”

“Max,” Rachel said, dropping all pretense. “I think we both know you could act if you just got used to being around a bunch of people. I’ve seen you act. I’ve seen you roleplay. Chloe told me everything about how you handled Frank and Damon. I think you’re a really good actor. It’s just about being in front of people.”

Max looked pale and Rachel wasn’t sure if it was the sudden frankness of the conversation, the reminder of her antics in May or the idea of acting in front of a crowd but it did lend the image of someone who wasn’t feeling entirely well. *Maybe she wasn’t kidding about her stomach, either.* For just a moment, Max pressed a hand against her head and Rachel couldn’t help but find it to be an exaggerated gesture of thought. Then, however, the girl squeezed her eyes tight, as if in pain. She reached out in reaction.

“You alright?” Rachel asked, as Max’s eyes opened again.

“Yeah.” Max told her. “Just a little headache. It’ll pass.” The photographer extended her right hand, as if to borrow Rachel’s pen and despite some concern, Rachel passed it to her. *What was that about?* In fairly scrawling cursive, Max leaned down and signed her name beneath Chloe’s. When she turned back with Rachel’s pen in her outstretched hand, Rachel saw the thin trail of blood passing from her nose down to her chin before even she noticed it, though her surprise must have been an alert. “Oh, shit.” As soon as she had her pen back in her hands, Rachel dug into her bag where she easily produced a small travel-sized kleenex package. “Oh, thank you.” Max sounded
and acted as if the kleenex was the end of the matter.

_Uh, hello_ , she thought, a little perturbed. _What is she having a stroke?_ Rachel didn’t voice the concern, as it seemed childish to be worried about something Max was not. Besides, she had a victory to celebrate. They didn’t speak much as Rachel lead them closer to the road to settle on a small brick and cement wall. For a moment, neither spoke as Max sat on the ground in front of the wall, leaning her head back.

“I’m kind of nervous about going into auditions blind,” Max admitted, the subject firmly back on acting.

“Oh, don’t worry. You’re gonna get a role.” This time, when she fished her phone out of her pocket it was not in an attempt to look relaxed when she was plotting. “You’ve got a week to read it and decide what part to try out for.” Max didn’t respond and Rachel took that to mean that she either needed some _actual_ peace and quiet or that she wasn’t sure what to say. Either way, it gave Rachel a second to text Chloe, who had not as of yet sent her a message. From the corner of her eye, she watched as Max opened the book with some difficulty, one handed.

**Me**

_Alright sleepyhead, wake up. Today’s the big day. Also, you me and Max just all signed up for the fall play, so we have /got/ to talk about that._

**Chloe**

_We did what?_

**Me**

_You heard me. Or read me. Whatever. Good morning._
Chloe

Good morning, now again, what? Did you two plan this behind my back? I won’t stand for this treachery, woman!

Me

See, you’re being a drama queen already. ^_^

Chloe

Seeya soon.
Wait, NO EMOJI!

The other semi-active conversations on her phone did not appeal to her nearly as much. The only unanswered text sent by someone not related to her was from Steph, and she was going to be able to see the girl in about three or four hours max in class, if not before. Only half visible as a preview, she stared at the most recent message from her father about a ‘sad lack of respect.’ Maybe some part of her wanted to respond to that one, too, but she didn’t have the words to tell him how little his opinion of her mattered to her right then. Not without getting in trouble with her mother, at least.

When she looked up from her phone, Max was actually sitting on the wall not two or three feet from her, looking through the book unabashedly. Over the next few minutes, she watched people come from the parking lot or the dormitories. Once in a while a group would stop near the fountain and talk or someone would sign up for auditions. Nathan, Juliet and Hayden had already added their names to the list by the time Max closed the book and slid it into her bag.

“What do you think so far?”

“I think Egeus and Demitrius can kiss my ass, so far.” Rachel grinned.

“Those characters you love to hate.” Out of the corner of her eye, Rachel turned to see Steph leaning forward at the display case, pen in hand. Oh, so she’s going for an acting spot this year? Awesome! Oh, I bet she gets Titania. That’s right up her alley. Maybe Hermia, though. Steph waved when she realized she was being watched and gestured to a table in the corner of the lawn, which Rachel remembered was usually her hang out.

“We’ll catch up,” Rachel said. “Waiting for Chloe to get her lazy ass to school.”
“Alright, sounds good!” She manages to sound so aloof without looking like a dick.

“I think the cast is going to end up a little girl-heavy.” Rachel told Max. “It’s not a big deal, we managed to deal with it during the Tempest.” Max looked thoughtful for a second.

“Oh, I know,” she said. “We’ll make Theseus into Thesea and give that to Chloe. Make her play the authority figure.” Rachel grinned.

“I like the way you think,” she said, genuinely amused. “I think that might make her head explode though.”

“Well, I’ll bring the camera,” Max replied, making a vague gesture toward her bag. “It’ll make the best damn play poster in school play history.”

“I don’t think Wells would let that get hung up, honestly.” Still, all awkwardness seemed to have faded into the background. So too had Max’s headache and nosebleed. Rachel tried to file it away for later. Max jerked her head around suddenly and pointed. A tan truck was slowing down as it passed in front of them. Its driver, blue haired and wearing a grey beanie took a second to stick her tongue out at them and flip them the bird. Rachel just fixed an impassive face on Chloe, who continued past them toward the parking lot. “And she has the audacity to call us nerds.”

“Speak for yourself,” Max told her. “I’ll take being a nerd any day. What’s your first class?”

“I got lucky: improv with Mr. Keaton and Chloe first thing in the morning. I think you’ll like him. He’s funny. What about you?”

“English,” she said, grimacing slightly. “I don’t hate it, but I’m excited to get to second period. The Photo Essay.” Rachel wanted to chuckle, but at least Max embraced the title of nerd. “The other photography class is really cool, though,” the brunette seemed to grow genuinely excited as she talked about it. “It’s all about taking pictures of people.”

“Well, if you need any models, find me and Chloe.”

“It has to be candid, I think.”
“When has that ever stopped you?” For a moment, Max furrowed her brow and looked down.

“Sorry about that.” Even though she knew she couldn’t be seen, Rachel rolled her eyes at the girl.

“I wasn’t being sarcastic that was an actual compliment.” Max looked up as Rachel opened the front flap on her bag. The object she was looking for was the only thing she kept in that part of the bag, so it was easy to fish out the polaroid in its small plastic sleeve. “If I have somewhere safe to carry it, this basically goes with me wherever I go.” Max took the offered photo, and slowly a smile returned to her face, though her cheeks took on a bit of color. Beside her, Rachel looked down at it.

Framed rather well, Rachel was looking up at Chloe from beside her in the middle of the truck’s cab, as of yet unaware that Max was taking a photo. She could see the worry etched into Chloe’s features and a look on her own face that originally made her unsettled. It was the sappiest she could remember ever seeing herself, the look of someone who was realizing she was about to go downhill, about to fall into Chloe’s orbit in a big way. And that’s exactly what happened, she thought as Max looked up and offered the photo back.

“I’m not gonna go all goopy or anything, but that’s really sweet,” Max told her. “And I kind of needed that boost.” The look on her face was definitely that of someone on the verge of ‘going all goopy.’ Shaking her head, Max changed the subject rather dramatically. “So, um, how’ve you been since you and Chloe- you know.”

“What?” Rachel asked, feeling her cheeks warm. Okay, is this about to get weird?

“No, not that. I don’t wanna know about that,” Max told her, backpedaling quickly. “I mean, when you guys left the ‘evidence’ in front of the police station.” Rachel’s stomach fell. She would vastly have preferred if Max were turning her (according to Chloe) great propensity for nosing into peoples’ business toward her (nonexistent) sex life. This door, however, was the one opened and she walked through it.

“It’s been kind of scary, actually.” Rachel said. “I know he can’t prove it but I think he knows it was us.” A thought occurred to her for the first time in a few weeks. “You know, it’s weird how right you were about him leaving shit sitting around.” Max grimaced.

“I used to read a lot of true crime stories,” she said, and Rachel had no reason not to accept that. “So he really did the old trick of hiding dirty money behind books?” Rachel nodded.
“Yeah. We did like you said and took pictures of everything in its place, shoved it all in a box and left it and the photos right in front of the door. The gloves worked wonders, too. The only prints they lifted from the box were my dad’s.” Rachel wondered at her own voice: she sounded vindicated, almost pleased. *I feel vindicated.* “I know this is weird,” she continued, voice still low to match Max’s, “but thanks for helping me get my father charged. Once they found that phone, it was all over.”

“What’s over?” Chloe asked from her left. Rachel jumped briefly in surprise but when she turned she did not see the grin she expected on Chloe’s face. “What?” She was dressed as casually as ever, though with a full shirt instead of her signature tank-top that was, at least for Blackwell dress codes, rather showing. *Also, I think she stole that shirt from me.*

“What’s eating you?” Rachel asked.

“Step-douche ambushed me in the parking lot, told me to focus on school and not on hanging out with my ‘punk ass friends.’” Chloe laughed bitterly. “Speaking of, how are you two doing?”

Rachel shoved her lightly.

“Remember that time when David was going to stop being a jerk and treat you with basic dignity?” Max asked her.

“Yeah, that was a really awesome six hours,” Chloe replied.”Oh no.” Chloe’s eyes shifted away from them to a tall, suited man standing just at the bottom of the steps to the school. Principal Wells was gazing directly at the three, gesturing with his right hand. Chloe lead the way after Rachel nudged her and fell in line behind her. “I can’t just come back to school or anything. I have to be hassled by every asshole this school has to offer.” Rachel shared a worried look with Max and then reached out to rest a hand against Chloe’s back, between her shoulder blades. That always seemed to make Chloe focus on her, draw her away from whatever problem was immediately on her mind. Chloe grew quiet. Max didn’t speak. Eventually, though, pulling the photographer forward with her, Rachel stepped up to stand beside Chloe as they pulled to a stop in front of Wells.

“Ah, Ms. Price, welcome back.” Chloe’s face remained blank and Rachel jabbed her lightly.

“Stop being so nervous,” she told Chloe, speaking clearly to get her point across.

“Yeah, sorry,” Chloe said, “Thanks, Principal Wells.” *He has to hear the sarcasm in her voice. We’re going to have to work on that during practice.* “It’s- It’s good to be back.”
“Well, I saw your transcript from the school you attended during your time away from us and I have to say, if you can keep that up here, you stand a good chance of being a great asset to Blackwell Academy.” Chloe did not respond but she did nod, as if she understood. “Do you think you’ll be able to do that?”

“Of course she will,” Rachel said, causing Chloe to glance sideways toward her. “We’ll be tutoring her on anything she needs help with. Even though she could tutor me in science.” Wells raised an eyebrow.

“We?” He swept his eyes across the three of them and then as if he had not seen her, turned to Max. “Ah, Ms. Caulfield. I was told your application essay for financial assistance was one of the most eloquent and moving the board has ever received.” Max bowed her head in what Rachel hoped was a false modesty and not just discomfort from the direct attention of someone she was not friendly with. If it was the second, the play was going to be a bigger struggle than Rachel thought. “It’s nice to see you’ve made fast friends with such… recognizable examples of Blackwell students.” That’s a kind way to say I’m a suck up and Chloe’s a troublemaker. Rachel wondered if Wells was biting back some kind of comment about the way Rachel and Chloe were dressed.

“Oh,” Max said, as she looked up. “Well, I met Rachel in May and I’ve known Chloe since I was like, five.” Wells’ face flashed slightly with worry, but he did not speak his concern. He didn’t need to. Judging by Chloe’s face she knew what he was thinking as well as Rachel did. “I’m pretty lucky to get to hang out with them. They’ve helped me feel comfortable about coming to Blackwell.”

“Yes, well, I’m quite glad to hear that. This is a place for excellence, safety and comfort is necessary for students to reach their full potential- and then exceed it.” He turned his gaze back on Chloe. “To that end, I would like to make you an offer at the recommendation of Rose Amber and in light of our communication and your performance during your time away from Blackwell. A clean slate, Ms. Price.” Chloe’s face was openly stunned. What did mom do? “A clean slate, on both sides. I will give you the benefit of the doubt in any future issues and you will return the favor by being a model student, reaching as high as you can, achieving and staying out of trouble.”

“Oh, absolutely,” Rachel said, when Chloe didn’t immediately jump. “In fact, she’s going to join Max and me in trying out for the fall production.”

“I am?” Chloe asked, as if she had forgotten their earlier conversation. “I mean, I mean I am,” she said, more confidently.

“Well, then given prior results,” Wells said, “I look forward to seeing that production. I am sure
you will all do Shakespeare proud, once again. Now if you’ll excuse me, I must attend to other matters.” Without waiting for them to say anything else, he turned and walked toward the doors of the school.

“I forgot about that,” Chloe said. “I don’t remember signing my name on any lists, you traitors.”

“Alright drama queen,” Rachel said. “Let’s go see Steph and Mikey before the bell rings.”

---

Chapter Ten: Telemachus Before the Plow

Chloe pulled the vehicle to a stop, sighing. She let the engine idle for a second before turning the key off. When the beast went silent, she was often reminded just how loud it normally was. There was plenty of work still needing done to the truck to make it really worthy of an odyssey anymore arduous than the trip between home and the school. School, she thought, with an internalized groan. Internal as it might have been, it still didn’t escape notice of the girl beside her. Rachel rested a hand briefly on Chloe’s shoulder. It was a silent gesture but supportive. It still made Chloe shiver slightly. Somehow, she was still not used to some of these moments of physical contact. The honest truth was that after this, their first day of the school year, Chloe was kind of miserable. I’ve got nothing on Mikey, though, she thought.

“So, have either of you actually seen Mikey drink before?” Max asked from the far side of the cab. She sounded both shocked and amused. Chloe shook her head. The photographer yawned.

“No, he really doesn’t like the idea, usually. Plus, he thinks his dad would be pissed.” Rachel released Chloe’s shoulder. “But I think Steph was right to just let him. The emergency gaming/drinking session didn’t go quite as planned, but at least he wasn’t thinking about Wells’ bullshit.” Max snorted.

“It’s going to be impressive if he’s ‘thinking’ at all in time for Steph to get him back to the dorms for curfew.” There was still a slight air of somberness about the cab and it wasn’t just because of Principal Wells’ lunchtime proclamation. It’s me, Chloe recognized. I’m basically bringing them both down. I just don’t want to do this. After a moment, Rachel nudged her quietly and Max opened her own door to climb out of the passenger side of the truck. Well, I mean, we’re here, right? Chloe popped her door open and hopped out, herself.

“It’s not gonna be so bad,” Rachel said. “It’s just dinner.”
“It’s dinner with David, and he’s been a bigger judgemental asshole than usual lately and I’m almost as tired as Max.” Rachel didn’t argue. Chloe lead the way to the front door, just thankful she was able to come inside without meeting David at the door or in the driveway. That used to be a much harder fate to escape before he started working, again. *I never thought I’d be thankful to have that asshole lurking around Blackwell.* When the door opened, she was greeted first by the sound of plates hitting the table. Chloe felt Rachel close at her back as she hurried down the hallway.

“Chloe, that you hon?”

“Yeah, mom. We’re here.” Chloe fixed a smile to her face as Rachel and Max called their greetings, taking time to remove their shoes. Chloe did not.

“Come on through, dinner’s ready.” There was, immediately, something a little off putting about the scene. Not only was David not making some offhanded comment about the time, her mother’s voice was exceptionally lilted. It was as if someone had stuck Mary Poppins into her body. *My spidey sense is tingling,* Chloe thought, pausing to look back. Nearly dead on her feet, Max didn’t seem to notice a damn thing, eyes half lidded as she blinked at Chloe in confusion. *We’ll be lucky if David doesn’t accuse her of being high.* Rachel, though, was raising the slightest of eyebrows toward the dining room. Still, after a second, her thespian nudged her onward. *She’s always doing that. I guess I need it.*

The dinner table was *immaculately* set. With enough plates for everyone and a rather large meal sitting in containers around the center it looked rather crowded already, but perhaps most concerningly, a small number of candles stood lit in the center of it. *Okay, this is getting weirder.* Her mother was almost, *just barely,* dressed up, but pairing that with a different style of makeup, the alarm bells the whole thing was setting off in her head began to drown out her thoughts. David was out of his work uniform, already and trying to distract from his “*I still work out more than I should actually have time in the day for, and they’re called SUPPLEMENTS, thank you very much, not steroids’* frame by cloaking it in a dress shirt. *Oh god, is she fucking pregnant? Oh god, don’t even think about that. OH GOD, WHY CAN’T I STOP THINKING ABOUT THAT?*

At that point her mother turned away from David, where some conversation was either ending or just interrupted. Chloe ignored the man. It was usually the safest thing to do. This did mean, however, that when her mother approached she could not ignore the *terrifying* look of happiness on her face. Chloe was embraced quick and without warning, something her mother had not done to her in a few years. *The ‘personal space’ talk was effective for a really long time, to be fair.* When she was released Chloe took a step toward the table but her mother walked past her instead and seized a surprised Rachel into a hug.
“It’s nice to see you, Rachel. Thank you for taking such good care of my Chloe,” Chloe blinked and shot a look toward David, moderately concerned about the state of her life if she was looking to him for an answer. He was scoffing, eyes on Rachel. Oh no, shitwad, you just keep that thought to yourself. Either way, there was no forthcoming answer. Is that mortal terror I’m feeling?” She watched Rachel respond a little too quiet for her to hear the response and then her mother released the girl and moved on to Max, who was very nearly pulled off her exhausted feet. For a moment Chloe wondered if she knew what was happening, but then Max returned the hug, tightly. Okay, I’m probably a shitty friend for just now thinking of this, but she might be missing her parents already. Eventually, the two broke apart and Chloe marked an idea down and filed it away for later use. There was a more immediate mystery to handle.

“Glad you decided to join us, girls,” David’s shot could be mistaken as a quip due to the light and airy tone of his voice if someone didn’t know that he was Satan’s Self-Righteous Child Mom has never put on airs for Rachel or Max, ever, Chloe thought, trying desperately to ignore David’s bait. Eventually, they were seated around the table. Max positioned herself opposite of Chloe and Rachel settled at the end of the table across from David, who was back to looking pleased. She was just passing the large bowl of pasta to Rachel cautiously when her mother spoke.

“Okay, okay, I was going to wait until after dinner, but I can’t.” She sounded giddy, like a kid in a candy store. Oh God, here it comes. Mustachioed Demon Baby named Damien who pushes his will on everyone and then whines about people always doing what he wants. Chloe mentally rolled her eyes. Okay, I’m letting myself get carried away here. “I, well,” she glanced at David, who shook his head, with a small smile in place. “Alright, well, David and I were able to secure a chapel in Portland on, can you believe it, this coming Valentine’s day.” Chloe’s insides cooled.

“Wow,” Max said, and she no longer sounded quite as dead tired. “That’s lucky.”

“I know,” her mother exclaimed. “They had a cancellation half an hour before I called and just offered it to us. Well, you have to be stupid to look a gift horse in the mouth.”

“Congratulations, Joyce,” Rachel said. Okay, no, can we go back and have that evil demon baby, after all? Suddenly the chicken alfredo on her plate didn’t look appealing in the slightest. There was a strange silence. Chloe realized it existed only because she was supposed to be speaking when two different feet struck her in the shins simultaneously under the table. She winced and tried to recover. Just tell her you’re so happy. Tell her it’s going to be a great wedding. Tell her everything’s amazing.

The truth was that she was not happy. In May, when she agreed to come back and ‘try again’ with David, her mother had sat down with her at the table and hammered out a deal. She would stop David from treating either of them badly, she would make sure he stopped treating Chloe like a military recruit and she would damn sure not let him talk down women around her. That deal didn’t last 24 hours. A week later, he was replacing my bedroom door because he forced it down
overnight when he found it locked. I can count on one hand the number of times I’ve seen Rachel fucking scared, but David kicking the bedroom door down at three AM would freak out anyone. She lowered the fork in her hand slowly, trying to buy herself time. Every pair of eyes was on her, now. *Mom lied to my face to get me to roll over and play dead every time David acted like a cockstain and now I’m supposed to be happy for them.* Once more, Rachel and Max kicked her under the table.

“That’s, amazing,” she lied, hoping that her tone came out more like surprise and not crushing despair. “Wow, do you think you’ll be able to finish all the preparations in time?” David grunted somewhere to her right but she refused to turn her head to look at him directly. She could tell he was sitting back with his arms crossed. Her mother’s face fell slightly and Chloe knew the jig was up.

“Oh, yeah,” the blonde started, trying to keep her voice as uplifted as before even though her grey-green eyes betrayed hurt. *Okay, David can go from 0-60 in a second on a good day and I just rained on their parade hardcore. I need to be careful.* She wasn’t sure if she wanted to scream, cry or vomit, but she took a bite. “I’m sure we can figure out how to get whatever we need in time, within reason.” Chloe made a big show of nodding, exaggeratedly.

“Nothing’s too good for my woman,” David said, his voice emphatic and his eyes boring straight into Chloe’s skull. Her mother laughed and the thought that throwing up was an option made an unpleasant reappearance.

“Oh, right,” her mother said, smiling widely once again as she looked first to Max and then Rachel. “I wanted you two to call your parents and make sure you’ll be able to attend. We’ll put you up while we’re there and take care of food and the like. I wouldn’t let Chloe’s friends go hungry, or miss out on the big day.” Chloe heard the odd pause, the hesitation before the word ‘friends’ and looked pointedly down at her plate. *I’d normally ask them to say no, but I might actually need them there. If they want to come, I’m lucky.*

“Oh, Joyce, you know mom and dad will probably want to come, themselves.”

“Don’t worry, Max,” her mother replied. “Vanessa and Ryan wouldn’t get taken off the guest list for anything. They were probably the best friends William and I ever had.” Chloe glanced sideways to try to read Max’s face but it was unexpectedly difficult. *It doesn’t help that she’s so different than when she came here back in May.* Unfortunately, as Rachel promised to call her mother and ask before they left that evening, Chloe had the same problem with her and, say what you want, Rachel was very much the same person Chloe met only four months ago.

“I’m honored by the invite,” Rachel added. She sounded sincere enough, but to Chloe she almost looked confused. *Okay, I think I’m projecting, now.* The rest of the dinner was a little calmer and
probably quieter as it was hard for Chloe to think of anything to say to anyone. When the subject
came around to the school day, though, Chloe’s complete and utter silence to that point was not
even enough to prevent things from becoming tense.

“Principal Wells basically just told everyone that unless they were going to be seniors when the
school switched to its two-year senior program, they’d have to find a new place to go to school,
after this year.” Rachel doing the lion’s share of the talking. Chloe had been having difficulty
joining in and Max alternated between being uncomfortable and nearly falling asleep sitting up,
something which had attracted a few glares from David’s end of the table. “Our friend Mikey’s
below us a year and he’s kind of devastated.”

“There were a lot of crybabies whining about that. Caught a couple of them actually trying to use
that as an excuse to skip class. It’s this whiny, liberal P.C. bullshit that makes these kids think they
can get away with this crap, and on the first day of classes, no less.” Chloe tensed up, licking her
lips. The urge to snap at David was rising but instead she looked across the table at her mother.
Absolutely no response came from the woman. Instead, it was Max who spoke.

“You know, some people just like having the ability to determine their own future.” Chloe had to
fight fairly hard not to pump her fist at Max throwing David’s own words at him. “They probably
just got a little upset when the choice was taken away without a warning.” Max looked away from
David toward Chloe, smiling lightly. “We decided we probably should help Mikey keep his mind
off it.”

“They’ll get over it,” David grumped. “Never liked that North kid anyway. His brother ran drugs in
the school last year.”

“And that’s all the excuse you need to judge Mikey, isn’t it?” Chloe asked, though she immediately
regretted it. David was about to respond through his clenching jaw, but her mother spoke up over
them both.

“I’m glad you all took care of your friend today,” the woman said, as if the rest of the conversation
had not happened. Chloe laughed bitterly.

“We basically just did what we did on Friday, only a lot shorter of a timeframe.” Max said, taking
the conversation back in some kind of control. “Plus, Chloe’s working on her surprise.”

“What surprise?” her mother asked, curious, her voice flustered and forced. Pretend everything’s
alright, mom. That’s always worked out for us, hasn’t it?
“Oh, Chloe’s starting a little sketchbook of the things our characters get up to in the campaign,” Rachel said. “That way, if Mr. North does move them away, he’s got that.” Her mother looked like she was about to praise the idea (which, after hearing out loud Chloe was beginning to think sounded perhaps too silly) but she was interrupted. David, it seemed to Chloe, was not intent on letting conversation go on without being a colossal ass.

“You’re all way too old to be playing dress up and make believe, anyway.” Again, Chloe raised her eyes toward her mother and again she looked pointedly down at her plate in response. Strike two. Lying to me in May is a running ‘strike one.’ If you want me to be a ‘problem child’ let’s get to strike three. Chloe remained quiet, doing her best not to antagonize David further. For her part, Rachel continued to carry the majority of the weight of conversation and she was good at it. If Chloe hadn’t known her, she wouldn’t know what to make of Rachel except to remember a thought she had before getting to know her better, that they seemed like such different people.

Chloe did make sure to speak to tell her mother how good dinner was when most of the plates were clear around the table. She also spoke when Max let out a loud, unexpected yawn. Sweet, sweet excuse, Chloe thought as she rose to her feet. It was abrupt enough to surprise her mother and Rachel, but eventually Chloe was ushering her friends from the table, loudly exclaiming that it had been such a long day that she ought to get them to school so they could relax before bed. At some point, David made a comment under his breath and Joyce called for Rachel to make sure to let her know if she could make it to the wedding when she talked to her mother. Chloe was polite enough to let Rachel respond before shutting the front door behind the three of them and exhaling.

“Chloe?” Max asked, questioningly. Rachel paused halfway to pulling her hair back into a ponytail as she caught sight of Chloe’s face. If only I could have that kind of effect on mom, Chloe thought, bitterly as she walked past them and to the truck. The message read loud and clear. Rachel and Max were in the truck only a few seconds after her. She gave them just a second to settle in before The Beast’s engine roared to life. She did not speak until they were backed down the driveway and halfway down the street.

“Fuck!” The scream echoed in her ears. “Ratdick mother fucker!” There was no narrative to the stream of expletives, no point. It was just anger and frustration and, if she was honest, fear in the form of word vomit. Trees, cars, homes full of people who would be glaring out of their windows at her if they could hear her as she drove by hurried past.

“Chloe, pull over,” she turned her head quickly, toward Rachel. Her arms shook as she grasped at the steering wheel. A stop sign ahead drew her attention and she slowed. “I mean it, pull over right now.” Okay, okay, she’s right. I’m pissed. Past Rachel, Max was staying strangely silent, though she looked inexplicably regretful to Chloe’s eyes, causing her to wonder if she was not yet again projecting.
“Look, sorry, alright,” Chloe started as she hit her turn signal. “I just can’t believe the-” It was rather hard to focus on the road in the failing light.

“Chloe, please,” Rachel asked, somehow both more forcefully and in a softer voice. It was scary how well that worked against her. Chloe flipped the turn signal on again and steered the truck toward the side of the road. It was an impromptu and illegal parking job, but Rachel waited patiently for Chloe to put the vehicle into park only a couple of blocks from the house. Then she grabbed Chloe, pulling her in close. Caught unsuspecting, Chloe did not and could not stop the lump from rising in her throat or the watering of her eyes as she buried her face against Rachel’s shoulder.

“It isn’t fucking fair,” she muttered, feeling like a sobbing child. It didn’t help when she added, “She promised me, Rachel.”

“I know she did,” Rachel told her soothingly. “I know she did. She let you down and you can’t understand why. It doesn’t even make sense to you.” Chloe laughed against her shoulder, reminded that Rachel was probably the only person in Arcadia Bay that moment who knew exactly what Chloe was feeling and all the horrible things she was thinking. “You don’t have to understand. It’s not your fault, not your responsibility. I love your mother, Chloe but she screwed up, here, not you. It’s okay that you’re upset, but you always knew it was coming.” Chloe closed her eyes allowed herself to inhale slowly, trying to calm her shaking limbs and furiously pounding heart. In the process, she caught the scent of the girl holding her and couldn’t help but tighten her own grip back. When she finally felt like she could relax, she pulled back, warm in the face.

“I’m sorry,” she told first Rachel, and then Max. “I promise not to go flying off the handle behind the wheel like that again.” Max gave her a lopsided smile that suggested all was forgiven, but then didn’t quite meet her eyes, so Chloe wasn’t sure what to make of that quite yet. She did, however, when Rachel placed a kiss against her cheek and released her, put the truck back into drive. No way in hell am I gonna make my little bitch fit make them late to curfew.

“This really changes nothing for you, you know?” she glanced sideways at Max, who seemed to be trying to relax in her seat despite being suddenly uncomfortable. A small flare of annoyance threatened to make an appearance, but she quieted it. “If David’s going to be a prick either way and you already knew they were going to end up getting married, sooner or later, what changes?”

“It means I was right,” Chloe said emphatically, though her throat threatened to close up against the words that followed. “She cares about David more than anything else. It changes everything I thought I knew about her.”

“It’s not that simple and you know it,” Max told her.
“No, I don’t know it, Max. Not anymore.” If I’m not careful I’m gonna get going again. They turned down one of the busier streets in town. “Mom made a promise to me, man. She’d stand up to David and in return I started biting my tongue around him more because it was her job to stand up to him for me, so she said. Well, my tongue is bleeding, the cat has hers and sometimes the shit he says actually makes me feel like crap about myself.” Rachel’s left hand rested on her upper arm. “I am so done pretending to be okay with that.”

“If you fuck up your mother’s wedding, no matter how much you hate the guy she’s marrying, you’re going to hate yourself more.” This time she did whip her head around, ready to say something that she would probably regret. Instead, Rachel spoke up.

“She’s right and you know she’s right.” This took the wind out of Chloe’s sails and, bitterly she agreed as she turned back to the road. Max did not speak again for the remainder of the ride. Chloe knew the tension in the cab was her fault but she still couldn’t help, as she pulled to a stop outside of Blackwell, but think that she wished she could just sneak into Rachel’s room that night and stay there. When Max did not speak before climbing out, Chloe reached across Rachel to grab Max’s arm.

“I’m sorry,” she told Max. “I’m really sorry.” When the girl smiled at her, adjusting the bag across her shoulders, it was a deeply sad and exhausted smile and somehow that broke her heart more than the rest of the day had managed put all together. That’s it. This isn’t okay. Rachel brushed a hand across Chloe’s cheek in a gesture that felt surprisingly intimate considering they weren’t alone.

“Tomorrow after school, just you and me, okay?” Rachel asked. “Do you have time for that?”

“I’ve always got time for you,” Chloe replied, laughing and hoping it did not sound nervous. It was Rachel’s turn to look a little flustered but she nodded in response and followed Max from the cab. When the door shut behind them, both girls leaned up against the truck to more easily talk to her through the window.

“It’s gonna be alright.”

“Uh-uh,” she told Max. “I’m done with this whole thing where I can be completely chill, sitting at home and then I hear his voice and my blood pressure rises like I’m sixty and twice as wide as I am tall. I hate the fact that he can make me just, uncomfortable, maybe even a little scared, from three rooms over. Just by talking. I hate the fact that none of it matters to mom. It’s not okay.” Rachel looked about to interrupt but Max was paying close attention this time. “I’ve got actual problems, I am an actual screw up. I don’t need his bullshit to think about on top of that just so he can play out his Drill Sergeant fetish.”
“Are you going to be okay to go back there?” Max asked her.

“Yeah, I’ll just go up to bed early.” That felt like a coward’s way out but it was the only option available to her. Behind them, a car was approaching. It was probably just going to go around them, but it did remind Chloe that she was idling in the middle of the road.

“Text us both when you get home?” Rachel asked.

“Sure thing.”

“Be careful, Chloe,” Max told her before turning to start walking toward the school. Rachel followed suit only after a grimace. Well, Chloe thought as she watched them go. At least I waited until after dinner to start royally fucking everything up.

---

Chloe pressed herself against the wall behind her and the lockers to her left. Her helmet, oversized and hanging loose at the chin straps, banged against the lockers, releasing a loud noise down the hall of Blackwell Academy. She discarded the helmet and looked down. Where the tile floor should have been, instead, was a persistent and confusing void. Samuel is gonna be pissed, she thought, looking about. Across the hall, crouching down behind yet another row of lockers was Rachel. The sound of approaching boots seemed to be putting her on edge. She was not even looking across at Chloe, though she did look somewhat intimidating in ragged fatigues and a helmet that fit instead of hanging loose around her head. After a moment, Rachel leaned forward and glared down the hall. Chloe exhaled and stuck her head out to look, too. The void-floor stretched until the corner, which looked impossibly far off.

Three sets of booted feet rounded the corner, each carrying someone she did not want to see coming after her and Rachel. David was at the lead, a rifle in his hands as he slowly approached them. Flanking her step-douche to be, James Amber and Damon Merrick marched in step. Chloe drew her head back behind the lockers, mouthing to Rachel that she did not know what to do. Rachel had no such compunctions. Her face was contorted in concentration and Chloe knew instinctively she was listening.

“Come on out, you little shits,” Damon called, readying the glinting steel blade. She did not respond and Rachel continued to listen. She’s trying to figure out how close they are without giving away where we’re hiding. Chloe closed her eyes and tried to do the same. The footsteps echoed off the walls and overrode one another. At any given moment it could have just been the three of them or an entire army could have been at their backs. Her breathing started to pick up.
Nervous energy caused her to shake. Fingers and toes curled and uncurled as she looked across at Rachel’s impassive, concentrating face. How the fuck is she so calm? Doesn’t she know what they’re going to do?

Chloe peeked out and, whether that was enough that she was seen or not, it didn’t matter. The men were close enough now that there was no answer but retreat. When she looked back, though, the open hallway she expected to see behind her was gone, replaced with only a cool, grey stone wall. Fuck! Across from her, Rachel’s eyes opened. They looked deadly and were no longer that gorgeous, bright hazel. Instead they were the color of dancing flames. Rachel turned, unarmed and sprinted out from behind the lockers. Chloe twisted her head to watch. The bricks along one wall of the hallway shifted aside without warning or reason and a door rose up from the void to replace them.

As soon as it appeared, so too did it open, catching Damon directly in the face. The sound of breaking bone made her shiver. Chloe watched the scene unfold. Damon’s knife clattered to the ground as Rachel ran past the freshly opened doorway. She rolled low beneath David, who did not move to react to her at all. Her hand closed around Damon’s knife and she brought it up as she rose to her feet. James Amber seized her and flung her around and against the far wall. The freshly opened door expelled Max like a bullet and she shot behind David, throwing herself on top of Damon, clenching a closed laptop in her grasp as if it was a bludgeoning weapon. David continued to approach steadily, his eyes blatantly locked on Chloe. She stayed rooted to the spot as she watched the people she cared about struggle with David’s cronies.

“It’s time to go,” Chloe jerked her head toward the voice to her right but there was no one there. There was nobody to own the encouraging words. That hurt more as much as anything else but she did not need to see her father to know his voice. “This one’s all you, kiddo.” She closed her eyes tight against tears that she had not felt rolling down her face. “After all, what’s the worst that can happen?” Rachel was screaming something, something about betrayal. Max didn’t talk, but she grunted as she struggled with Damon who seemed to realize he was twice her size and managed to throw her off of him and against another row of lockers entirely.

“I can’t,” she told the disembodied voice. “I can’t,” she yelled, not at David but at Rachel and Max, who were losing their own struggles. David continued slowly toward her, the weapon in his hands rising. He was frowning his usual frown beneath the thick mustache but Chloe knew instinctively that this was not one of regret or sadness. This was determination. He was going to end her if she did nothing. “It’ll- it’ll just make things worse,” she tried to explain to the girls. Chloe did not think she was audible. “I can’t,” she emphasized, pulling herself back behind the lockers.

David continued to approach and Chloe closed her eyes. No! I don’t want to see this anymore, she thought. This is over! But, it wasn’t over. Even through clenched lids she could sense when David rounded the corner and was standing right in front of her. If she opened her eyes she might be looking right down the barrel of his weapon and that was the kind of sight she refused to make her last. She gulped.
“You know, you broke your mother’s heart,” David muttered, leaning too close by far to her. “This is for the best. We’ve got a family to start.”

A bullet that might as well have been a bomb rang in her ears.
Chapter Eleven: Strophê

“Ignoring your father is far too immature for you, Rachel.” To say that Rachel Amber was upset was a bit of an understatement. She was upset when she missed out on lunch. She was upset when she saw her friends hurt. In that moment, laying on her bed in the dorm, Rachel was not upset. She was livid. It was the kind of anger where afterward, she felt warm and really needed some air.

“And living with him is far too stupid for you, mom.” An affronted noise passed through the receiver. “Seriously. What happens if you annoy him too much? Maybe Damon Merrick’s gone missing but there are plenty of other people out there James could pay off.” The silence was pregnant with her mother’s rage. “Honestly, I can’t believe you’re pretending to be surprised that I don’t want to talk to him. I know it’s you pretending, because you’re smarter than he is, mom. You always have been.” Across the room, Max was leaned over Rachel’s desk, head laying atop her crossed arms. The earbuds in her ears seemed to be a successful insulator against the noise of Rachel’s side of the argument. It would have been enough to earn a smile if she were in a better mood.

“You think too harshly of your dad, Rachel. I don’t agree with what he did but--”

“I don’t think I’ve got a dad. I can’t change that he was my father, but he’s definitely not my dad.” That shut her up. For a second, Rachel thought that her mother would hang up on her.

“If this is how you’re going to behave, we might need to rethink you going on any out of town trips in February.” Her anger went from a dull roar to a raging flame. You’re getting worked up, girl, Rachel told herself as she felt a thin sheen of sweat on her forehead.

“Well, good news is, by February he’ll be rotting in jail where he belongs and even if you do that, he won’t be able to hurt you or anyone else I give a shit about,” Rachel told her. She felt a vindictive sort of pleasure when her mother did not respond. She hung up the phone without a proper goodbye. Still warm, still angry, she leaned back on the bed as Max stirred at the desk. She might have felt guilty about waking the girl up under normal circumstances. Instead, she stared up at the ceiling for a moment and then closed her eyes. Don’t try to talk to me yet, not yet. It was too hot, too hot by far.
Laying in bed, her eyes shut, Rachel tried to focus on her breathing. Mercifully, Max was silent. Whether she went back to sleep at the table or not, Rachel did not know or care until she heard the sound of Max typing away and a moment or two later the sound of paper. It was not distracting, it was not disrupting. The heat was more of an annoyance to her trying to calm down than anything else. This was an oddity that Rachel had been forced to deal with for the last two years, feeling overly warm when she lost her temper. She had even once gone to a doctor to ask about it and been rewarded with a confused look and a patronizing tone.

She may not have fallen asleep on the bed, but did space out pretty effectively, enough so that Max finally had to interrupt her from her thoughts. By that time, she was completely calm. Max was folding up an old, worn looking sheet of notebook paper and sliding it not into her bag with her laptop and iPod, but into her pocket, where Rachel couldn’t be sure she’d ever seen Max store anything before. She felt genuinely grateful when Max said nothing about the argument but she was still warmer than she was comfortable with. Rachel shrugged off the plaid overshirt.

“It’s time,” Max said, sleepily if unnecessarily. Rachel smirked at the girl. “What?”

“You have a good nap?”

“Mhmm,” Max admitted, though she looked a little embarrassed. It did nothing to stop Rachel from the smile on her face. “Again, what?” Rachel only shook her head this time. Her mood had turned a full 180, now all she wanted was to physically cool down. Max, she noticed with some confusion, also looked warm. “Whatever,” Max tried to play it off but she was red in the face. Okay, we both need some fresh air, then. “Chloe’s probably going to get there any time now and start spamming us with texts if we don’t get down there.” Max had a point, there. Chloe had not yet learned the fine art of patience.

“Do me a favor Max?” Rachel asked as she shut the door to her room behind them. “Will you please send Chloe an entire page-long text full of emoji?”

“You madwoman,” Max replied, sounding affronted. “You’ll give her a conniption!” That was enough to make Rachel laugh. Rachel patted the phone in her pocket to be sure it was still there and looked back at Max, who was only a step or so behind her as she walked toward the stairs. The rest of the hall was empty. Rachel took a moment to examine the girl beside her. Back when they first met, she could not even imagine the girl trying out for the school play. Since then, though, Max had become a lot less reserved if still a bit on the anxious side. Today she looked a little uncomfortable. “I’m sorry you’re having so much trouble,” Max told her, reaching out to stop her before they descended the steps. Rachel shared a look with the girl for a moment, before Max withdrew her hand, looking pointedly away.
“I’m sorry you were in the room when that happened,” Rachel said, then, trying to laugh the momentary awkwardness she could not yet name away, “I’m also sorry I woke you up.” It’s actually really sweet she gives a fuck. Together they descended in silence and Rachel figured that was because Max didn’t want to admit how absolutely beat she was. Once in the cool air, Rachel closed her eyes tight and shivered as a breeze brushed against her. It might have still been fairly early in September but the afternoons were rather cool. Pairing that with the unusual warmth she felt, it was rather easy for her to feel a little overwhelmed as she stood on the steps of the dorm.

“Rachel, are you okay?” She opened her eyes. Max was looking at her with genuine concern, despite an apparent exhaustion. Perhaps it was the shiver, or the way Rachel had her arms wrapped around herself but something had Max worried. Rachel let her arms fall to her sides, feeling silly. She aimed a raised eyebrow and her ‘cool and collected’ face on Max. It was a successful gesture. Hopefully it says, ‘that’s my question.’ Max went a little red in the face when she looked away, shrugging as if to dismiss the exchange. Oh yeah, Rachel thought, grinning as she continued toward the school. I’ve still got it.

She was glad to be amused instead of upset when she had nearly reached the front doors to the school. Chloe was waiting, leaning against a door with her phone in her hand. Rachel’s phone vibrated in her pocket. She didn’t bother to check it. Realizing they had yet to be noticed she reached out and stopped Max. For a moment, Rachel examined Chloe. She was dressed a lot nicer today than usual, like she was actually dressing up for auditions. It was sweet, if unnecessary. Rachel actually enjoyed Chloe’s new grungy look: most of her clothing tended towards black, grey and white save for her jeans or that strange “Jane Doe” shirt she loved so much. It tended to make her eyes and hair stand out especially well in bright lighting. Then again, the best part is that it makes things so much cuter when she gets flustered.

Rachel was going to gesture to Max that she was done waiting, when the door to Chloe’s left opened. She recognized the boy stepping out of it, Eliot. Up until recently he had been a fairly friendly person and he still was to Chloe. When around Rachel, though, he no longer spoke. He did not look at her, he did not engage in whatever conversation he was in and if they were in class together (like the history class she shared with Max) if she spoke in any way he would simply go silent. Rachel was not stupid nor as oblivious as Chloe was about the boy. She knew exactly what his problem was and suspected he was behind some problems she had already begun to experience since school started.

The two spoke briefly and then Eliot turned to walk back inside, Chloe went back to her phone. Predictably, the moment she looked away, his face changed. For just a second, he looked frustrated. Then he looked up and spotted her and Max standing near the fountain, obviously watching. The brunet disappeared into the school almost immediately. Rachel glanced sideways.

“What the hell was that?” Max asked her, though Rachel got the feeling it was not a genuine
question, more of an expression of concern. “Jesus, he’s getting worse and she doesn’t see it.”

“You’ve seen it?” Rachel asked, impressed and a little confused that Max had caught on so quickly. “Already?”

“He’s not exactly subtle,” Max told her. Now, she deepened her voice slightly. “‘Hey Chloe, wanna hang out tomorrow? Hey Chloe, what about dinner? Hey Chloe, how’s it goin’? Chloe, pay attention to me.’” Rachel smiled slightly. “I mean, Chloe’s being daft about it, I’m not sure she even realizes he’s crushing on her.”

“And he doesn’t get that she doesn’t get it.” Rachel said, quietly.

“And he’s getting angry.” Anger might be a bit of a hard word to describe it, it always seemed to Rachel to be more like frustration. *Then again,* she thought, remembering the messages sitting in her inbox from a hidden number, *maybe she’s right.* “Rachel, I get bad vibes from that guy. I think he’s dangerous.”

“This coming from the only other person Chloe knows who talks to Nathan Prescott?” Rachel asked her, genuinely curious. “I mean, I know I’m down to kick his ass if he turns out to be the creep she thinks he is, but I heard you two are bonding over photography.” Max looked at her for a second with something in her eyes that seemed out of place. She looked searching and serious, but whatever she was looking for she either found it or gave up the hunt, because her brow unfurrowed and she relaxed.

“I don’t know,” Max finally told her. Rachel waited for her to clarify. Chloe looked up from her phone, noticing the two of them for the first time. Rachel waved at the confused girl and waited for Max to go on. “I’m getting some scary vibes from him, too, but I guess I hope he’s not as bad as he seems.” Rachel nodded.

“Same here,” she admitted. “Though I did see his photos once and they’re--”

“They range anywhere from R-rated and kinky to fucking twisted,” Max told her, as she started back toward Chloe, who was watching them in concern. “I don’t judge the first kind but the rest freak me out, too.” Rachel followed. There was plenty more she wanted to ask Max. That was a fairly typical response she had just about any time they spoke. She often got the idea that the photographer with her borderline nu-hippie style was a lot smarter than anyone gave her credit for. *She knows things,* Rachel thought. *Reminds me of Samuel, sometimes. Wonder if they’re both psychics.* Rachel chuckled, though whether it was at that or Chloe asking how long they were
‘standing there watching her’ she wasn’t sure.

“Just a minute or so,” Max said. “Pretty sure Rachel wanted to perv on you a bit.”

“Aww,” Chloe said, though her face did take on a pink tinge. She mimicked her mother’s accent. “Sweetpea, you don’t need to hide for that,” Rachel felt a little surprised herself when Chloe pocketed her phone and threw an arm around her shoulder. “So, what role are you two going for?” Chloe asked, dropping the accent but not letting go of Rachel. She leaned into Chloe.

“I’ll probably try to be one of the fairy servants,” Max said. “Something small.” Rachel rolled her eyes. “You’re too good an actor for that, Rachel thought, but she did not speak.

“I think I’ll go for Titania and leave Juliet and Dana the leading lady roles. What about you?” Chloe did not respond at first, pushing the door open and leading Rachel in. She was alright with this, walking into the school with Chloe’s arm around her shoulders. It was a lot more blatant of an intimate move than expected but incredibly comfortable.

“Well,” Chloe continued as Max followed them in. “I’m doing this for you two, so you better get roles.” Rachel grinned.

“You didn’t say who you were trying out for.”

“That’s because I haven’t got a clue.” Rachel sighed. Of course she didn’t bother to do any actual reading. Not that it matters. Keaton almost fawns over her after last year. Rachel had to admit she enjoyed the improv class more than expected. Chloe was probably the reason for it. It wasn’t just being around her, though, it was watching Chloe realize she could actually act, that she was actually good at it. I don’t know why she’s so surprised. She’s been winging shit and acting ever since the first time I saw her. Rachel wondered why it felt so long ago that Chloe started attending Blackwell. “I really don’t wanna be Hermia or Helena.” Or maybe she did read.

“Mr. Keaton will have an idea, “ Max said, “I’m sure.” Rachel jumped and immediately felt guilty. For a moment, she had forgotten everyone and everything but Chloe. She glanced back at Max, who, smiling, clearly had an idea of what was happening. Like I said, she knows things. The three of them joined a small crowd of people outside of the theater classroom. Rachel was particularly surprised to see Eliot, of all people, mixing with the crowd. He only looked at Rachel and Chloe once before turning away and going quiet. Beside him, Nathan Prescott glared at them. Wearing her signature beanie and looking as if she wanted nothing more than to get the audition done with, Steph waved from a spot near the door.
“I think I’ll try out for something it wouldn’t be hard to genderswap,” Chloe said. “Like, Puck. I bet they could get away with that.” Rachel nodded in agreement. They had just enough time to sit down beside her when the door opened. Rachel’s greeting was cut off by Mr. Keaton calling her name. *The curse of alphabetical order.* She got right back on her feet and glanced back. For a moment, Chloe seemed lost in her thoughts and rather displeased about something. Then she smiled up at Rachel and left her another mystery to deal with. Rachel turned toward the aging drama teacher. He smiled kindly, which reminded Rachel to fix her ‘actress face’ into place. She gave him a relaxed grin and greeted the man as the door shut behind her.

“Hello, then Rachel.” She glanced around the room. They weren’t alone. Sitting at a table in the back was a woman Rachel recognized as a friend of Mr. Keaton’s, who usually helped him with the play, taking a kind of ‘assistant director’ position. *Mostly she just does the physical things he’s kind of too weak to do.* Her name, if Rachel remembered, was Jennifer. She was dressed up in a manner that reminded Rachel of her mother, frankly: nice clothes in earth tones and a haircut that honestly looked a little out of date. She was friendly, though.

“Nice to see you again,” she greeted the woman.

“You too, now,” as Mr. Keaton took a seat, Jennifer pushed a script toward her, one that someone had taken the time to bind. Rachel accepted the script, preferring that to the book in her bag. “What role are we going to hear you read for?”

Maybe half an hour later, Rachel was seated beside Steph, legs crossed and waiting. To Steph’s left, Max slept bent half over the bag in her lap. The crowd around them was thinning down dramatically. After having given Chloe a death glare as they passed on his way out of the classroom, Nathan Prescott had absconded the scene, ignoring both Max’s attempt to talk to him and Eliot, who followed him. Rachel turned toward Steph.

“It’s been like, five minutes,” Steph told her, as if reading her mind.

“It feels like fifty,” Rachel replied. Steph’s knowing, teasing grin normally amused her, now it just left her slightly more worried. She glanced past the girl toward Max, who had slumped sideways against the game master. Steph looked pretty alright with that, herself. Rachel fixed that same smile on Steph, who notably did not respond. The door to the room opened and Brook pushed off from her position against the wall, eagerly. Rachel felt a bit eager, herself.

Chloe did not come out of the classroom looking absolutely exhausted (or sporting evidence of a new nosebleed) as Max had. She did, though, take one look at Rachel’s face and then look away.
Rachel didn’t say anything as Chloe approached and Chloe didn’t sit down, instead leaning against the wall beside her. Steph raised a curious eyebrow.

“Okay,” Chloe said, her voice dropping slightly. She had not as yet made eye contact.

“Okay?” Rachel asked.

“I did the stupid audition for the stupid play, now stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like I did something special, I just want to hang out with you.” Steph loosed a loud, ‘aww’ from Rachel’s left, which Rachel did her best to ignore. Max stirred slightly, and sat half up, looking around in confusion. Chloe finally looked down at her. It took Rachel a second but she got to her feet as Brooke vanished inside the classroom. For a moment, the urge to kiss Chloe overrode her sense of where she was, but that particular fire dulled, probably as a result of the wolf whistle issuing from a spot below and to her left. Damn it, Steph.

“Right, now that that moment’s gone, I think it’s time for me to get home.” It took Steph a second to get up, probably due to the fact that she insisted on pulling Max up with her and Max was very much exhausted. “You, young lady, need to go to bed.” Rachel turned back to see Max shouldering her bag as she rose but there was clearly difficulty even standing. What the hell happened in there? She looks like she ran a marathon. It was true, Max’s exhaustion seemed almost exaggerated, but Rachel didn’t think she was that kind of person. And it’s kind of hard to fake that whole “I’m not sure where I am” look in her eyes. “Come on,” Steph said, pulling Max along by the hand. “I’ll drop her off before I leave.” Rachel shot a look back at Chloe.

“Later,” Chloe called at their retreating forms. Now, far quieter, the girl added, “Oh shit, Steph’s definitely got a crush.” Rachel was forced to agree. “Not sure if Max likes girls, though.” When she turned back, Rachel furrowed her brow at her. “What?”

“Are you stupid or just pretending?” Rachel asked the girl. The pink tinge to her cheeks and the way she shrugged, looking away was the only answer she needed. They probably didn’t need to talk about it in some place so public. This time Rachel reached up and rested an arm across Chloe’s shoulders. “Alright, I wanna grab my notebooks before we leave.”

“Let’s do it,” Chloe agreed. It didn’t take long to reach Rachel’s locker, but during that time the
quiet between them felt unnatural. Okay, maybe being so blunt about Max wanting a piece of her was a bad idea. How do I fix it? Rachel opened her mouth to try to placate the girl, but Chloe’s attention was fixated on something on the floor. Rachel followed her gaze to a pool of something red. For one horrible moment, she thought the liquid that had very clearly poured out of her locker was blood. Too thin, she told herself. She stepped carefully around the pool and took a closer look at her locker.

“It’s been pried open,” Chloe said. “Where was David the Doucheguard when that happened?” Rachel pulled the door wide open and grimaced. Mother fuckers. It wasn’t the notebooks or even the paperback on the floor of the locker, drenched entirely in paint, that upset her. It was the dark, leather jacket which someone had taken extra special care to ruin that really pissed her off. I may not be the type to obsess about clothes but I liked that jacket. She clenched a fist, cursed and slammed the door shut. Broken by whatever was used to break into it, the door bounced wide open again. “Hey, hey, relax.”

“That’s it,” Rachel said. “I don’t care about all the graffiti-” The voices of the two boys on the far end of the hall quieted.

“You mean like, ‘Rachel Amber is a Stupid Bitch’ scrawled on the bathroom wall?” Chloe asked. Rachel did not respond.

“I don’t care about giving me shitty looks, but he just crossed the line by fucking with my shit.” Chloe’s confused face frustrated Rachel at this point. She was, in fact, beginning to feel a little warmer. At the far end of the hallway, leaning against another set of lockers entirely, Eliot and Nathan were talking to one another. “They pay.”

“Who?” Chloe asked her.

“The stuck up prick and the boy tripping over himself to get into your pants,” she spat, gesturing down the hall. Astounding, she thought, bitterly as she watched first confusion and then dawning comprehension cross Chloe’s face. “Jesus Christ, Chloe, I love you and all but Max is right, sometimes you’re a daft fucker.” She expected Chloe to be offended or get irritated back. What she did not expect was for her to shut up entirely and have trouble meeting Rachel’s eyes. “What?” she asked, genuinely confused.

“You love me?” Rachel closed her eyes and exhaled. This was not the time for that kind of conversation. Also, did I actually say that? Does that mean I meant it? Should I have meant it? Aren’t we basically just friends who occasionally cross the line? She dismissed the last idea as her kidding herself. She had always expected that eventually things would become a little more serious, but there was no rush. Not with a lifetime ahead.
“Yeah, well, you know, get over it,” she said, before kicking her locker door once more. It left a notable dent. “And your buddy Eliot?” she continued, loudly enough to hopefully be audible to the two boys down the hall. “If he ever touches anything of mine again, I’m going to break the hand he touches it with.”

“Oh yeah?” Chloe asked, suddenly grinning brightly enough that Rachel felt both warmer and embarrassed. She stepped closer to Rachel and leaned down slightly, toward her. “Does that include me?”

“You are such a dick sometimes, let’s get out of here.” Rachel took Chloe by the hand and willfully led her toward the doors. They had to swerve to avoid running into Brooke as she emerged from the theater classroom without breaking stride. Rachel didn’t even think to apologize. “I’m going to hate myself for acting like this in an hour, but right now I need to get outside.” Chloe moved a little more quickly to keep up. Rachel tried to ignore that the blooming punk seemed to be humming. *I can’t tell if today can go fuck itself or not.*

----

There was still a little fire in her heart when she shut the engine off in the driveway to the soon-to-be Madsen household. It was hard to think of the place as her home lately, especially over the last few days. As uncomfortable as the moment was, Chloe recalled the day when Max said that Chloe was her home. There were a lot of unfortunate implications attached to that, but Chloe had come to understand it at least. In a way, anywhere with Rachel and Max was her home a lot more than this building where she slept at night. Alright Price, she said. You actually didn’t fuck up today, so let’s go inside, get upstairs and let this just end as a good day.

While Chloe had been thrown off at first at the idea of the first day of play practice being only three days after auditions, it was nice to have a quick turnaround. As long as I don’t have to actually tell anyone what my role is I am just fine. It felt a little on the embarrassing side to say ‘I am playing a genderbent fairy queen.’ Hey, it’s whatever. Chloe was still riding the high of realizing that she wasn’t absolute shit at this and though they were basically all sitting around reading from the scripts at this point, she was comfortable with the process.

She opened the door to the house pocketing her keys and immediately locking eyes on the stairs. Up there was the safe area: the bathroom, her bedroom. Unfortunately, no sooner had she shut the door behind her than her mother’s voice sounded out. How the fuck does she keep getting off work so early? Chloe groaned to herself. “Chloe?” her mother called again. In surrender, she walked through the hall and out into the combination dining and living room. By the looks of things they were already a good five or ten minutes into the meal of mashed potatoes and fried pork chops. Still, everything seemed to be calm enough, so if she just remained level headed it might even be something resembling a friendly conversation with her mother. Her stomach growled at the sight of an empty third plate at the table. Oh no, don’t you betray me, you son of a bitch, she told it. “Hey, sweetie, how was school?”

“It was alright,” she responded, and then, determined to put more effort into it, she added, “They kept us late at practice so we could, I dunno, discuss our characters. I don’t know, but I think it...
helped. Shakespeare is pretty intense.” Chloe sat down at the table, the smell of the chops causing her to literally water at the mouth.

“I can’t believe you’re late to this delicious dinner so you can play dress up with a bunch of- of geeks.” The comment seemed to start at a comedic tone but by the time David was done, he was looking at her as if she was a waste of time and space. God damn it. She looked once at her mother. Early on, this was the kind of thing Joyce would call out, even before their little tete-a-tete in May. Now, her mother rolled her eyes dismissively but remained otherwise silent.

“Well,” Chloe said, starting to rise after only a couple of seconds. Neither of them are going to ruin today, she thought. Against the memory of that look Rachel gave her as she was doing her best to describe Oberone to Mr. Keaton, not even David’s snark was sufficient, yet. She was proud of me. Chloe shook her head. “It’s been a long day of being a geek, so I’m gonna go upstairs and have a shower and get a start on that English homework.” It wasn’t even a lie, the essay on The Catcher in the Rye wasn’t exactly in her wheelhouse. It wouldn’t hurt to just get it over with.

“So your mother works a long shift,” David started. “Then pulls some favors to get off early, come home and cook for her family. You show up late and then to top it all off, with this amazing dinner your mother has worked so hard to make waiting on you, you decide to go up to your room and mope like an ingrate.” 1-2-3-4-5- “Are you going to say anything?” David asked her. His silverware clattered against his plate.

“David,” her mother started. Whatever she was going to say was dismissed with a wave of his hand. For the first time Chloe could remember, she took that dismissal without an argument, without even a word. Nope.

“Well?” he asked Chloe. She responded by pushing her chair in, carefully and turned away. “Oh fine, go sulk in that dark room of yours. More food for me.” Keep trying to pretend you’re joking and not being a massive douche. I am not going to have it out with you today. Her, maybe, not you. She took the stairs in quick succession and was in the bathroom with a new outfit before she could lose her cool. Asshole.

Me

He started the minute I came home.

Rachel

David?
Me

Who else? I think it’s going to be worse than usual. I think it’s time to get up to my old tricks.

Rachel

Old tricks?

Me

Absolutely. Let’s start with telling Blackwell rules to fuck off, again. Can I stay with you tonight?

Rachel

Any time ^_^

Me

No emoji.

If she thought the shower was going to buy enough time for everything to calm down, Chloe was wrong. No sooner had she shut the door to her room and begun hunting down her copy of the novel in question than the door opened again. She turned on the spot, ready to chew David out for violating her privacy, yet again. It wasn’t David standing just inside the door, it was her mother, still dressed for work. She didn’t even have time to change out of that ridiculous uniform. She had to rush right home and cook for Sergeant Dickweed.

“Mom, please don’t,” she asked, genuinely intent on not arguing with her. Frustration, though, was beginning to mount. Chloe ran a hand through wet hair and noticed, with some annoyance at her reflection, that her roots were starting to show. “I bit my tongue and let him shit all over me as usual, now I’m going somewhere I’m wanted for a few hours.”

“Somewhere you’re- Oh, Chloe, you’re being so dramatic,” it wasn’t the dismissive tone, it was the dismissive phrase that pissed her off. Her mother flipped on the large, overhead light in the room. “Why are you so sensitive all the time?”

“Do you remember what we talked about when I came back?” Chloe asked her. There was no response. “Yeah, I figured you did. You made a promise.”
“And I kept it.”

“For maybe a day,” Chloe replied, her voice rising. *Nope, not like this.* Exhaling, she turned away from her mother and found the book she was looking for amid the chaos of her desk, half buried underneath her laptop. “It was a simple deal: I shut my mouth when David treats me like shit and you speak up. You make him stop being a sexist sack of shit around me, you make him stop being a jerk about *literally everything* and I don’t have to be ‘disrespectful’ by daring to stand up for myself.” Chloe heard her sigh.

“David is just an old fashioned guy, he doesn’t mean any of it.”

“I don’t give a fuck, mom,” Chloe said. That seemed to upset her mother judging by the face she made, one of disappointment. “He’s still here, he still calls me ‘girlie’ or ‘soldier’ more often than my name. He still searches my room. He kicked my door down once.”

“And he found you sleeping next to Rachel, who, lord knows I like her, but if she is more than just a friend, there have to be restrictions.” Chloe blinked once and realized that she was not too embarrassed to have this conversation, for once.

“Speaking of names,” she said, redirecting the conversation away. “If either of you think I’m taking his, you’re nuts. We had a deal, mom.”

“You’re being really disrespectful right now, Chloe,” her mother said. “And I don’t appreciate it.”

“That seems to be the standard here. He talks down at me *everyday and you disrespected me,*” Chloe told her and that seemed to actually quiet her mother down for a second. “You lied to me, you broke your promise. I kept up my end. I bit my tongue. He made me feel like shit. He made me feel scared in my own home, he made me feel scared to come home. I live thinking that when I’m here he’s always over my shoulder and I’m usually right. I went through all of that without really giving him a piece of my mind because I promised you that I wouldn’t and I’d let you do it.” At one point the calm got away from her. Her voice began to rise and her tone shifted from ‘trying to explain’ to ‘trying to be heard.’ Chloe knew well that her ‘trying to be heard’ voice was nothing easily missed. David would have already heard her. “And I’m done. You’re not going to do anything about him.” The crushing realization dawned on her. “You never were going to do anything about him. You never will.”

“You’re just overreacting to the marriage,” Joyce told her, eyes beginning to water slightly, as if she was a victim and not part of this whole disaster.
“This is me realizing you were never going to help me if it meant telling David fucking Madsen not to be an absolute asshole, maybe because you love him too much or maybe because every other thing he says is shitty as hell and that would be too hard. You stopped me from staying somewhere where I was wanted and brought me back here where I am not.” Chloe backed away and grabbed her school bag from the end of the bed.

“David isn’t that bad, anymore, Chloe. He’s really been trying.”

“The next time,” she said, “that he calls me ‘girl’ or ‘girlie’ like he’s talking to a dog, or he calls me soldier and tells me to ‘shape up’ he’s going to be happy.” Joyce raised an eyebrow at her. “Because he’s going to get the war he wants.” With the bag over one shoulder, she moved toward the door and found herself actually dumbfounded when her mother stepped in her way. *Okay so she’s not done, yet.*

“Why are you so intent on looking for trouble where there is none?” Joyce asked her. For a moment, she wanted to tell her mother what David’s attitude toward her really did. She wanted her mother to know that she sometimes, late at night laying in bed, believed some of his bullshit, that it made her feel like nothing. She wanted to tell her mother that this was his goal and it was working and that was not okay. *He shits on everything I love, he criticizes everything I do or think or say.*

“I’m tired of being on high alert every time he walks into the same building as me. I’m tired of being made to feel like nothing and what I’m most tired of is you pretending that you don’t see it. I know you’re smarter than that and when you act like this it makes me feel like you’re lying to me twice.” This seemed to take the wind out of Joyce’s sails to a degree. She stepped away from the door. Chloe relaxed knowing that her escape was possible, but she wasn’t done yet, not now that the discussion had started.

“You lied and manipulated me into being David’s stressball. I don’t know what went wrong in his head and I don’t care. It’s not my responsibility to be a target for all the sick, hateful things in his head. Now, I’m going where I’m wanted. When it comes time for the wedding, I will smile and nod, I will be there for my mother- my mother who will never be there for me again, but other than that? David decided a long time ago everything else was fair game and I’m going to play by his rules.” Chloe opened the bedroom door. For just a moment she read her mother’s face and saw the same self-righteous disappointment in it. *Does she really not get it? Is she really not pretending? “I love you, mom. I just wish you had never made that promise to me. I would have been happier with you just letting it all go on instead of lying to me.”*

Chloe met David outside the door. He was staring down at her with a lot of things to say clearly on the tip of his tongue. She chose not to give him the satisfaction. It took no time at all to duck past him. He did not even try to stop her. *Because mom is right there and touching me is something*
even she won’t be able to ignore. There was no sense of closure as she got into her truck. Strangely, though, watching her mother in the top floor window and David standing in the front door was pleasing. *I’m done rolling over, I’m done doing tricks.*

Chloe turned her head. A soft wind blew through her hair. It was dark, but by the limited light sources in the area, Chloe recognized precisely where she was. The long stretch of grass she was standing in, the bench in the distance: it was a park, the park where, on a night just like this, she and Rachel had first really opened up to each other. Chloe turned a circle. For the moment she was simply looking at the outlines of the trees in the distance. Then her breath caught in her chest. Two dark figures stood several feet away, talking. Even at this distance, though, Chloe knew who they were both by their outlines and their voices.

The grass blades between her bare toes were soft a moment ago. Now, as if they knew she had found the night’s secret, they were sharp, even hurting. That did not stop her from approaching. There was a cement path a ways off, but that would have led her in the wrong direction. It would take her away from the two girls gathered around a trash can. It wasn’t a night like this, it is tonight. Chloe thought that maybe that should be strange. It didn’t, though. What was weird was that one of the two girls in front of her, was her. It took thirty seconds to reach them. Why is there another me? I’m dreaming. Why would there be another me? The realization that she was dreaming did nothing to change anything around her.

The other Chloe looked slightly slimmer or maybe it was the way she held herself. Her hair was undyed. Every time Rachel turned to speak to her, to tell her about the day her father rescued her after an accident hiking, the other Chloe’s face was normal, if concerned. Each time Rachel looked away, it changed. The other Chloe changed entirely. She became almost see-through and the expression on her face was blank, almost robotic.

“Can I borrow your lighter?” Rachel asked the other Chloe. For a moment, she watched herself become real again, digging the lighter from her pocket.

“No,” she told herself. Neither of them turned, neither of them noticed her. “Please, just stop.” Nothing changed. Rachel took it and with both Chloes watching, lit the photograph in her hand on fire. For a moment, Other Chloe looked shocked and then she faded into that half existence again. It made Chloe’s stomach churn, but she had bigger fish to fry. Reaching past this other version of herself, she tried to grab Rachel by the shoulder as the photo fell into the trash can. “No, please stop.” The hand that should have seized Rachel and stopped her or at least thrown her off balance passed clean through her.

I can’t do anything, here. I can’t change anything here. Chloe wondered if that was true. Desperately, she wanted it not to be. Chloe was forced to stand back and watched the fire grow. She watched the faux Chloe fade away more than before, until she was almost a shade. The majority of the park joined her. Benches vanished entirely, grass turned to void. Almost everything
but one single tree and one trash can ceased to matter. Chloe positioned herself between Rachel and that trashcan, desperate to change things.

“You can’t, kiddo, this one’s not yours to change,” there was no body to match her father’s voice to, again. Not my what? She didn’t understand, but Chloe swallowed and focused, eyes narrowing on the girl in front of her. I can stop it, this time, she told herself.

“Rachel, stop it!” Everything changed, if only briefly. For a moment, only steps away, a third person came into view, as if teleported there. She looked haggard and terrified, dressed in clothing that she typically only liked to wear to bed, but it was another Rachel. Chloe whipped her head around to match eyes with her. She did. They did match eyes. This Rachel can see me. The girl’s confusion was palpable and Chloe wanted to try to understand what was happening. The first Rachel, though, had plans. Chloe didn’t feel anything as the younger girl’s foot passed through her body like it was air. She did hear the trash can fall over, she heard the wild scream of rage and saw, in the younger Rachel’s eyes, fire and hatred.

When Chloe turned, the Rachel who could see and hear her was gone and the tree behind her was set aflame. A whole forest fire waited. Homes and buildings were going to be destroyed. Peoples’ lives would be changed forever, all over again. Chloe tried to reach out for Rachel, but even the few remaining physical things in this world were fading, including her. The shade Chloe was gone, the trash can was gone and Rachel was fading fast, but she would not stop screaming. Chloe wanted nothing more than to get hold of her and make the screaming stop. It did not entirely come from a place of care, either: her ears were aching.

She opened her eyes.

She opened her eyes. Sitting straight upright, her heartbeat wild, Chloe collided with something in the small bed. That something, it seemed, was Rachel herself. The tiny light plugged directly into the outlet on the far side of the dorm room was just enough to make her face visible in the night. Judging by the looks of things, she was feeling not far at all from the same way Chloe was. Confused, Chloe looked about and untangled herself from Rachel. It was a little more difficult than she thought. Hours ago, the realization that she would either sleep quite literally pressed up against Rachel or on the floor had been a bit troublesome. Now, it was oddly comforting.

When they had both halfway recovered their wits, they sat together, with one of Chloe’s arms around Rachel as she tried to find the words to describe her dream. Slowly, their breathing quieted. Her heartbeat was getting back to normal. She turned toward Rachel only to see that the girl looked devastated. Pulling her closer, Chloe waited. Maybe this wasn’t the time. Maybe she had her own nightmare and needs to relax. The idea of two people sharing a bed having nightmares at the same time seemed like long odds. She was toying with the idea of how she might find those odds, for real, when Rachel spoke.
“I was back at the park, before the fire.” Chloe froze. No, no, there are no odds for that. Technically speaking that wasn’t true, but ‘one in a million’ didn’t even begin to cover it. “I kept trying to stop myself from burning that picture, from setting that fire.” Chloe swallowed. No, I’m still dreaming. I’m gonna wake up at any moment. “I get that it was a freak accident that made it get out of control, but I still hate it. I kept trying, but neither of us were listening to me.” Wake up, Chloe. “And then—”

“And then another me appeared,” Chloe told her. “And she was fucking terrified. Wasn’t she?”

“What the fuck?”

“What the fuck is right.” Chloe swallowed. Rachel disengaged from the embrace and slid to one edge of her bed, trying to keep her voice low. Chloe looked into Rachel’s face and saw shock and confusion but that wasn’t what she wanted to focus on. What she wanted was to focus on how beautiful she was. If she was still asleep, a moment or two of selfishness wouldn’t hurt her, because this dream within a dream was a real bitch.

“Chloe, are you telling me we had the same dream?” Chloe closed her eyes. Wake up. This is getting weird. “Chloe Price, look at me.” She did. When she opened her eyes Rachel was no longer so scared but she did look determined. She looks like a lightning bolt waiting to strike, Chloe thought. Maybe I am awake. I don’t think I’m smart enough to make all this up. Chloe didn’t know what to say.

“I- I guess we’ve been spending a lot of time together?” Chloe offered. It was, for the most part, a joke. For once, her sense of humor did not go over very well. Rachel stared blankly. “I don’t know, I don’t know what to say.” That seemed to be enough to relax her, slightly. “I mean, am I dreaming right now?” Rachel reached out toward her. “Don’t you do it,” she warned the thespian, knowing exactly what Rachel’s plan was. Rachel pulled back, smiling a little. She did, however, pinch her own arm, rather harshly. Rachel winced.

“Well, I’m awake,” she told Chloe.

“Why does weird shit keep happening to us?” Chloe asked. “And- holy shit!” Rachel raised a finger to her lips, gesturing for Chloe to quiet down. She tried her best. “The weird ass dreams.”

“What?”
“I’ve been having crazy dreams ever since we met,” she told Rachel. “Well, I mean since we started hanging out. Have you?” Rachel shook her head. Chloe reached out and brushed Rachel’s hair back behind her ear. It earned her a soft smile and that was enough to at least calm Chloe’s surprise, though nothing was going to quell her confusion. “Most of the time, I can do whatever I want in them. Even when I realize that I’m dreaming.” Slowly, Rachel relaxed and eased back toward Chloe. “But sometimes- oh my god.”

“Go on, Chloe.”

“Sometimes, I have dreams where no one can see or hear me.” Rachel nodded.

“Like tonight?” she asked.

“Yeah, but it only happens-” Chloe laughed. “It only happens if I’m sleeping near someone. Like that night a few weeks ago when we fell asleep on Steph’s couch with Mikey? I had a weird one, then. I still don’t understand most of what I saw.” Rachel was quiet, like she was letting her talk. “Rachel, I think I can see other peoples’ dreams. How is that possible?”

“I don’t know,” Rachel replied, rubbing her eyes. “Part of me thinks I’m still asleep and making this shit up.”

“Yeah, me too,” Chloe told her. “Do you know any other psychics we could ask?” she asked, teasingly. Rachel didn’t laugh but she was no longer tense. Okay, I think I’m about to lose my god damned mind. Or maybe I already am. She leaned back in the bed. “Rachel?” she said.

“What is it, Chloe?”

“I think I’m actually scared shitless,” she admitted. After a second, Rachel’s weight shifted on the bed. Turning her head slightly, she saw Rachel’s face inches from her own. For the first time since May, their lips met. The fear didn’t leave but there was a new voice in the fray. She had heard echoes of it, before: a voice in the distance. As she returned the kiss, it grew louder, happier and prouder. It told her that this was precisely where she needed to be. That voice told her that yeah, something weird as hell was happening to her, but she was still Chloe Price and she had Rachel Amber beside her. Add her oldest friend to that mix and she was absolutely a force to be reckoned with, for Blackwell, for David and for anything else thrown her way. Rachel does this to me.
For the next couple of minutes, she felt powerful. She felt alive. She felt happy. She felt these things in a way she had never truly experienced before. When they faded, they left an echo behind. Something that she wasn’t sure could ever be robbed from her. Chloe managed to escape the dormitory into the early morning air without being spotted or heard, the rest of the girls asleep in their beds. Those echoes? Those marks left behind by the night Chloe had just spent? They didn’t make her wonder less about this dreaming nonsense. They did not make her mother’s betrayal any better or change her conviction to put David in his place.

All of these things were stronger. That’s right, I am Chloe fucking Price, she thought as she crossed the invisible property line of Blackwell Academy, a grin stretching across her face. I might be some weird dream spy, but I am and always have been this town’s worst nightmare. It’s time to kick some ass. Turning in the direction she knew she’d left her truck, Chloe thought to herself, Unfortunately, I have to start that by speed writing an essay between now and fifth period.
Chapter Thirteen: Hermes Rustling Cattle

She felt silly at how big the smile on her face got when Chloe came walking through the cafeteria door. Up in the line for the breakfast buffet, Max took no notice. She is ravenous in the mornings, Rachel thought and then not much care was given for Max or anyone else in the cafeteria. Her fairy queen was more than aware that Rachel’s eyes were on her and only her. There was something different and familiar about the way Chloe walked. In one way, the last couple of days Chloe had been quite like herself when the first started hanging out but there were differences, still. She walked more confidently than Rachel had ever seen from her and it was both adorable and flattering, considering what seemed to have set this off.

The memory of their stolen early morning, only a couple days ago might still make Chloe flush when she was reminded of it, a fact Rachel had taken advantage of once or twice. Still, some sort of realization had clearly been at work. Within a couple of hours Chloe was talking about ‘making plans and acting on them’ as she felt they had been given a fair amount of shit lately and not taken revenge. Rachel had to say that she agreed. And that’s why I’ve been thinking. For just a moment, Steph waylaid Chloe by calling her over to their table. That’s fine, Steph. Get a load of my girl. Rachel made a face at Chloe when she glanced back at her and her conversation with Steph and Mikey wrapped up quickly.

Even she was momentarily taken aback when, so publicly, Chloe approached, leaned across the table and pressed her lips to Rachel’s cheek. She’s feeling confident. Rachel shifted in her seat, face warming slightly. With a twinge of regret she watched Chloe notice it. In response, Chloe got up and moved around to sit beside her, taking her hand, watching her close. Alright, alright, Rachel wanted to tell her. Instead, she tried to fix an impassive face on the girl. There was no backing Chloe down at the moment, apparently.

“I’ve seen you embarrassed before but never quite this quickly. I could get used to that,” Chloe teased. For just a second she was tempted to do something to return the favor to Chloe but they were in an awfully public place. Instead, it was time to change the subject.
“We have problems,” Rachel told her. Chloe chuckled.

“You’re telling me.”

“No, I mean, we have problems and you were right, it’s time to do something about them.” That changed Chloe’s face. She sat up straighter in her seat, turning to face Rachel, but Rachel had to note, she didn’t let go of her hand. *I’m fine with that*, Rachel thought, shifting it so as to interlace their fingers. “It’s time to face them and for that we’re going to need someone who is both smart and creative. Kind of like you.” Chloe pretended for a moment to preen slightly. “Stop me if I’m wrong, but there’s only one Chloe, right?” The taller girl ran her free hand through her hair.

“Save that kind of talk for your dirty dreams, young lady,” Chloe told her. Rachel shoved her lightly in response.

“Anyway,” Rachel told her as the third person joined the table. Max sat down, tray loaded with toast and eggs. *Oh that sounds good*, Rachel thought, stomach roaring. “Since there’s only one Chloe Price, we need the only other person I know who’s as good on her feet. So, I recruited Max.”

“She recruited Max,” Max confirmed briefly, before tearing open the miniature carton of orange juice as if she hadn’t had anything to drink in days. Rachel chuckled. Chloe, on the other hand, quietly asked a question.

“Um,” Chloe started. “Does that mean you told her about-”

“About my friend being some sort of hella wicked dream mage?” Max asked, after she swallowed. “Nope, haven’t heard a thing about it.” The photographer pulled a face.

“Someone’s in a mood this morning,” Chloe said. Then somewhat quieter, she continued, “Does that… you know, weird you out that your friend’s some kind of freak?” The question was asked with some levity but Rachel knew better. Rachel knew that under all the rest of Chloe’s new confidence, there was some concern about what this experience (and theoretically, others) meant about her. Rachel expected Max to take on a serious and reassuring tone, the kind she always responded to Chloe’s insecurities with. Instead, Max literally spittook.

Once she recovered from the moment, Max didn’t pull herself together. Instead, she bent over her tray and started to laugh. It was a little infectious, enough that Rachel half smiled though she was concerned by Chloe’s lack of response to the laughter. It took a moment for Max to calm down.
This long, deep belly laugh was confusing but at least everyone was happy, right? Rachel shook her head until the laughter died down. Chloe shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

“No, no, listen,” Max started, apparently sensing her discomfort. “You don’t know what “freak” is yet,” she said. “But yeah, I’m in. I’m doing a little research. Also, don’t go thinking this changes fuckall between us, Chloe.” Rachel nodded. “Now, the research. I’m not done yet, sorry,” Max told them. “I sort of passed out early last night? Long day.” The room was beginning to fill a little. Rachel’s growling stomach was pulling her toward the line, but she needed to make her point to Chloe first, especially as Chloe seemed to visibly relax.

“We used to do things about problems,” Rachel said. “Murderous father? We turn him in.” Chloe gave her a quick searching look, as if she wasn’t sure that Rachel was entirely alright. *I’m not entirely alright, though,* she told herself, waving her arm slightly so that the sleeve on her left arm slid farther down against the early morning cool. “It’s time to get back to that.”

“I’m down,” Chloe said, though it sounded like some of her will had dimmed, like she wasn’t sure about Max knowing about the dreams. It made Rachel regret the unilateral decision to fill the photographer in slightly. *We need a reset on the conversation, to get it going right. Also,* she added, eyes shooting toward the shrinking buffet line. *I’m hungry.* Rachel stood up, not letting go of Chloe’s hand as she tugged toward the line.

“Food first, revenge plans later,” Rachel told them. Max raised the half empty carton as if in toast. Chloe laughed, the sound very natural. “Lots of food, then lots of revenge.”


“Before what?”

“Just nevermind,” Chloe replied. “Let’s go.” This time she took the lead and Rachel was forced to shoot the back of her head a confused look. *Some people,* she thought, *make no sense in the mornings.* Then all thought of serious matters died away, well, matters more serious than the most important meal of the day. She was forced to release Chloe’s hand when they each grabbed a tray. As they waited and retrieved breakfast (her, eggs and bacon and Chloe, biscuits drenched in gravy that Rachel personally found lacking) they were forced to talk about these less serious matters.

“So does the new Chloe still like playing tabletop and acting in the play?”
“You know it, honey,” Chloe shot back, quickly, ladling a tiny bit more gravy on top. *You can do that all you want, but it’s still gonna suck.* “Not only am I gonna be the best damn fairy queen in Arcadia Bay history—” Rachel cut across her.

“You know it, honey,” Chloe shot back, quickly, ladling a tiny bit more gravy on top. *You can do that all you want, but it’s still gonna suck.* “Not only am I gonna be the best damn fairy queen in Arcadia Bay history—” Rachel cut across her.

“Uh, hello,” Rachel said, pointing to herself. “Literally Titania.” Chloe didn’t stop.

“I’m also going to play the skull-shatteringist Barbarian the western kingdoms will ever know.” Rachel rolled her eyes. If she admitted too openly or too often that the boisterous Chloe had something of an effect on her, she would never win an argument again.

Yeah, yeah, scourge of the north. Let’s go.” Max was taking turns going at her eggs or looking through recent photos when they returned to the table. Rachel was disturbed to find that Chloe looked eager to tear into the subpar breakfast in front of her. *Then again, the bacon on my tray’s soft and the scrambled eggs were probably made in really, really large batches.* She let the table eat in peace for a minute or so.

“Alright,” Rachel said after finishing a piece of bacon and a couple of forks worth in eggs. “Now, onto business. Let’s think about the problems we’ve been ignoring.” She held up her left pointer finger. “One, David is a douchebag.” Rachel looked across the cafeteria to the rather wide man leaning against the wall beside the only exit out into the rest of the school. He matched eyes with her and did not react. “Chloe can’t sneak into the dorms every time he acts like a huge troll. We need to handle that.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that one,” Chloe said and the edged tone of her voice made Rachel look away from the security head and back to her girlfriend. *Yeah, face it, the word is ‘girlfriend.’ “I’m not going to be running from his ass so often anymore.”* Rachel saw Max looking up, concerned and trying to hide it. “Also, the other night I found a fairly secluded spot to park. I imagine I could get away with it on rare occasions. If I pull far enough off the drive.”

“There are plenty of places like that around here,” Max muttered, then relaxed.

“I don’t like it, but it’ll do in a pinch,” Rachel replied. “We need to keep thinking on that.”

“Well, in a real emergency I could probably afford to get Chloe a motel room for a couple of nights,” Max said, and then she speared some egg on the end of her fork.

“How?” Chloe asked.
“I’ve got some money of my own saved up.”

“How?” Chloe asked, again. Max stabbed more and then more egg and, looking Chloe dead in the eye, stuffed it into her mouth as much as to say she wasn’t going to answer. Rachel laughed and took control of the conversation again.

“For problem two, Max you’re sitting it out.” For a moment, the girl tried to talk through far too many eggs. This resulted in a failure of getting any point across, but it did seem to make Chloe forget about her curiosity, as she smiled at Max’s struggles. Rachel waited as the brunette reached for a drink and tried to choke it down.

“Why’s that?” Max finally asked, sounding mildly affronted.

“Because you’re still trying to get chummy with Nathan Prescott and I’m not about to be as big a dick as to ask you to help me fuck with him.”

“Look,” Max said, her voice lowering. “I think he’s lonely. I tried to talk to him for a while. Now I’m just trying to stay neutral.” Rachel opened her mouth to say she understood but Max held up a fork-grasping hand. This didn’t matter to Chloe.

“And I say he’s fuckin’ nuts,” Chloe told her.

“If he fucked with my friends, though” Max continued, talking slightly louder and looking pointedly at Chloe. “He needs to pay.” Without breaking her matched gaze with Chloe, she added, “Eliot too.” Rachel grinned.

“Damn right,” Rachel told her, feeling both relieved and impressed as she sat back for a moment, crossing her arms across herself.

“But I’ll sit it out anyway,” Max added, “because I’ve got shit to do later.”

“Like what?” Chloe asked.
“After classes, I’m going into town to meet up with Frank,” Max admitted. Rachel had not thought of the man since May. She knew Chloe had seen him at least once since everything went down, but Rachel had never particularly gone to him before.

“Why’s that?”

“Why do you think?” Rachel and Max asked her in unison. They matched each others’ rolling eyes.

“Right, so before this becomes the ‘Chloe’s being silly’ routine, go on.” Rachel was surprised at the slight irritation in Chloe’s voice. It was something she needed to investigate but for the moment she just decided to be a little less teasing.

“So, first off,” Rachel said, calling the conversation back. She shot her eyes across the room to the table where Eliot, Victoria and a girl she didn’t know were sitting, mostly ignoring each other. “Eliot.” Chloe returned to paying close attention. “It’s time he knows how much it sucks when someone ruins something you care about.” Chloe grinned.

“That’s my girl,” she said. For just a moment, that was enough to make Rachel shiver. Damn you. Chloe’s new attitude toward her could definitely get to her, in the most amazing ways. “And Nathan,” Chloe continued. “People have seen him writing that shit about you everywhere. Now not only is he talking shit about Rachel Amber, but he’s stomping on my territory. I don’t go to high society douche parties and douche all over people.” At this point, Max muttered something about how much she ‘hoped not.”

“Then what’s the plan for Nathan?” Max asked them.

“Simple,” Rachel beamed. “We do exactly what he’s always accusing everyone of trying to do.” She gave them a minute to come to it themselves or ask and no one else spoke. “We’re going to embarrass him in a very public way.” Chloe whistled lowly, raising a hand. Rachel accepted the high five.

“Wait,” Chloe interjected, suddenly looking concerned. “This won’t fuck with the play will it?”

“No, my little thespian,” Rachel teased. “It won’t.”

They were done planning long before the warning bell rang. It was a miniature signal of sorts. Max
put away her camera and a photo of Chloe and Rachel plotting. When Rachel asked about it, Max said she was going to call it, *Sweet Revenge*. Rachel found it fitting enough. For the first time Rachel was slightly disappointed when the three of them had to split apart that morning. With Max onboard, their first plan would be so much easier to pull off with three sets of hands instead of two.

Still, when the three said goodbyes, sharing eager looks between them just outside of the cafeteria— with David Madsen looking over their shoulders—Rachel did not change her pace and did not let herself calm down. This was going to be good for her and Chloe both. *Speaking of*, she thought, stepping closer to Chloe, whose arm rose almost instantly to rest on her shoulders. *Maybe this brave new Chloe has more than one benefit.* Rachel looked up at Chloe. Chloe didn’t turn to look down at her, or back at David or even at Max as they split up.

Rachel was amused to see the determination on her face as they milled about, walking toward the theater classroom at roughly the speed of growing moss. To be fair, it left Rachel time to think. Even if Chloe wasn’t feeling too terribly talkative, that was fine: she was still warm against Rachel’s side and when it came time for them to try out their hand at acting in front of Mr. Keaton, Chloe was going to be at her side more figuratively if not physically. Bit by bit the rest of the entire, small elective class entered the classroom after them: Hayden and Juliet came first, followed by Steph and then Dana.

Mr. Keaton came in, predictably, a minute before the bell rang, clutching his cup of coffee. From her own desk, Rachel looked side-eyed at Chloe who smiled wickedly once at Mr. Keaton’s retreating back. To be entirely fair, Rachel didn’t pay a lot of attention as he spoke. At one point he instructed them all to write down ideas for an improvisation scene and she did so mechanically. She contemplated the curiosity on Chloe’s face as she thought for a moment and then slid a slip of paper into a cap being passed around.

“You were thinking about that one a while,” she whispered at Chloe.

“I couldn’t come up with anything,” Chloe responded, looking a little pink in the cheeks. “Strangely enough,” she lowered her voice further, “I’m distracted right now.”

“Hey,” Rachel shot back. “Save that kind of talk for your dirty dreams.” Chloe shut up and sat up straight, but she did not stop smiling. Around that point the bell rang, signaling that the class was finally going to actually begin. Rachel waved once and it was enough to get Chloe’s attention. That was another thing that she had to feel good about under different circumstances but this was serious time. Lowering her hand to her waist she signaled with five fingers. Chloe didn’t speak or even nod, but the look in her eyes was enough to get the message across: she would be ready.

The morning light came in pretty well through the couple of windows at one side of the room. A small, weak stage at the front held a chair from which Mr. Keaton lectured unless he was teaching
something from a historical bent. In that case, he typically used an old chalkboard set on wheels off to the side. All in all, it was a fairly calm morning for the first few minutes. Rachel tried her best not to appear to be focused on the clock and to that end when she saw three minutes pass, she started to count the remaining seconds.

Up at the foot of the stage, Keaton was talking to Dana about something that even a moment ago Rachel would have remembered. The fact was she had no care for the class, but she had to appear attentive. Rachel locked her eyes on Keaton’s face as if she were absorbing his every word and continued to count. 60-59-58... At some point Mr. Keaton asked a question and Juliet, Hayden and Steph each raised their hands. I haven’t got a clue. 47-46-45... Juliet gave an answer and judging by the look on Keaton’s face he was pleased with it. At that point he approached a spare desk made for a student, where the hat bearing their scene ideas was waiting. 17-16-15... fuck if he calls my name or Chloe’s it all goes to shit.

Well, Rachel thought, this is an improv class. With a few seconds still to go, she leaned forward, eyes closing and then, exhaling loudly, she collapsed sideways. For a moment pain actually shot through her arm as she collided with the ground. There was a surprising amount of silence, before a chair pushed back from a desk beside her. Faithful and reactive, Chloe came out of her seat to kneel beside her. Juliet expressed genuine concern from the front, and, most kindly, Keaton didn’t call Steph out when she exclaimed, ‘Oh, shit!’ Mission start, Rachel thought, trying not to smile.

“Rachel?” Chloe said, her voice tentative. Rachel stayed limp as Chloe shook her once, then twice. My other arm is going to bruise, she thought. “Rachel? Come on.” Slowly, Rachel opened her eyes, and glanced about the room. Most of the faces in the room were concerned or, in Chloe’s case, seemed to be. Steph was staring at her through narrowed eyes. Damn you, Rachel thought. Don’t you say a word. She committed to the performance. “There you are.”

“What happened?” Rachel asked, keeping her voice quiet. Keaton approached and with some difficulty, knelt down. Chloe “helped” her to sit up.

“You fainted or something,” Chloe told her. “You alright?”

“I’m dizzy,” she lied, frowning. “I think I need to go to the nurse’s office.”

“Of course, my dear,” Mr. Keaton told her. He steadied himself against a desk and rose back to his feet. “It might just be dehydration, make sure to get some water after she’s had a look at you.”

“Uh, Mr. Keaton?” Chloe asked. “If she falls while trying to get to the office she could hit her head.” Rachel pretended to be too out of it to really speak as Chloe helped her up and did not
release her arm.

“We wouldn’t want that, I don’t fancy breaking in a new Titania,” Mr. Keaton chortled to himself. Rachel resisted the urge to roll her eyes and thought that maybe Chloe had rubbed off on her in some unfortunate ways when it came to dealing with people being over the top. “Ms. Price, escort Ms. Amber to the office, quick as you like.” Step one: Damsel in Distress, complete. She let Chloe lead her out, muttering to her, asking if her head hurt.

“No,” Rachel responded as they finally left the room. The door shut behind them and Rachel kept her head down as Chloe looked about.

“Clear,” she said. Rachel relaxed and lifted her head. “Alright, so what’s step one of your big master plan?”

“That was step one,” Rachel replied in an undertone as she started down the hall for the nearest exist. “Step two is getting to the dormitories without being seen by your Step Douche.” Chloe nodded.

“Then let me take a lead, if David sees me you can probably get away, he’ll be drooling to give me shit right now.” Rachel did step behind her. “By the way, that was impressive.”

“Works every time,” Rachel told her. She stayed one or two steps behind Chloe but things happened fairly quickly from that point onward. Maybe it was the small uptick in adrenaline and the big effects that could have or maybe it was just hurrying to keep up with Chloe, who was a bit quicker than her, but either way they were at closest exit quicker than Rachel expected. Chloe pushed a door open and stuck her head out comically, it was like a scene from a cartoon. She looked twice in each direction and then pulled Rachel out onto the campus.

“Run?” Chloe asked her.

“Run,” she answered, knowing full well there were plenty of windows that they could theoretically be seen by and only so many trees to hide behind. Not to mention David could see us at any point if he’s watching.

They made it to the second floor of the dormitories without seeing another living soul. Chloe, it seemed, was finally beginning to relax enough to have questions but was biting her tongue. Rachel appreciated that. It was a lot more fun, in her mind, to imagine Chloe’s face as her evil plan began
to unfold itself naturally. She pushed the door to her dorm room open and once they were both inside, gestured to a plastic bag in the corner. Chloe crossed the room and after a moment of fiddling with the plastic, was forced to tear the bag open. The first thing she pulled out was a full keyring of keys.

“That part was Max’s idea,” Rachel clarified. “I told her we’d need to get into locked rooms today and she suggested that Samuel isn’t very attentive with his keys.” Chloe smiled sideways. “Apparently she’s swiped them once already.”

“Me too,” Chloe said, as if feeling slightly wistful. “God damn, I hope Max likes her birthday party, we kinda owe her on this one.” Rachel nodded and gestured for her to go on. Boasting about her plan was fun and all but if Chloe didn’t make it back to class in short order people might start asking questions. “What’s ‘Nair’?” Chloe asked as she fished out a small bottle.

“Hair removal cream,” Rachel responded automatically and then she turned the knob to her door. She didn’t wait for Chloe to respond. Even still, there was a sharp intake of breath followed by ‘Oooh’ behind her. Rachel smiled down the empty hall. It took them very little time to get into the first floor dorm hallway but Rachel froze shortly after entering to listen for the sound of a student who might be skipping class or someone doing a room check. Chloe stopped uncomfortably close to her. Or maybe too comfortably, she thought, feeling Chloe’s breath against the back of her neck. Her breath began to come heavier. We need to move now.

Rachel started to lead the way, muttering the name of her first target. After a second, Chloe pulled ahead of her and began to literally pull her down the hall. The boys’ hall was messier, any signs or posters covered in the crudest graffiti, including a truly freudian number of dick drawings. With Chloe in the lead, Rachel had little else to do but roll her eyes after she counted her 23rd dick drawn across various surfaces of the hall. Jesus Christ, do the words overcompensation mean anything to any of these people?

“Bingo,” Chloe said as they reached a door. The slate next to it labeled it as belonging to “Smeliot.” Rachel marked it down as the closest thing to wit anyone on the floor was capable of, Rachel watched Chloe try the doorknob. It was, mercilessly, locked. Flipping through keys on a separate ring that seemed to relate to the dormitories, she eventually found one labeled correctly, with the number of the dorm and pushed it open. This pig’s room is a wreck. Eliot’s room was strewn with clothing: over the dresser, over the back of a chair, across a desk. Rachel shook her head and it hit her that there was one little hitch left in her plan.

“So,” Rachel asked as Chloe eased the door shut behind them. “This is where you come in. What does Eliot hold dear?” Chloe responded without a moment of hesitation.

“He has some book of poetry about a gi-” Chloe’s voice caught and Rachel turned a raised
eyebrow on her. “About me. Um,” she started. “Is- is this a bit too mean?”

“Fuck no,” Rachel told her. “He’s behind the shit that happened in my locker and I feel some kind of way about that.” Chloe contemplated for a moment and gestured toward the desk. It took them both carefully shifting clothes, paper and laptop aside, turning up a worn notebook that Chloe pointed at immediately. Rachel took a second to flip through the pages. Every page was full, which was enough for Rachel. She shoved the notebook under her arm and turned away from the desk. Feeling petty, she took his pillow from his bed. Chloe looked amused and Rachel didn’t blame her. It was simple petty annoyance compared to the rest of her plan which was probably because it was off the cuff.

From the absolute chaos of Eliot’s room to the strangely meticulous organization of Nathan’s it was like a matter of night and day. Nathan’s room was dark, in many different senses of the word. Enlarged photos, most of which suggestive of some type of sensuality paired with restraint, hung from the walls. A fairly decent printer sat on the desk beside Nathan’s laptop. The kind that could probably handle paper for good photographs. She took a moment to covet the dark, thick rug in the center of the floor though. Nathan had a sense of style. She liked most of that style, actually, but she figured if she tried to make off with the rug it would be discovered eventually. Bastard. Then again, the shed in the junkyard…. Rachel filed the idea away for if they absolutely needed another plan for revenge. She pointed toward the mini fridge under the desk.

“Get me one or two of any drink in there that isn’t water,” Rachel asked. The first thing she did was shove Eliot’s pillow under Nathan’s bed. Makes absolutely no sense, but at least it will annoy the piss out of them both, maybe even confuse them. Chloe opened the fridge and at that point Rachel was already digging through Nathan’s closet. Careful not to expose any skeletons she might not want to see, Rachel avoided anything that looked like a magazine or a photo album. On a shelf at the top of the closet (she had to reach harder than she wanted to) she found a bottle of shampoo that looked to be about half empty. Grinning, Rachel held out her hand.

“Nair,” she said, turning back toward Chloe. Chloe had come up from the fridge with a half gallon of chocolate milk and a can of coke. Oh fuck yeah, that’s my girl. Rachel grinned.

“Oh, right,” Chloe said, pulling the small bottle from her pocket. “Think that’s enough?” Rachel nodded, removing the cap from one bottle and then the other.

“What are you thinking?” Rachel asked her, giving the freshly spiked bottle of shampoo a hard shake.

“That no one should ever mess with Rachel Amber.”
“I could’ve told you that the first time we talked,” she said, passing the notebook off to the girl before replacing the shampoo bottle. “Last but not least,” Rachel quipped, pulling Nathan’s small trash can from beside the desk. Chloe tossed the notebook in without hesitating and Rachel took that to be a sign that she wasn’t against the idea, after all. In fact, Rachel stepped aside and let Chloe pour both liquids over the notebook and the absurd amount of kleenex in the trash can. *He doesn’t look like he has a cold*, Rachel thought, shuddering. She instantly regretted the thought due to the five or six that followed.

“Just think,” Chloe interjected. “It’s still first period.” Rachel reached out, pushing a strand of blue hair behind Chloe’s ear. Chloe shivered and Rachel grinned. *It just means that I’ll have to wait a while before my sweet sweet revenge comes to fruition. In the meantime.*

“So we can both get into some real trouble or we can get you back to class and me to the nurse.” Chloe looked red as she turned around to face Rachel. She looked twice at the room around them with some disgust on her face and that was all the answer Rachel needed. “Yeah, you’re probably right, let’s bounce.”

They did.

Rachel was not really riding the high from the sneaking around anymore by the time night had begun to fall. Having just received a text from Max suggesting she was back at the dorms, it felt like the right time for a catching up. It was actually becoming a pretty commonplace part of the evening, to spend the majority of it with Max, either in her room or Rachel’s own. Typically it was a matter of conquering shared classwork. Tonight, though, she just wanted some company and since Chloe was doing her ‘standing up to David’ thing, now, she simply hadn’t been able to stick around campus.

“Door’s open,” Max called from within. Rachel made sure to shut the door behind her fairly quickly.

“Everything go alright with your ‘after-school meeting?’” Rachel asked right off the bat. Then she focused her eyes on Max. She was already in a tee and pajama pants, leaning back against the wall as she sat on her bed. A photo album was laying open on top of her closed laptop and to her right was a large, open bag of pretzels. The look of someone who didn’t have a care in the world, paired with the snort of amusement at the question was answer enough. “Never mind.” Rachel said, shaking her head, though she couldn’t help but smile.

“I *may* have taken the very long, very secluded way back to the dorms,” Max told her, grinning. “Like, through the woods.”
“And you may have gotten the good stuff,” Rachel responded, plopping down on the far end of the bed, reaching out to steal a pretzel. “So,” she started, thinking that if there was ever a time to bring this up, this would be it. “How’ve you been handling things since the school year started?” *It’s only been a couple of weeks.*

“What do you mean?” Max asked, chuckling once. Still, she sat up just slightly and the look of amusement faded from her face. Rachel fought one small war in her head and then continued.

“I mean,” Rachel told her. “You’re really different now than you were back in May.” Max didn’t respond, but she did take mini-pretzel and take a bite. *Okay, so maybe even high off her ass Max doesn’t give straight answers.* Rachel wished Chloe was here. No matter how comfortable she and Max had gotten around each other, Chloe had years of experience dealing with her. *Oh fuck it, push it.* “I mean, honestly, you still get nervous reading lines and I can see that, sometimes I do too but you talk to or at least try to talk to people. You’re more decisive, less prone to freaking out and, forgive me for saying, less violent.” Max was sitting up straight now, but surprisingly did not look upset.

“You can probably say about all of that about Chloe, too.”

“Yeah, but I think we both know it’s kind of a bigger change in your case.” Rachel watched as Max looked to be considering something and finally the girl patted the bed beside her. Rachel moved back from the edge of the bed, pressing her back against the wall only a few inches from Max, who seemed comforted a little.

“Honestly,” Max started, in a voice threatening to be broken by laughter, “I have no fucking clue what’s going on with me.” This didn’t strike Rachel as a lie or obfuscation. “This isn’t how people who deal with the shit I was dealing with work. They don’t just stop feeling angry or violent. They don’t just stop getting worked up around anxiety triggers. That takes work and I was in no shape to put in any work and people? People used to really fuck me up. They kind of still do, but nothing like it used to be.” Max sighed a little. “Plus now I can actually think for myself instead of just following directions.” This seemed so out of place that Rachel couldn’t help but seize onto it and ask.

“Whose directions did you ever follow?” Max raised her head, face conflicted.

“I-I just meant generally speaking,” Rachel tried to take her at her word. “I’ve still got my issues but they seem totally different. Not as bad, at least, not all the time. I still have trouble sleeping sometimes.”
“What issues might that be?” Max responded with a question of her own.

“What do you fear?” Max asked. Rachel was slightly taken aback.

“What do you mean?”

“You know, back when we first met you said something that made it sound like you had some sort of phobia.” The comment hung in the air and then Max’s face changed. It was simultaneously regret and maybe also Max shutting down a bit. And either way, she still looks calm, not like it would have been back then. Then again, how tense can you get in bright pajamas with cartoon cats on them? Rachel smiled, which did confuse Max.

“The technical term is Nihilophobia.”

“The fear of nothingness,” Max told her. “Void.” Rachel nodded. She didn’t say anything more as she wasn’t prompted and the consideration of even the phobia made her stomach churn a little. She was so distracted for a moment that she didn’t realize Max was building up some kind of strength. “Honestly? This whole school and everyone in it scares the shit out of me sometimes. Sometimes it doesn’t, sometimes I know why, sometimes I just don’t. Sometimes it’s so tempting to stay in this room.” Rachel shook her head. Maybe there hasn’t been as big of a change after all.

“Why?” Rachel asked her.

“I can’t say,” Max answered, shaking her head. Rachel was about to ask if she had a guess when a noise came up from the floor below. It was not uncommon for sounds from one floor of the dorm to drift to another, especially when some testosterone-fueled jackasses decided to bare knuckle box. Two such incidents had already occurred. Still, tonight Rachel didn’t think anyone was able to avoid the scream, wordless and pure rage, that sounded up from the bottom floor, from just where she might imagine the boys’ shower was. Loud voices came and went for almost two minutes. Max and Rachel sat in silence, Max alternating between confused at the ruckus and amused at the look of satisfaction on Rachel’s face. And this is real, deep, body buzzing satisfaction.

“What in the hell did you two do?” Max asked her when they had not heard anything for almost a minute.

“Honey,” Rachel told her, “You’ll know it the minute you see it.” Rachel pulled out her phone without clarifying any further.
Me

Mission accomplished <3

---

Akratismos

Disclaimer: Anything familiar to you, I do not own. This is entirely a work of fan fiction for personal amusement and fulfillment. I make nothing from this and own none of it.

Chapter Fourteen: Akratismos

No dreams last night. This was her first thought as she opened her eyes. I wonder if there’s a way to make there be dreams? Chloe sat up rather slowly but the truth was that she felt well rested and she knew there was a starting gun to be on the line for. Still, if she made less noise before she got to her shower, it was less likely she would run into either her mother or David. This was probably for the best, given their explosive argument the night before and the fact that Max’s birthday party was upcoming. She didn’t think either of them could actually stop her from leaving the house against their will but she wasn’t about to push them to that point. For the moment, she was just satisfied by the act of finally speaking her mind.

The Chloe in the mirror in one corner of her room didn’t look satisfied. She looked anxious. Chloe took a moment to idle, examining her reflection in the mirror. It’s probably safe to say this is about as tall as I’m going get for the rest of my life, Chloe thought, eyes trailing from the mirror to the graffiti’d corner of the room where her father used to mark her progressing height. At least I left mom in the dust. For the third time in as many days she frowned at her showing roots and decided that something would need to be done about them.

I’ve only got a little money left at this point. I can’t exactly go spending it on dye. As much as I enjoy it. She considered just lifting the dye but the idea didn’t sit well with her. It sat so badly in fact that as she glanced in the mirror she went from anxious to frustrated. Chloe turned away and dug the day’s outfit almost entirely at random from her closet and dresser, taking full advantage of the few pieces of clothing Rachel had gifted her long ago. She paused back in front of the mirror long enough to check the shirt against the jeans and decide it was fine, before a photo taped to the upper corner of it caught her eye.

It was not a polaroid, like most of the rest Max took but the girl had framed it expertly and used the timer on Steph’s digital camera to assure she was in it. Chloe was impressed at how composed she looked, half-drunk already with an arm around either Chloe or Rachel. Mikey stood to Rachel’s side and Steph to Chloe’s. Chloe couldn’t help but think that was a conscious decision on Steph’s part. It was, all in all, a memory Chloe had come to hold dear, their first session as this new group.

Max has been stepping up to bat for us, she thought, laying her clothes on the bed. You know, it’s silly but... the idea of another, smaller birthday gift wouldn’t leave her mind. She knew just where
the box it was buried in was. *Okay, okay, you can’t go digging around in the closet this morning.* Chloe gathered her outfit, her phone and keys, determined to bolt straight from the bathroom after her shower to the truck. *If mom catches me, I’ll have to sit down to a ‘nice family breakfast.’* It wasn’t that Chloe didn’t miss breakfast with her mother. It was just *simpler* when they interacted as little as possible. Especially in the mornings.

*I’m always way too honest first thing in the morning.*

The thick plastic tray snapped loudly against the table as she sat it down a little too roughly. Both the pile of scrambled eggs and tower of toast threatened to topple in response. Opposite of her, Max looked up in confusion. Rachel simply raised an eyebrow. Chloe ignored them both for a second, sat down, bit into a slice of toast and left them to ruminate on it for a minute. Warm, melted butter and crispy toast drew Chloe’s attention away from the moment and she wanted, not for the first time, to know why Blackwell had the best of everything. Chloe jerked her still blaring earbuds from her ears with one hand and reached for a small carton of milk with the other. After she swallowed and let herself take a drink, she finally spoke.

“First off,” Chloe said, looking pointedly at Rachel, “You’ve got to stop making googly eyes at me from across the room, people are starting to talk, woman.” Rachel rolled her eyes slowly for emphasis. “And you,” this time she pointed an egg bearing fork at Max, who had gone back for a moment to staring blearily at her tray, as if she was not in much of a good mood. “Happy Birthday.” Max lifted her head and smiled lightly, though Chloe noted that it didn’t quite reach her ears.

“Thanks,” she said. “I’ve already gotten a wake up call from someone,” Max eyed Rachel sideways. In response, with a sort of challenging grin, the taller girl bit into a slice of bacon. “Then about six texts each from my parents and four from Joyce.” Chloe rolled her eyes but chuckled. So what, Max deserved to be doted on on her birthday. Everyone did, at least by the people they loved. *Phrasing, Price.* Chloe looked down to find that half of her toast tower had vanished. *Now who did that?*

“Someone’s hungry,” Rachel teased. Chloe responded by sticking her tongue out. “Don’t let me get ahold of that or people will really be talking.” Chloe didn’t push her luck but decided that this time the threat did not embarrass her so much as intrigue her. Turning her eyes back to Max she found the girl still looking a little despondent as she picked at her own breakfast. Chloe glanced once at Rachel, who, grimacing, shook her head as if to say she did not know.

“So, while you were off meeting up with Frank, Rachel and I sort of snuck out of town yesterday to pick up a gift,” she continued. “It’s safely hidden away at the location of our party on Saturday.”
“You didn’t have to do that,” Max replied, looking up. She was suddenly slightly uncomfortable and it was only then that Chloe noticed her fiddling with her camera in her lap. Okay, what’s that about? Maybe she doesn’t have a picture she needs for an assignment for that photo essay class? I think she was having some trouble with it. Chloe raised an eyebrow. “You guys know I appreciate having any kind of party at all.”

“Max, shut up,” Chloe said. “I told you before you flew back off to Seattle that we were going to try to make this one rock. It’s not gonna be all I wanted it to be, but we’re gonna have fun, and that includes a gift.” Max did, in fact, shut up. She even smiled more genuinely. “And this morning I thought of something else I actually really want you to have.”

“What’s that?” Max asked her.

“We’ll save that for the party, or maybe the morning after.” Chloe sat about attacking dinner again.

“Oh,” Rachel said, “That reminds me, did you get your mom and dad to give the school permission to let you sleep off campus Saturday?” Max nodded.

“I told them I was going to stay with Steph, though I think I’ve barely talked about her at all to them,” Max admitted, running a hand through her brown hair as if trying to tame it, though it looked fine, certainly slightly more put together than usual. “I really can’t wait for Saturday, though. It was really cool of Steph and Mikey to be okay with putting off the session until then. I just, I guess I’m a little more nervous about practice tonight.”

“Why?” Chloe asked.

“Well, Mr. Keaton wanted us to start trying to memorize the lines a little harder. What if he wants us out of book already?”

“There’s no way in hell,” Rachel told her. “Last time we didn’t get out of book for almost four weeks. It’s barely been two. Tell you what, Puck, bring the script with you one of these nights when we hang out. We’ll run lines. Even if I have to read for Oberon.” Max relaxed slightly, in fact, most of the way. “Was that really all it was? Chloe asked herself as the photographer began to eat properly. Jesus, Max, I didn’t think the play was actually making you nervous.

At first the idea of Max and Rachel spending most evenings together had made Chloe a little confused, if not quite uncomfortable. The idea that they hung out despite Rachel apparently having
the same suspicions about the girl that Chloe did was encouraging, she had decided a few days ago. It was as if they were going beyond a couple of separate friendships. They were just, Chloe, Rachel and Max, not some discordant group of people who hung out because of odd circumstances. In the end that was a comfortable thought. It was just that sometimes Chloe had her own suspicions. She tried to shake them off, reminding herself that if Rachel and Max continued to get along it might make any future issues a lot less painful. Besides, Max might get end up getting too focused on other things for something like a crush to really matter.

*Would you actually want that?* This thought was an outsider: unbidden and unwelcome. Chloe buried it immediately under worries about homework, play practice, birthday parties and the future Mr. and Mrs. Madsen. Both for her sake and the sake of keeping the conversation going Chloe decided to change the subject. *Nothing is without its risks in this situation,* Chloe thought to herself. *I think that’s a sign I need to spend a bit more time with Max myself and figure out what makes her tick. It’s weird to think Rachel might know her better like this.*

“So, does Skinhead Prescott think you had anything to do with the whole ‘now-I-need-Rogaine’ incident?” Chloe asked Max, genuinely concerned. This time, Max shrugged.

“Honestly? I don’t think so but he hasn’t really talked to me in a few days. I’m kind of over it. I tried to help someone I thought was lonely and he acted like a prick to my best friends.” *Plural,* Chloe thought, not quite able to stop herself from uncomfortably shifting in her seat. “Besides, considering Eliot’s black eye, I think you’re probably right about him being a little unhinged.” Despite her past friendliness with Eliot, Chloe simply had to think about the grafitti up around the school or the impromptu paint job of the inside of Rachel’s locker and she didn’t particularly feel much regret that Eliot and Nathan had resorted to a fist fight.

*Of course it got covered up because boys will be boys and poor little rich boys will get what they want,* Chloe thought, slightly bitter. *Still,* Nathan Prescott sat alone today, though judging by the furtive looks being thrown his way by one Victoria Chase (dressed far more richly than she used to be, Chloe noticed) it was most certainly by his choice. Only a few days had passed since part of his hair came out in the shower and the rest was shaved off, so from where she sat she couldn’t even really see any new growth and, apparently, he had decided against a hat. *Maybe a bad choice there, buddy.* At the very least his scalp no longer looked red, at least until he lost his temper.

“He didn’t do anything, did he?” Rachel asked. “Like, to make you change your mind.”

“Nope, just the shit with Eliot.”

“Good,” Chloe said, before taking a large bite. She let the implied threat hang in the air. For a few seconds, they sat in silence again before Chloe admitted, “I really can’t wait for the Saturday
“Me too,” Rachel replied. “I’m so close to leveling up and there’s this spell I really want to take.”

“Gee,” Max said, catching a bit of bacon on the edge of a fork already loaded with eggs stolen from Rachel’s tray. “It wouldn’t happen to have anything to do with fire would it?” When Rachel stuck out her tongue, Chloe grimaced at her orange juice. *Note to self*, she thought, *Rachel does not get to cast on anyone I’m in combat with. Dre smash, Dre doesn’t burn.* “I thought as much,” Max told her, and then pushed her own tray away. Chloe stacked it beneath her own.

“I’ll take it when I’m done,” she said.

“Thanks,” Max shot back. “How goes Mikey’s secret gift?” Chloe grimaced slightly, giving a noncommittal gesture with her hand. “Well, it’s only going to be like, one or two scenes per session, so it’s not like you don’t have a lot of time.”

“Maybe,” Chloe said. “Unless Mr. North is like half the other parents and just gets pissed off and pulls Mikey out now.”

“I don’t think he will,” Rachel told her. “He’s gotta know how sad this makes him.”

“Maybe, but I’ve been working on the tattoo idea lately. I kind of need to catch up with someone,” Chloe added. “Since she’s already rocking a badass dragon.”

“A badass dragon that you designed for me,” Rachel replied, squinting slightly. “What was I gonna do, just never get it?”

“You waited two weeks.”

“Two long, excruciating weeks,” Rachel replied. Chloe rolled her eyes.

“Could I see it?” Max asked. “I’ve never gotten a good look.” *Does she mean the tattoo or…?*
“At my design?” Chloe clarified. She found herself feeling a lot less jovial than she had been a second ago. “Uh, sure I guess, I’ll bring it to the Saturday session-party thing.” The truth is, I’m nearly done with it but I’m not so sure about it now. “To start with, I had this really basic design idea: pictures that stood for people and things that were like, important? Like, one was going to be a twisting railroad that ran most of the way up my arm. I also wanted a pirate’s eyepatch. That sort of thing.” She could tell with just a glance that each of the girls understood the symbols she was describing. “When the weird ass dreams got worse, thoug, I tried to use things I saw in them. I was still going to tie them together with that red ribbon, but…”

“But?” Max asked her.

“Well, now I know that some of those dreams might not be mine. If I’m picking up dreams or symbols from other people, they might mean something different to them and I don’t know if I’d like that in their position.” At least I know I want to keep the broken theater masks, Chloe told herself, raising her head. She caught Rachel staring and, ignoring that she was about to do the same, decided to tease her slightly by pulling a face. “Don’t get so serious about it. I’ll just have to think about things a bit.”

“Did you uh, have any kind of images for me?” Max asked, quietly. “I mean, other than the eyepatch?” Turning a little red, Chloe nodded.

“I had this weird dream the night we found Sera,” Chloe told her. “You know, the three of us crashed out in the back of the RV.” Swallowing, Chloe remembered the dream with more detail than she probably ought to. “It’s silly.”

“I’m curious,” Max told her.

“It was this dream of you, but not really you? Like an older you. You were chasing this big, blue butterfly through Blackwell.” Max blanched and Chloe realized she had hit the nail on the head with her guess. “That was your dream, right?” When the photographer nodded, Chloe looked at Rachel. It didn’t seem to bother Rachel to imagine that Chloe might have found herself sharing a dream with Max, but then again her face was awfully impassive. “I’m sorry,” she finally said, though it felt lame. Max laughed in response. “Okay, what’s so funny?”

“If you’re seeing peoples’ dreams, that’s not the weirdest thing in the world, Chloe, try not to worry about it.” Max was smiling as she put her camera away in her bag. Well, what is? Chloe almost asked her. “But you might be right,” Max told her. “About the symbols. The butterfly… sometimes I think I know what it means and it’s not good. Other times I think it is.”
“Have that dream a lot?” Chloe asked her. Max nodded.

“That’s one of the better ones,” Max told her. “But- never mind.”

“Face it,” Rachel replied, seeming to find her voice again. “If you weren’t weird, I wouldn’t like you so much.”

“Don’t you mean, wuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu
“So,” Steph asked when, a few minutes later, Chloe found herself in the theater classroom across the aisle from Rachel. Steph was sat directly in front of them, turned around in her seat. “No strange fainting spells planned for today?”

“I don’t know what you could ever mean,” Rachel replied, fanning herself. She took on an exaggerated ‘southern belle’ accent. “I do declare, it was simply too warm in this classroom yesterday.” Around that time, Chloe watched Hayden enter from the corner of her eye, looking a little on the disgruntled side. He’s been having trouble memorizing his parts, I think. I wonder if Theseus really agrees with him. The boy tried to hide his frustration as he greeted the three of them, providing a distraction from Steph’s questioning.

“It’s not like I think either of us care if she knows. I’m sure she’s figured it out my now, anyway. News spread around the population of the school pretty fast after Nathan lost his cool in the boys’ dorm, ambushing Eliot in the television room and accusing him of being behind the hair-loss incident. All of that while wearing only a towel. To Chloe it was just the best confirmation that she was right: Nathan wasn’t really all there. Rachel or I really should have been his first guess.

“So,” Rachel asked suddenly, leaning slightly toward Chloe. “What kind of scene did you submit yesterday anyway?” Chloe swallowed. Don’t tell her, she warned herself. Don’t tell her. If you’re lucky he won’t even pull yours. Glancing back to the door, Chloe called out a loud, sudden greeting toward Juliet as she stepped through the door. This time, both Steph and Rachel were suspiciously eyeing her. I’m so fucked. Face reddening, Chloe leaned back when Juliet stopped in front of them.

“Hey, Chloe,” the taller girl greeted, looking a little taken aback by the sudden friendly greeting. “How’d that essay go in English? I think I didn’t do so well.”

“Ah, I’m comfortable enough with it,” she said, hoping to keep the subject off of her improv prompt long enough for the two girls in front of her to forget. Like that’s gonna happen. “I’d have asked Max for help with it, but she kind of hates that book.” Juliet nodded.

“I’m pretty sure at one point she snapped at Warren for calling her ‘Maxden Caulfield.’ She never snaps at anyone, much less Warren.” Chloe raised an eyebrow.

“What, are they buds?” she asked, feeling a little surprised not to have heard about this.

“It’s kinda weird,” Juliet said, this time settling into the seat beside Steph’s. Both Rachel and Steph
were suddenly paying more attention to the conversation than to Chloe, so Chloe marked that a
win. “It’s like sometimes she tries to be his friend and other times she doesn’t? I think it’s because
he’s just so flip-floppy.”

“What do you mean?” Steph asked.

“Well, he likes to pick someone to pay a lot of attention to, like, way too much. If they actually
start to pay any attention to him, though, it’s like he gets bored. I don’t know what his deal is, but
he does think he’s funny with all his cute little nicknames. Max usually puts up with them, but
yesterday…” Chloe marked that information down for later consideration.

“No jokes about any relation between Max and any fictional Caulfield,” Steph said, as if
committing it to memory. “Fair enough.” Dana followed Mr. Keaton into the room, talking
excitedly about something that Chloe couldn’t really understand. Either way it meant that their
little pow-wow was broken up. Victory, Chloe thought, when Steph and Juliet turned to their
notebooks and Rachel began to idly flip through her script.

“Hello, hello my dears,” Mr. Keaton greeted. “Ah, my favorite time of day, my favorite class, the
history and art of improvisation.” Don’t let this turn into a speech about the importance of improv,
Chloe thought. Not again. “This class gives me hope that it will not be a dying art form.” For just a
moment the man drew in a breath as if to begin the dreaded rant, but then he said, “Ah,” and rose
from his seat on the short stage to his desk, where an old cap sat. Fuck, Chloe thought, I take it
back, I wanna hear it again! “So, I am sure you’re quite excited to finish these up,” Chloe rolled
her eyes. “We’ll try to get two or three done today, before we go over the reading.”

“What’s wrong?” Rachel asked her, in a low whisper. Chloe shot a look toward the girl as Mr.
Keaton announced that they ‘might as well start off.’ The bell rang just as he reached one thin hand
into the cap and pulled a sheet of paper out. He waited patiently, the serene image he coated
himself with during class hours not broken by what Chloe knew had to be quite testing. Mr. Keaton
was actually a little on the impatient side from time to time.

“Ah, now this is an interesting one,” Mr. Keaton drew the paper up to his face to read it a second
time, more closely. “‘You and your partner wake up to discover you’ve just had the same dream.’”
Rachel’s look of utter shock made Chloe more embarrassed than anything else the girl had said or
done lately.

“Look, I just panicked and I didn’t know what to do—” she spat it all out at once, in a whisper.
“For this one, how about we give Ms. Amber her first scene.” _Son of a bitch_, Chloe thought. _Don’t call my name, don’t call my name._ “And Ms. Gingrich.” Chloe was relieved that someone else was to act out this _very_ personal scene with Rachel, in one way, but in another she wasn’t. Especially considering Steph having, at least at one point, had feelings for her. Steph got up to her feet and after a moment, Rachel buried the stunned look on her face and got up to follow.

_Well, Chloe said, I guess turnabout’s fair play, she and I did a scene yesterday while Rachel was stuck in the nurse’s office._ The look on Rachel’s face when she turned to look out at the crowd from the stage, though, promised there were going to be words exchanged about this. _I think we can file this one under ‘you fucked up, Price.’_ Chloe settled a grin on her face in response, determined to enjoy the scene.

This was no small stage in a classroom that Chloe stood on, some time later. Oh, no. This one was fairly large in comparison and put together much better. _She_ stood opposite of Rachel, who was looking slightly horrified on the other side of the stage, a trio of faceless figures helping her with the back of her dress. Her hair is gorgeous, Chloe thought, following the intricate braid, (interspersed with flowers) with her eyes. _Chloe wasn’t sure what the look on Rachel’s face was about, but she wrapped her arms around herself, taken out of the moment by a cool gust of wind._

One moment there was no one out there, in front of the stage. When she turned away from Rachel to look out, the next, the seats were filled. Each one of them, to the last, was occupied by somebody laughing as hard as she had ever heard another person laugh. Shivering, Chloe turned in confusion toward Rachel, who ran a hand along the length of her own dress. Chloe looked down. _She herself wore a green tunic, something that seemed entirely out of place in a play set in ancient Greece, but that wasn’t what bothered her. It wasn’t what explained how cold she felt. It wasn’t even what explained the laughter._

Where she might expect pants or even a long skirt (it’s supposed to be a gender bent Oberon, right?) _there was nothing._ Chloe lowered her arms quickly to cover her front. How the fuck did I get out of the changing room in my underwear? Chloe wondered, looking askance at Rachel or her ‘helpers.’ How did nobody stop me? _There was definitely someone who should have stopped her, if not Rachel._

“Puck,” she exclaimed, calling toward the back. “PUCK!” Also dressed slightly inappropriately for her role, Max hurried in from stage right, in a dark but plain shirt and pants. _She_ stopped after stepping on stage, looking confused. “How the hell did this happen?”

“Language!” Shouted a voice from the crowd. Chloe ignored David. _That was easiest. Maybe it’s time to exit, stage right._
“You sure about that, kiddo?” Chloe turned back toward Rachel. All three of her servants had vanished and in their place, looking no older than the day he died, was Chloe’s father. His voice boomed over the talking and laughter from the crowd. “Or is this an opportunity?” Chloe blinked, feeling her cheeks begin to cool. “How do you think you got out of the changing room without noticing you weren’t wearing pants? Do you really think Rachel or Max would let you embarrass yourself like that?”

“We wouldn’t, you know,” Max told her, from only a step or two behind, tone serious. “You get that, don’t you?” Rachel started to approach, moving toward center stage.

“That’s not the sort of thing we’d do to you,” Rachel agreed. “Not for real.” Chloe began to understand then. Pants, Chloe told herself. I want some fucking pants. In the next moment, there simply were pants on her and they were mercifully warm against this strangely potent wind which had begun to cause the set to sway behind them. Greek robes and togas and shit aren’t really my style, Chloe thought, looking down at the tattered blue jeans now around her lower half.

“This is my dream, so I can wear what I want,” Chloe said, nodding as she matched eyes with her father.

“That’s my girl,” Rachel said. Her voice was barely audible over the crowd, which would not stop jeering at Chloe, mocking her.

“What’s next?’ Max asked, now moving up to stand between she and Rachel. In answer, Chloe turned her gaze outward. Few of the people calling at her, laughing from the crowd, were clear in her vision. Her mother and David sat in a far corner, the Ambers in the front row. Looking murderous, Nathan sat beside them. Usually, she would want to understand what it meant, but this wasn’t a usual circumstance. Now, she simply wanted them all gone.

“Now,” Chloe told Dream Max, focusing on the people in front of her. “Now fuck this. ” For a second the production of A Midsummer Night’s Dream had a crowd in attendance that would make Mr. Keaton swoon. Then, with as little as a thought, every man woman and child in it was gone. Absolute silence ruled the stage. When Chloe turned back her father was nowhere to be seen, but Max and Rachel were backing toward the exit at stage left. They said nothing and made no gestures, but Chloe knew she was supposed to follow. Deeply satisfied, she glanced once at the spotlight beating down on the stage and it dimmed.

Chloe followed the most important people in her life into the darkness backstage.
Chapter Fifteen: Pentheus In the Mountains

Rachel shoved the empty can in her hand into a trash bag weighed down by a few rocks. *Two for me,* Rachel thought, turning back to Max, who was digging another beer from the cooler in the corner. *Five for her.* Rachel shook her head, smiling at Max’s back. Eventually the girl found purchase on a beer and held it up in offering. Carrying the bag with her, Rachel settled on a crate close to the one Max was sitting on, around a slightly shaky folding table. She accepted the drink and popped the tab, watching as Max dug her sixth out.

“Hopefully it won’t take Chloe too long to get back with the others,” Max said, sitting back up straight, wavering slightly. *It may be cheap beer, but it’s still beer,* Rachel thought, amused to see the drink starting to get to Max. *Hope she knows how to slow it down, soon.*

“Ah, they’ll be back in no time,” Rachel said. “There’s plenty to drink, it’s just some of it will probably be warm. Not much ice.” Rachel gestured briefly to a few boxes stacked in the corner, covered beneath an old tarp. “Besides, your big party is tabletop and beer in a junkyard- surprise!” Despite the slight depreciative tone in her voice, Max grinned and raised her can in toast.

“No way, this is pretty cool,” Max told her. “I mean, we’d have found a way to make it awesome just the three of us, but Steph and Mikey and some gaming sounds fun.” Rachel nodded. “It really does mean a lot to me.” *I can tell,* Rachel thought, trying to suppress the slight roll of her eyes and the smile both. *God damn, this girl gets sappy with a buzz.* “Thanks for sharing your guys’ special spot.”

“Max,” Rachel said. “It’s kinda your spot too, you know? I think knocking out a drug dealer and saving my ass here might buy you a bit of timeshare.” Incredibly, Max laughed at the reminder instead of getting upset by it. Rachel relaxed on her crate, wishing they had a few chairs. Max got up. Feeling guiltily amused Rachel watched to see if she was capable of walking a straight line. *Okay, at least she’s not quite that much of a lightweight,* Rachel told herself as Max knelt down beside her, an arm resting across her shoulders. Rachel was going to ask what she was up to when Max brought her camera up.

“Smile.” Rachel lifted her own arm and pulled Max in closer, smiling for the camera as the girl
bumped against her. There was a brief flash and then Max released her and reached out to take the polaroid by a corner. “Excellent,” Max exclaimed. She did not get up from her spot beside Rachel who turned, looking down to watch her as she waited for the camera to finish spitting it out. Max gave it a quick look and then sat it face down on the table without getting up.

“Got a plan for that one?” Rachel asked. Max shook her head. “Could- could I have it?” It was a friendly request, because she wanted a shot of just the two of them. Most of the photos Max took didn’t really feature herself. (She apparently felt like people would judge her if she became known for taking ‘selfies.’) Instead of simply nodding or speaking, Max’s grin grew wider and, Rachel felt embarrassed to realize, the girl’s cheeks reddened. God damn it, why are you allowed to be so cute? There are laws in this country, you know.

“Yes ma’am,” Rachel said, hoping that a blunt (Max didn’t smoke cigarettes) would distract them both from beer. It was not even ten in the morning and there was a lot of necromancer hunting ahead of them. Max pulled a rolled joint from her bag and then slid her beer aside to let her dig through her bag on the table. I actually don’t have a lighter on me, Rachel thought, frowning. She usually kept one just in case Chloe or Max lost theirs. “I guess you don’t really use that for general anxiety anymore?”

“Not really,” Max said quietly as she pulled a lighter out. “I mean, sometimes it still gets bad. It also helps after really bad days where the school just freaks me out, though.” Oh right, something about the school ‘freaks her out.’ That was another one of those mysteries that Max was made up of. Then again, a lot of people talked in whispers like they thought that she, Rachel, was mysterious, too. In reality, she thought, she was fairly normal and it took putting on a hard to read face and being friendly to make people whisper about you, apparently. I mean I guess that makes sense, Rachel accepted the first hit. Hot, burning smoke poured down her throat, into her chest. Max is always putting on faces… even for Chloe. Maybe she and I have more in common than I thought. The thought was unappealing, considering the day ahead of them. “I still like the stuff for fun, though.”

“I noticed,” Rachel exhaled, letting the smoke escape and waft up toward the sky. “Not that I can blame you.” Awful skunky, she thought. She leaned forward and untied her shoes, intent on at least getting comfortable while they were in the shed. “What do you think we should do about David?” Rachel asked Max, who was still holding in her first hit. “I mean there’s always the Nair tactic again.” Max exhaled.

“Nah,” Max told her, waving a hand dismissively before passing her the joint. “Look, first off,
even if you can make sure Chloe doesn’t fuck up and use the wrong shampoo, there’s no promise for Joyce.” Rachel scoffed but Max was right. Dammit.

“What about David’s mustache?. You know he waxes that thing.” Max laughed into the can at her lips. Taken by surprise a bit of beer spilled down the girl’s chin.

“Shit,” Max exclaimed, unable to keep from laughing. She put the can down and with her unoccupied hand wiped beer from her chin and throat. Rachel smiled at her, shaking her head.

“Look, I get it, and that’s a good idea and all, but Chloe has to come up with this one herself. David’s her problem. It’s up to her to deal with his ass.” Rachel opened her mouth to protest.

“Wait, listen. No, we definitely help her. Just, I think unilateral decisions would be a bad choice on that front.” Max took a hit. We’ll be through that thing in no time at this rate. Oh well, might as well get high as shit.

“I guess,” Rachel said. “That makes sense. It’s her he’s giving shit to. But I am gonna keep bothering her until she comes up with something.” Once she had accepted and taken yet another hit, Rachel reached out and tilted the photograph face down on the table in front of her upward. It was beginning to develop pretty well, after all.

“That should be fine,” Max said, breathy as smoke escaped her. “To go in a pocket or somewhere dark for a bit.” Rachel let herself examine it just briefly, starting to feel the slightest bit lightheaded. The two girls in the photo were smiling, genuinely happy and looked so comfortable beside each other. It was an odd slice of their lives, their interactions, their personalities, but no less legitimate. I think I get what Max likes about this shit, she said to herself as she slid the photo into her pocket. It’s really like cutting a small chunk out of life and looking at it. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Rachel told her, smiling more brightly. “I think so.” For the next few minutes they bounced ideas off of one another for ways to suggest how to handle David, but in the end it kept coming back to minor acts of vandalism which would annoy him and that wasn’t what they needed. Though neither wanted to say it, Rachel figured they both had come to the same conclusion: David was a lot harder of a person to get revenge on than Nathan Prescott. He had actual power over not only them but someone they both cared a lot about. Eventually Max leaned over and retrieved her sweatshirt, as if she were cool. Rachel noted she had yet to open her seventh beer, which was probably for the best.

“Well, shit,” Max looked down at what was left of the blunt, a bit of paper and ash. Discarding the remains she pulled her sweatshirt on. For a moment, the girl’s tee rose up just slightly, and Rachel looked down, instantly self-aware of the reaction. She decided to finish off the beer in front of her, ready to take a break from thinking too deeply. If Chloe’s gone much longer, she thought, distracting herself. I’m gonna call and make sure she hasn’t had some sort of wreck.
“So uh,” Rachel started, when Max was done. “You might want to make sure to grab more than one blanket tonight,” she gestured to a pile of blankets stacked in one corner of the shed. “It’ll probably get a bit cold out here at night.” Max turned, making an appraising face at the pile.

“I dunno, the cold never bothered me anyway.” For a moment, Max turned back to the table and started to raise the can to her lips, then, snorting, she sat it down. Rachel raised an eyebrow at her. Her words slurring slightly, Max spoke again, half-singing. She began to rock on the crate, turning slightly as if dancing. “Let it go, let it go! Can’t hold it back anymore! Let it go, let it go!”

“What are you even singing?” Rachel asked her, shaking her head more emphatically. Goofy fucker.

“Oh,” Max said, getting quiet. For a second, she looked confused, then concerned and then, snorting, she burst into laughter again. Yeah, okay, she’s had plenty for the morning. Of everything. “Oops! Don’t worry about it.” For a moment, the photographer, her face red, her eyes sparkling, looked like she was going to finally regain control, fists literally curled against laughter. “But you’re gonna love it,” Max said, before her urge to sing overtook her. “Let the storm rage on! The cold never bothered me anyway!”

“What in the hell are you talking about?” Rachel asked, unable to resisting breaking into laughter as she watched Max make wide, grandiose gestures from her seat as she sang. Max waved her hand as if to say not to worry about it, yet again, but she could not keep a straight face. Rachel found she couldn’t, either. In this way they fed into each other’s laughter until a voice suddenly made Rachel turn. Eyes watering still, she tried to catch her breath as she saw first Chloe and then Mikey and Steph enter their little hideout.

“Jesus, you two, I was gone for maybe half an hour!” Max laughed louder and Rachel couldn’t resist. It was infectious. She did too.

“They’ve been in the good stuff,” Steph muttered, shaking her head at them. Chloe gestured toward the cooler and Steph stepped around Max, patting the girl on the shoulder once as both Rachel and the photographer tried to cool down. Mikey sat down opposite of Rachel in a bright orange tee, bearing the phrase ‘Arcadia Bae.’ Somehow, even that was funny enough to cause Rachel to lose the control she had regained. Feeling lightheaded, she leaned forward, gulping a heaving breath as she heard Max lose her cool to her right.

“Dear lord,” Chloe said, moving to wrap Rachel in a hug from behind. “You two are fuckin’ trouble, you know that?” Chloe asked her, close to her ear. Rachel grasped Chloe’s hands as they met rested just above her stomach. She did not quite stop giggling.
“Takes one to know one,” Max retorted around snorts.

“Yeah, yeah,” Chloe told her. “I see how it is. Steph, beer me please.” Rachel eventually managed to calm down, by which point Steph was teasing Mikey, asserting he would not know “the good stuff” if he inhaled it. Mikey admitted he wouldn’t, but he was fine just sticking to beer. Max was coming back to her senses, to a degree, breathing naturally when Steph finally turned to her and greeted her properly.

“Hey there, birthday girl.” Even inebriated, Rachel heard the tone in Steph’s voice and rolled her eyes at Chloe. I kinda hope she just gets it over with and says something to her soon, Rachel thought to herself, unsure why Steph’s crush might make her uncomfortable. Max accepted a quick, one armed hug from Steph, who sat down on the other side of her. Chloe was looking curiously at Rachel when Rachel pulled her eyes away.

“What’s wrong?” Rachel asked her, confused by how serious Chloe’s face was, suddenly.

“Nothing,” Chloe said, before apparently deciding to catch up with Rachel and Max, draining her beer in one go. “Alright, fuck it,” Chloe said, her mood apparently not very improved. What was that about? “Who wants to whoop some skeleton and/or necromancer behind?”

“I’m down,” Rachel replied, leaning forward as Chloe slowly scooted her crate closer to her. That’s a good sign, I guess. She still frowned. They both did.

“Let’s do it,” Mikey agreed, pushing his glasses up the ridge of his nose.

“I don’t carrot all,” Max said, before snorting. Rachel placed her face in her hands. Chloe sighed, loudly and asked Mikey to pass her another beer and get started on one for himself while he was at it.

“How high are you two?” Steph asked, amused but clearly a little concerned. “And do you have your dice?”

“I’m a rocket, man,” Max replied. Chloe groaned, loudly.

“Wait,” Rachel said as she retrieved her and Chloe’s bags from a small shelf above their stash of blankets. “Why didn’t I hear the truck when you all pulled up?”
“Honey,” Steph responded, “You two wouldn’t have heard the fucking apocalypse over each other.” Rachel figured that was a fair response. Max plopped her own bag down on the table and dug out her character sheet.

“Plus,” Chloe said, clearly still not over whatever was bothering her a moment before, “we parked a ways out so we walked here.” Rachel nodded.

“Good idea.”

“I’m aware,” Chloe responded, examining her nails as she made a proud face. Rachel pecked her cheek as she sat back down.

“Then let’s do this,” Steph said, by way of calling them to order. It only took a moment or two for people, even those as far gone as Max still was, to pull out their most commonly used dice and open the folders they kept their character sheets in. The wind wasn’t blowing too badly, so there was no risk of anything getting blown away or around. Putting aside the momentary awkwardness which she couldn’t exactly identify, the day had already started out pretty well. Steph, setting aside the drink she would probably be nursing for an hour, unfolded what at first looked like just another folder. Instead it was her game master’s screen, mostly to shield roles and sheets she might be looking at to keep players surprised.

Without meaning to, Rachel leaned sideways toward Chloe. She received a soft bump on her shoulder in acknowledgement as Chloe leaned in toward her. Within the walls of this little structure the rusty chaos of the junkyard wasn’t visible. Considering that the little wildlife there was in the area seemed to be feeling very calm at the moment, it was peaceful. Then again, for obvious reasons, Rachel was feeling rather chill herself. She caught herself laughing at the bump. Max was squinting down at her sheet, as if trying to remember why she was down so many hitpoints. Rachel didn’t want to be the one to remind her that her disastrous attempt at heroics was why they were at risk of once again being the unwitting guests of an angry necromancer.

“Very well,” Steph started after shuffling through papers behind the screen for a minute or two. “When last we left off, Che had just healed Jule, ending the round and putting him back on his feet. Unfortunately, you aren’t done yet. The abandoned great hall was even less abandoned than expected.” Thought so, Rachel told herself. No good reason for her not to end combat before ending last session. Rachel glanced down at her sheet, looking at a couple of small marks made in very light pencil. I’ve only got one combat spell left. “It starts first as the familiar clinking, cracking dragging noise.”

“Please, no more armored skeletons,” Mikey practically begged. “I’d rather have the shades!”
“Be careful what you wish for. Any transformations left?” Max asked him, sounding hopeful.

“One,” he muttered. “Depending on how big this wave is, I might burn through it before we’re done.” Rachel watched Steph, as she often did during these conversations. Steph acted as if she was looking down at her notes or at a copy of the monster’s manual, studying the creatures approaching them. The small smirk forming on her face told another story completely. When she had given everyone a moment or two to converse, Steph continued to describe the approach of their foes. It seems she did not have miniatures related to these particular skeletons which did suggest that that Mikey’s fears were justified. *He takes it a little seriously in some ways but he does get his fun out of it.*

That is what they did for the next few hours, sought to get their fun out of dice, paper, numbers and their own imagination. That wasn’t to discount the addition of herb and drink, of course but Rachel found those supplementary at best. She kept herself from getting to the point of overwhelming giggling and laughter but, by the time the light was too low for them to continue rolling dice she found herself a little more free with their rapidly dwindling beer supplies. The biggest downside to this setup instead of doing it at, say, Steph’s, was the lack of a refrigerator.

In this way Rachel found herself holding a warm beer as she sat at Chloe’s side around a campfire. Obscured from view of the road or the railroad by the ruined shells of cars and other large pieces of junk, this small fire was doing pretty well about warming them up against the cooling night. Max was still wrapped up beneath a blanket next to the fire, a bit exaggeratedly. She wasn’t singing any nonsensical songs about not being annoyed by the cold anymore, though. Nor was she drinking. Rachel turned her eyes from Max to Steph, another curiosity that night.

Interspersed through their little gatherings, there were small moments in discussions when, obvious to everyone it seemed but Max, Steph dropped little hints of her interest. Other than the greeting that morning, that had been conspicuously absent all day and remained so. It wasn’t that the girl was any less friendly or anything, she simply seemed to have given up. Maybe she decided Max wasn’t being oblivious and just had no interest. Or maybe she’s just tired of trying. *I can understand it.* At one point an arm came down on either Chloe or Rachel’s shoulders without warning and when they each turned back, Max knelt down behind them.

“Hey,” she said. Rachel grinned. “Thanks, you two, for setting all this up.” Max seemed to be coming back to herself more completely. After a moment the girl stepped away from them and moved to sit beside Mikey, who was flipping through the sketchbook Chloe had dedicated specifically to designing the pieces of the sleeve she wanted done. *Right, Max was wanting to get her hands on it.* Rachel watched Chloe’s eyes stare almost anxiously at the two of them for a few seconds, then she shook her head and turned back toward the fire. *Chloe’s still worried about the dreams.*
“Everything’s gonna be alright,” she told Chloe, who looked back up. Chloe nodded in response but otherwise did not look too convinced.

---

Kraipale

Disclaimer: Anything familiar to you, I don't own. This is a work of fanfiction for personal amusement, fulfillment and maybe a bit of self-therapy. I make nothing from any of it. Cheers.

Chapter Sixteen: Kraipale

September 25th, 2010

The world existed in flashes of being. Chloe was lost in that disorienting, confusing mess. The ground beneath her feet shifted from rocky to green to mud from one moment to the next. Other moments, it didn't even exist. Millions of voices echoed off of walls to the world she did not think existed. Nothing around her was solid for long. One moment, she looked out to the ocean and a horrible gust of wind rocked her on her feet. The next, there was nothing but void and voices. Chloe closed her eyes against the world coming into and vanishing from existence, but it actually did nothing. Eyes open or closed, she saw or did not see the same. It made it impossible to get her bearings straight, to know where she was walking or if she was covering any ground.

The physical, mechanical motions involved in walking were hard to focus on. The voices weren't voices. They were a voice saying several things at once. The wind picked up, jostling her even when the world was void. A loud crashing sound stuck out over the voices and then an explosion. The world came into being and she swiveled her head around looking for the source of the explosion. The world flashed back out. Chloe had been in a couple of what Arcadia Bay's finest called 'raves.' In the moment, she chose to seize onto the comparisons in her mind, a world that was dark and did not exist when the lights went out.

This is shitty music then, Chloe thought, beginning to feel desperate. Those lights came on but instead of illuminating a crowd of writhing, sweat-drenched people it showed some sort of outside scene, somewhere away from too many buildings. Chloe steadied herself and stood still. In time with the sound of wind and that voice which spoke over itself, the world continued to come into be and then extinguish itself again. Focusing, she got snapshots of dirt and gravel, tree root and rope, one tall, slim building whose top she did not see at first, but when it came back she recognized. The lighthouse, Chloe told herself. Okay, you've been here this long but at least you know where here is- sometimes.

Trying to focus on the voice let her pick out phrases but she was having difficulty understanding what she was seeing and hearing at the same time. She felt lightheaded. For a moment, the bench she and Rachel liked to go and sit on together came into being and it lingered a bit after the world fell away around it. Then, it too fell to void. Okay, she thought. That settles it. You're at the lighthouse. The ocean is ahead. She walked carefully forward. This isn't right. Sometimes she felt gravel beneath her feet, stones which dug into them. Other times, there was nothing and she was not sure if she was moving up or down, forward or backward.

Dream logic, she told herself. This is a dream. The voices continued, and she slowed to allow herself to pick at phrases like "This is the end," or "Everyone will die, in one great gust" or even, "I should be put up against a wall for this." Chloe was disoriented but she would never not recognize Max Caulfield's voice. As if that was a signal, two forms slowly curled into view as the world came back. One of them remained when it left again. It remained a steady, real point in a false or hollow world. Chloe walked toward it.

"I did everything I could," the voice said, the rest suddenly quieting. The world came back, but it
was blurry, hazy and disconnected. The lighthouse floated feet off of the ground and threatened to blow out to sea with the wind. Something that might have been Arcadia Bay appeared unnaturally far in the distance. That solid form turned sideways and Chloe thought, for a moment, that she was looking at Vanessa Caulfield. The bench Chloe and Rachel loved so much sunk into the blurry, distorting earth and did not come back.

Vanessa was speaking, but the body-less Max-voice was combating whatever she was saying. Chloe stepped farther to the side and drew a deep breath. This was not Vanessa, at all. Her eyes were wrong. Her chin was wrong. Dressed in a familiar sweatshirt, though it was soaked through, was Max. She looked older, more mature, but it was Max. Chloe strained to hear what she was saying, unsure why she had not noticed Chloe approach. The voices in the background faded to a whisper, until they made up the raging wind.

Chloe jumped as something else came to be mere inches away from her. Slightly leaner, her face contorted in worry, thick rings beneath her eyes, this new something was a someone, it was Chloe. She looked broken and tired, wearing eyeliner that was clearly a day or two old and a tattered dark jacket, she was soaked, as well. With her came the pouring rain, so intense that it cooled even her, the real Chloe, as she had to force herself to think of herself, to keep clear. This other Chloe spoke and as she did, Arcadia Bay eased back toward the lighthouse, coming closer and closer until it looked almost natural in its positioning, and something massive appeared just off of the coast. Chloe remembered it distantly, as if from, as if from a dream, Chloe thought, laughing to herself.

Neither the Older Max nor the Older Chloe heard her laugh. Distantly, she was sure she had seen this storm before, in a dream. This made simultaneously no sense and perfect sense. The storm was cyclonic and looked larger than Arcadia Bay itself. It was moving in at what might be a snail’s pace if it weren’t for the fact that it was so very large. It was on course directly for Arcadia Bay. Chloe didn’t need to be told to know what would happen when it reached the town. The water beneath the storm rebelled against the order of things, waves swelling.

"All that would take,” Older Chloe said to Older Max, “is for me to-” Older Chloe turned toward the ocean, words lost by tears.

"Fuck that,” Older Max screamed. The world dimmed and quieted. Older Max grew still and then, in a familiar event, both of the forms in front of Chloe dimmed, too, until they were see through, like ghosts. The disembodied Max voice began to speak again, over and over, concurrently, discordantly. What little of the world which remained solid began to shake. Chloe stumbled about, looking for anything stable to hang onto. There wasn’t anything, not post or tree or bench which was not moving. She fell on her ass and could do little but cover herself, listening to the voice and wait for the shaking to stop.

"The storm approached the town.”

"He was a monster yet she worshipped the ground he walked on. It made her sick until the end.”

"They stood alone on the rocks. One cried, the other screamed. They both surrendered in their own ways.”

"Frank Bowers stayed conscious the longest- he actually burnt alive.”

"You are my number one priority.”

"We caused it.”

"She caused it.”
"Victoria's body was never found."

"You are all that matters to me."

"One thought she didn't deserve it. The other was so sure."

"One wanted herself for the world, the other wanted her over the world."

"I couldn't make this choice. She couldn't make this choice. She made it. I made it. Why can't I see?"

The storm came back into being, the ocean rising like grey walls around it as it made landfall. For a moment, Older Max and Older Chloe appeared, embracing. Screams and rage, destruction, explosions sounded. For a moment, Arcadia Bay came back into Chloe's range of vision in sharp detail. In the next, it was undifferentiated debris, scrap, trash, bits and pieces of structure. Chloe did not need to get closer to know what had happened.

"Max, I'll always be with you." This voice was different. This was her voice, her own. With it, another world came to life. This one was nighttime, dark and concrete. Chloe didn't want to see it. She did not want to see the shattered shell of Arcadia Bay, not for anyone. One look around her showed that this was not where she stood.

"Who the fuck names their kid Calvin?" the Voice-Max asked from nowhere in particular. Chloe stood on the edge of a street, on a dark, shattered sidewalk with weeds coming through it. Beside her, Older Max was bright and clear. She looked deranged, hair wild, eyes heavily lidded and making her seem barely conscious on her feet. Sometimes, Chloe thought she saw another form taking shape behind her, but it never did. From that spot, a new voice was whispering and Chloe knew it was whispering to Max, but it was impossible to make out what was said. Chloe turned to follow Older Max's line of view.

"When she stood over his hospital bed, she could smell him pissing himself." Voice-Max said from all around her as the world quite literally spun. "She told him if he didn't want her to finish the job, he'd stay quiet and count himself lucky. She smelled more than Calvin's piss before she left him there, covering and blubbering." Chloe saw herself again as the city street with it's buildings large and short and rundown came back to life, sprinting across a dark parking lot. Sometimes the lot was gone. Sometimes Older Max left but somehow, Older Chloe remained clear and defined. Someone, a tall if thin man, was giving chase, shouting at her.

"You psycho lezzer, bitch!" Older Chloe didn't turn back. Something metal glinted on the ground behind the man in one moment, beside a strange, lumpy shape. Then all of that was gone. Chloe looked back at Older Max, whose face was one part realization and one part agony. Chloe glanced about. An old but large hotel stood across the street from them, seemingly where Older Chloe was running from.

There was no longer a street in front of her, but a car was approaching. Chloe knew where this was going, she knew what was about to happen. Her Older self locked eyes with Older Max, stopping in her tracks where pavement had been moments before. Confusion and shock overrode Older Chloe's panic. Not the real Chloe's, though. Her fear was not gone. She screamed at the top of her lungs, trying to wake up. She did not want to see it. Older Max was sprinting in the next moment over a mangled corpse. Then, the world shifted again and Max was in the lot, and she was the one chasing. The man was running. Older Max was screaming, or maybe that was the world around her screaming. The parking lot was not well lit but there was light enough for the knife to glint in Older Max's hand. The thin man tripped, no longer anger and rage but complete and utter terror. Chloe saw the outline of Older Max flinging herself on top of him, of the plunging knife and
Chloe jerked her head down. In the process she was unable to avoid the sight of her own body collapsed in the road just in front of a dented bumper, head twisted unnaturally on its neck. This is too much. This is too much.

No more, please!

Chloe woke up screaming. It was not an intentional choice but she rolled over, head knocking against Rachel's. Chloe scrambled up and to her feet, head jerking around. An inch to her left, Max was climbing to her own, eyes wide, face pale, turning on her feet. She slammed her own mouth shut, squeezing her eyes against a pounding head. One foot in front of the other, she rushed from the building. Someone's hand—it had to be Rachel's—was jostled loose from her knee as she turned.

Vicious and vile, some of last night's indulgence painted the dirt only eight or nine steps from the little cement shed's entrance. Conflicting flashing images ran through her head and distracted her from the majority of the pain. She was just dry heaving by the time she felt a hand between her shoulder blades. The gesture was familiar as Rachel's attempt to calm or comfort her. When she was sure there was no way she would be ill on Rachel, she turned around, wiping her mouth with the back of her arm. Her head ached and her eyes watered and when she tried to talk it came out as blubbering.

Rachel embraced her, muttering absolute nonsense in the most soothing voice Chloe had ever heard her use. Chloe did not fight the tears but she could not stop herself from trying to explain what was hurting, what was wrong. Over Rachel's shoulder, she could see Max, only two or three steps away, watching her with wide, aware eyes. Very aware. Chloe understood what she had just experienced better from looking in them, they were guilt and shame. Dream. Her dream. Max. Max's nightmare. Everyone dies and then I do too. I've never seen or felt or heard of a dream like that, where so much of it wasn't there.

"It was hers," she told Rachel through desperate attempts to breathe, through bile and burning. She had to stop trying to explain but she gestured helplessly to the girl behind Rachel. Rachel half released her stepping aside. Chloe hoped she did not take this wrong, but couldn't care in the moment. Max approached tentatively and stopped a foot away, turning almost to the side, looking pointedly away from her. "Your dream," Chloe gasped. "Yes?" Staring at the ground, Max nodded. "Here," she said. "Come here." With her eyes closed, as if she expected to be struck, Max did as she was told, moving almost laterally as if to only expose a small part of herself to Chloe.

Without moving her left arm from Rachel's shoulders, she reached out, leaning forward almost violently with her right arm and pulled Max as close to her as she could. In the moment the three stood uncomfortably close together. Chloe wanted Rachel to understand, desperately hoped she did. She was rewarded when the girl's other arm wrapped around Max, and brushed against Chloe's right. Max did not break down as Chloe had, but her long sigh was shaky as if tears were close to the surface. Chloe could not stop hers yet.


"Not your fault," Max said, and judging by the way the three of them shifted, she suddenly squeezed Rachel as tightly as she did Chloe. "That one was all Max."

"I'm sorry," Chloe replied as she came to her senses, releasing them both. "Your head?" she asked Rachel.

"It's fine," Rachel told her, carefully, clearly. "Are you going to be okay?" Chloe shook her head.
"No, you will," Max told her. "It will calm down," Max stepped back from them, as if self-conscious. "It will, Chloe. Go back inside and sit down." Chloe reached out for Rachel and the thespian's fingers intertwined in hers automatically. Chloe lifted her head and opened her mouth. She wanted to ask Max where those dreams came from and what they meant, why they were so violently broken and disjointed, why nothing seemed to exist for long. There were so many questions, but she couldn't make any of them make sense.

"You have that one a lot?" Max first nodded and then shook her head.

"A little less each time," she responded, in a senseless tired tone. "I'm losing it. I'm losing all of it, waking or sleeping. Mercy." She sounds broken. For a moment Chloe feared she would see that harried Older Max in front of her when she blinked. She did not. Rachel looked concerned at them both, but Chloe didn't think she could understand how disorienting this dream would be.

"They all died," Chloe whispered as Rachel led them back to the shelter.

"They all died and she - I never forgot it," Max answered. Hazy, Chloe did not say anything else as she ducked back into the shelter. Steph was chugging from a gallon jug of water. Mikey was, the lucky bastard, not showing signs of so much as a headache. Her own skull felt like it was being hammered. Her mouth felt like it was trying to force down broken glass. "Hold tightly to the walls, you look like you're about to fall over." Chloe took Max's advice and stayed close to the edge of the room until she and Rachel settled themselves on the floor. Rachel pressed close against her, questions visible on every inch of her face. Chloe clung tight to her in response.

Steph opened her mouth to speak to them all when Max turned and unceremoniously stumbled out of the structure, oddly leaving behind one of her shoes. Rachel jerked upright slightly and turned her head to the doorway, then back to Chloe. She looked powerless. She wants to go after Max, Chloe understood. Fuck it, maybe she should. Chloe shifted her arm from Rachel's shoulders, to send the message that she was going to be okay where she was. If Max really had just experienced that nightmare, if that was really her dream, Chloe was not sure she was really okay. She's talking like she's in a daze.

"What happened?" Steph finally managed.

"Bad dream," Chloe answered, mustering most of her focus into sounding completely calm as Rachel got back to her feet, not to read unnecessarily into it. "Really bad dream. I guess I wasn't the only one who was having one." Gesturing toward Rachel's retreating form as she chased after Max, Chloe turned her head from Steph to Mikey, who was placing his glasses on his face and looking at her with genuine concern in his eyes. Fucking Mikey, she thought, why do good people have such big hearts?

"Really, Chloe, are you alright?" he asked her, absently (and uselessly) knocking dirt from his jeans. His shirt was on backwards and he seemed to be trying to make it sit comfortable on him. He was so far gone he actually lost that last night. By that point I was the only one who could fucking walk straight. "That was some scary shit."

"You're telling me," she responded, her stomach churning. "I'm sorry, I'm really sorry I woke up like that. I've never had that happen in my life. My nightmares are intense but they're nothing like that." Steph shook her head and stood up. It only took her a second to cross the room but she sat down next to Chloe, opposite of where Rachel had just been.

"Hey, it's alright. I mean, Mikey wishes he'd worn his brown pants, but we forgive you." Mikey shook his head, looked down and seemed to realize what was wrong with his shirt. Looking embarrassed, he stood and fixed it. Chloe strained to hear something, anything from outside. "Man,
that was some birthday party, though."

"Yeah it was," Max replied from the entranceway, seeming a lot more composed. "I think I enjoyed the dice rolling more than the campfire, but the company was the best part." It took Chloe a second to look up and match Max's eyes and in that way she came to understand Max's difficulty with eye contact during intense moments. When she did, though, a version of the determined, stony Max was back in control. "So other than Chloe and I having shitty dreams-" More like dream. "This was probably my best birthday party since I left Arcadia Bay." Mikey nodded, looking a bit impressed.

"I mean, it beats the shit out of my last birthday," he told her. "I was out of town, so no hanging with Steph or anyone else." Max approached and held a hand up in front of Chloe. Chloe reached up and struck it with a high five. She hoped that the gesture and the look on her face would be free of any condemnation or any blame. None of this was Max's fault. Max settled herself on the far side of Steph and after a moment Rachel rejoined them, clapping her hands together.

"Okay, so we weren't supposed to be up this early, but I've got some money to spare and a fucking hankering for something." Chloe's stomach protested but she knew, as was often the case, that she would feel better with food in her stomach.

"Fuck it, let's go to the diner," Chloe told her, struggling to get to her feet.

"Are you sure?" Rachel asked her. "I mean, your mom…"

"My mom thinks we all slept at Steph's last night," Chloe responded. Then she turned back to Steph "Oh, by the way? We all slept at your place last night."

"I gathered that," Steph replied. She sounded a little short. "Fuck it, let's do that food thing."

"This is a lot of people for The Beast," Max commented. "I think I'll sit in the back and get some fresh air."

"Alright then," Steph said. "Am I shotgun or do I get sandwiched between two gorgeous ladies?"

Rachel sighed and turned toward the exit.

"Steph, it's too early for your wet dreams." Mikey whooped. Chloe smiled. Max's nightmare hung over her but as she turned her gaze on Max she could see in the girl's eyes that it hung over them both. The shitty thoughts in her mind the night before seemed paltry in comparison to that dream. As soon as, unbidden, the memory of her own corpse rose to the forefront of her mind Chloe turned and gestured outside unable and unwilling to sit idle much longer.

It was unusual on any day for five teenagers to walk into the Two Whales Diner in one big, lumped group. For this reason, when Chloe opened the door various people turned from the counter or a few booths to watch them enter, even if only for a second. Chloe brought up the tail end of the group and entered behind Rachel. For a moment, Rachel glanced worriedly back at her and Chloe was forced to wonder precisely what she was thinking. This is way too fucked up, she thought,
taking the thespian by the hand and leading her (and by extension the rest of them) to a booth without looking around to see where her mother was in the diner.

"Simon, get ready, I think we're about to have a big order coming in," her mother's voice called from somewhere near the counter. A man grunted from the grill.

"I'm sorry I was so shitty yesterday," Chloe whispered to Rachel as they and Mikey eased into one side of a booth. Max and Steph settled opposite of them, chattering about the session the day before. "I was just- it's not important but, I'm sorry."

"It's alright," Rachel said, though she looked confused. If Chloe tried to analyze that, she wasn't going to be in a very good mood when she was done.

"So," Mikey said as soon as everyone had grown quiet. "Dad says we're definitely leaving this summer." Chloe exhaled, turning her attention toward the boy, who looked crestfallen.

"I'm sorry," Max replied, reaching across the table to pat him on the hand. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"I didn't wanna bring anyone down last night," he replied waving her concern off. "I just thought you guys should know." Steph hummed briefly, then spoke, thoughtfully.

"You know," she said, taking a second to uncharacteristically pull her hair back in a very short ponytail and discard her hat. "I think we can come to a nice stopping point or at least a place it makes sense for your character to bail out by then." This seemed to give Mikey a cause to smile slightly, which just confused Chloe. To her it would have been one more reminder that she had to leave everyone behind. Suddenly, she felt like she could better understand Max's predicament a couple of years prior.

"I appreciate it," he said. "That feels like a good way to go." The conversation trailed off, perhaps at an ideal time, because at that point Joyce was standing at the end of the table, her arms crossed across her chest.

"Did you kids actually get any sleep last night?" Chloe looked up at her mother. She was smiling ruefully at them, as if they appeared in a predictable state. If she'd seen the beer the five of them had gone through (and the bit that remained) she might be taking a different view of their appearance. Chloe, at least, had to pretend that every noise around her did not cause her head to throb.

"We lost track of time," Steph said, as if prepared with an excuse. "I prepared a little too much for one session and then didn't keep an eye on the time." Chloe listened to her mother's sigh and watched her raise a small pad up to take orders on.

"Well, out with it," she told them.

"Coffee," Steph said. "Dark, hot coffee. And uh," Steph paused in consideration then added, "Two eggs over easy and plenty of toast to soak up the yolk?" Oh god, Chloe thought, that sounds amazing.

"That," Chloe said, "That right there, but no coffee."

"You never did care for it," her mother added, taking quick notes.

"Pancakes sound amazing, Joyce," Max said.
"The more things change," her mother quipped. "Orange Juice?" Max nodded.

"I think bacon and a couple of eggs sunny side up sound good to me," Rachel added. Mikey raised a finger.

"I'll second that, but with toast on the side, please." Polite bastard, Chloe thought. She smiled at him.

"Alright, you guys, just relax. I'll bring out some water in a moment."

"And coffee?" Steph asked, hopefully.

"And coffee." Joyce grinned at them. Heels clicking against the floor of the diner (how the fuck does she do all that in heels?) Chloe watched her mother turn to pass their orders through to the back. A small silence rested over the table, a strange deviation from last night's loud, sometimes raucous laughter and arguing.

"Chloe," Rachel said, nudging her. Chloe looked up.

"Oh right," she said, opening the plastic bag she was balancing on her lap. The table came a bit back to life, though it was mostly in the manner of a few hungover people trying to not give off the sense of being hungover in public. "So, I was thinking about it," Chloe continued, lifting the object out of the bag. "And dad really would have liked this." Chloe settled an old Polaroid camera down on the table in front of her and slid it across to Max. "You really liked using it back in the day and I know it's a little bit worn out, but I think he'd be happy." She glanced up at the girl opposite of her and neither hangover nor nightmare seemed to be bothering her too much in the moment. Chloe couldn't seem to really read what she was thinking though.

"Chloe, I-"

"I get it if it's not really worth using, but I just think it should find a home with someone who would appreciate it, you know?"

"Chloe, shut up," Max said. "I really love it." Chloe did shut up. Max looked like she wanted to say something else but at that point the familiar clicking of heels grew closer to the table. "I think I'll use this one from now on. The other one is cool and all but it doesn't really have the same meaning." Chloe smiled sideways, feeling fingers work between her own, where it rested on her left knee. Glancing toward Rachel she received a comforting smile. Max turned the old camera over.

"I think that makes more sense than having it sit in a box somewhere," Chloe looked up as her mother spoke, setting a tray carrying a few glasses down on the far edge of the table. "William used to say that when Chloe had you over for a night, he learned more about photography from you than he thought there was to learn." Chloe was uncomfortable about the look of pride her mother turned on her. "Great idea, Chloe." Water and coffee were passed across the table.

"Thanks for understanding," she told her mother. They shared a look between them that reminded Chloe this was the most they had really talked in some time. As her mother went back to work, a more uncomfortable silence took hold than before, even as Max turned the old camera over in her hands. "So, I've kind of had an idea for the play," Chloe told the group at large, mostly to cover the silence. "I've been sitting on it for a couple of days and I wanted to run it by everyone here." For the next minute or two she outlined the concept and in response received more in the way of support than she expected. What she didn't expect was that when Rachel told her she should bring it up with Mr. Keaton at practice, that she would find herself strong armed into it so doggedly.
Disclaimer: Anything familiar to you, I do not own. This is entirely a work of fan fiction for personal amusement and fulfillment. I make nothing from this and own none of it.

Note: As we begin to enter a period of some time skips between chapters, things will start to progress a bit "off screen." Bear with me, here as part two is picking up pace.

Chapter Seventeen: As Euripides

September 28th, 2010

“Alright, alright, everyone,” Mr. Keaton called, his voice rising slightly. The man placed his hands together as if in prayer. He’s getting frustrated. Rachel glanced back around the room. Save for the absent Nathan Prescott (he had been absent a few times, lately) the theater classroom was packed to the brim with the cast, which was just slightly smaller than that of The Tempest’s the year before. “You’re getting antsy. I don’t know why; the full moon was last week.” Rachel couldn’t help it: even through all the worries weighing her down she smiled. That was what she liked about Mr. Keaton: despite the “oh dear, I’m such a slow, calm old man” attitude he put on during school hours, once you joined his cast you got to see who Mr. Keaton was: sarcastic, quick and blunt. “So, once more, Titania and Oberon, take it from the top.” Two quick, sharp claps rang throughout the room.

Rachel glanced sideways at the Oberon to her Titania. Chloe was not looking sideways at her, staring down at her book or even stealing glances that Rachel pretended not to see toward Max (who was looking rather grimly determined at the idea that the scene included her as Puck,) but at Dana who sat a row ahead of them with her book off to one side, doodling on a page of a notebook as she waited for a scene involving her. Rachel could understand why. Chloe had been shooting jealous glances at her since before they took their first break of the night, because for the first half of the play, Dana had already, by some herculean effort, memorized her lines. Rachel had to admit she was impressed, herself. *Probably did a lot of reading ahead of time, Rachel pondered. Or maybe she’s actually a Shakespeare fan. That wouldn’t surprise me.*

“Oberon,” Mr. Keaton chided, though with a surprisingly gentle edge to his voice. *I wonder,* Rachel thought, *if Chloe actually realizes how much he actually likes her or if she’s too busy being
jealous that someone is doing better than her at memorizing lines this fucking early. Rachel could
admit that some of her exasperation was misplaced. There was more at work in the way of issues
between her and Chloe than just Chloe’s rather unreasonable insecurity about line memorization.
What it really came down to was that Rachel was beginning to panic, herself about how distant
Chloe was becoming with her. “Oberon, my dear,” Chloe looked up suddenly, looking guilty. “As I
did almost a year ago, I must ask you to save me. Please, take it from ‘Ill met.’” Chloe nodded
quickly. Rachel watched her out of the corner of her eye, aware that the bluenette was shooting
furtive glances at her right back. To Rachel’s left, Max turned inquisitive blue eyes on them.
Rachel shot her a reassuring smile.

“Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania,” Chloe greeted. Her voice did not deepen in an attempt to
sound more masculine, she was embracing the “gender bent” aspect of the character but she did
seem to speak more evenly and project more clearly from her usual speech patterns. Rachel
doubted Chloe even realized she was doing it. While her experience with the Tempest had mostly
been her being quick on her feet, Rachel could tell already that Chloe was a natural at this, not at
all as she had been in the first weeks of her first production. The artist was looking pointedly at her.
Rachel, on the other hand, did lower her voice slightly and as opposed to Chloe slowing her speech,
Rachel spoke quickly even as she tried to keep her voice crisp.

“What, jealous Oberon!” Rachel feigned surprise and a little bit of frustration. “Fairies, skip hence:
I have forsworn her bed and company.” Perhaps determined to put herself into the scene a little
more or maybe thinking that it would help her in recalling her lines, Chloe turned more directly
toward Rachel and she matched the gesture. Rachel watched with curiosity as her girlfriend’s face
smoothed out, becoming slightly more impassive looking (Chloe was anything but impassive,
normally) and when she spoke next she truly spoke as a proud, royal being, a queen.

“Tarry, rash wanton: am not I thy lady?” Chloe shifted the emphasis in the altered line, drawing it
away from “lady” to “thy.” This was a simple enough change which made it easier to make the
lines make sense when both of your the faerie leaders were queens but it wasn’t something that
everyone thought of instinctively. Chloe had not needed any kind of coaching and hadn’t even
really expressed the idea beforehand. She had just naturally adjusted the line and made it work.
Chloe’s impassive mask nearly shattered when Rachel grinned at her before responding.

“Then I must be thy lady: but I know when thou hast stolen away from fairy land and in the shape
of Corin sat all day playing on pipes of corn and versing love to amorous Philidia.” If Rachel
thought too much about that line, especially when applying it to her and Chloe, she would probably
start thinking about something that would distract her pretty firmly from play practice. Keaton’s
already had to call me out once today, better not make it twice. “Why art thou here, come from the
farthest Steppe of India? But that, forsooth, the bouncing Amazon, your buskin’d mistress and your
warrior love, to Theseus must be wedded, and you come to give their bed joy and prosperity.”
Rachel waited and then stifled a grin as Chloe half started to pull her script close to her and then,
without breaking character in the least, stopped as if realizing she could remember the line after all.

“How canst thou thus for shame, Titania, glance at my credit with Hippolyta knowing I know thy
love to Theseus?” The almost teasing tone of her first line faded, and Oberon was revealed for who he (or in this case, she,) was. Jealousy crept in that sounded almost real enough to concern Rachel if she hadn’t already come to the conclusion that Chloe was not to be underestimated in her ability to act. *I don’t think she realizes that some days she’s a better actress than I am. What a dick.*

“Didst thou not lead him through the glimmering night from Perigenia, whom he ravished? And make him with fair AEgle break his faith, with Ariadne and Antiopa?” Rachel couldn’t help but notice that Mr. Keaton had folded his hands in front of him and looked moderately amused as he stared down at the script in front of him. Multiple sets of eyes were on them, though that was natural enough when two people were reading opposite of each other.

They read opposite of each other for a short while longer yet. Max remained true to her character, Puck, and paid them exorbitant amounts of attention but did not speak until their interaction was almost through. When they had had their argument about the damage their argument was causing and even rehashing the cause of their argument, things calmed down. *Maybe the reason she has so much trouble with that line, Rachel thought as Chloe leaned over her script and read ‘Do amend it then-‘ is because she gets kind of out of her groove. I’ve got a really long winded bit right before. That idea inspired some amusement in her and if she thought about it long enough, Rachel figured she could come up with a fix for it. But first I need to figure out how to fix us,* she thought, feeling concerned by the way Chloe did not match her eyes and had not all night.

“Not for thy fairy kingdom. Fairies, away! We shall chide downright, if I longer stay.” Rachel pushed her script away, perhaps because it was the closest she could get to turning and striding proudly and angrily from the stage. *That should be fun.* At that point, Keaton clapped his hands once more and declared them free for their final break of the night. Chloe was the first of them on her feet and Rachel actually had to hurry to catch up with her as she made for the door to the classroom. Max was several feet behind them. Rachel didn’t want to think about what they might look like to the people still getting to their feet and preparing to stretch for the day.

“Hey, wait up,” Rachel called. Chloe glanced back and slowed but her face didn’t change. It was, Rachel was disturbed to see, not all that different from her ‘in character’ face as Oberon. *Not good.* Max joined them fairly quickly and the two of them fell in line behind Chloe, heading for the vending machines in the hall at a fairly leisurely pace. To say that Chloe had been getting distant from her was a little disingenuous. It was more like a mutual distance was growing and it made Rachel’s stomach twist. *I hate this. I want to fix it.* For a second she shot a look to Max and she could tell by the concerned response splayed across Max’s face that that look was a pleading one. She had not meant to let on just how upset she was. Rachel smoothed her face with an intent thought and paid attention as they reached the machines and Chloe began to dig change out of her pocket. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’ll get over it,” Chloe responded, instantly. She did not look at either of them as she retrieved a can of soda from the machine in front of her. “I just feel like I’m going to fuck it up.”

“You’re doing fine,” Rachel told her. She reached out to pat the girl on the shoulder but the memory of just how long it had been since there was any physical closeness between them made
her falter at the last second. Chloe did not even notice. “You’re getting your lines at a perfectly reasonable pace and you emote better than half the people on the cast.” When she glanced sideways at Max, the girl was shaking her head. What?

“Yeah, I guess,” Chloe said and then she turned around to face them.

“I think it’s time you bring your idea up to Mr. Keaton,” Rachel told her, hoping the subject change would help matters. “If you wait too long, it’ll be too late.”

“She’s right,” Max replied. “Now’s as good a time as any.” The photographer did not look directly at Rachel or Chloe either one as she squeezed between them to get to the snack machine.

“I feel like I’m being double teamed,” Chloe told them, though she was clearly trying to sound and act as if she was amused, judging by the lighter tone of voice and the raised eyebrow. Rachel nearly made a joke to the effect of ‘not even in your dirtiest daydreams’ but it would have been halfhearted. Chloe’s mood was exceptionally lower this evening than recently, maybe a good night’s sleep would make everything better? Fuck, I hope. Rachel wasn’t quite at the point of ‘irritated’ yet but ‘freaking the fuck out’ was not far off. They had barely touched one another (even in the simplest of ways like a bump to the shoulder or a high five) in days and in Rachel’s mind it had been even longer since the last time they had a deep conversation.

Break had technically been over for about a minute and a half by the time that Rachel, Chloe and Max sat back down. Chloe immediately went back to staring at her script despondently. No, Rachel said. The rest, fine, we need to work shit out. But she doesn’t need to just sit there upset. As Mr. Keaton looked like he was preparing to call them to order Rachel decided to make her move. Hopefully, she’ll just roll with it, she thought.

“Mr. Keaton?”

“Yes, my dear?” Keaton responded, fixing green eyes upon her with a raised eyebrow.

“Chloe’s had an idea about the play and I really think you should hear it,” she said, trying her best to sound deferential and assertive all at once. Rachel could almost swear she heard Chloe stiffening up beside her. “It’s a really good idea.” To Rachel’s left, Max nodded, encouragingly. Chloe shot her a look that expressed discomfort and a bit of frustration but when Keaton gestured imperiously for her to rise, Chloe stood. That’s my girl.
“Well,” Chloe said, then glanced around the room at the assembled cast as if realizing that people she did not or had not spoken with at any length as well as people like Eliot, who no longer spoke in her presence outside of reading his lines, were watching. “Um,” Rachel reached over and despite the distance between them pressed her hand against Chloe’s arm. Just barely, so lightly that it might have been in Rachel’s imagination, Chloe leaned into the touch. She hoped she wasn’t imagining that. “So, Rachel, Max and I were watching this Romeo and Juliet film from the 90s.”

“Ah yes,” Keaton said. “I am familiar with it.”

“Then for people who aren’t, they keep the script normal but the setting and everyone’s clothing are modern for the time. It’s kind of gritty and the Capulets and Montagues are basically warring mafia families.” A couple of voices raised to suggest that they had seen it. Rachel rolled her eyes that there were not more: the school’s English teacher (a kind, if quiet lady named Bernadette Hoida who was excitedly awaiting her first child) showed the film in most of her general English classes. “I was thinking, what if we went for something like that but expanded it a little more.” Mr. Keaton waited for her to clarify and Chloe did not immediately respond. Rachel saw her searching. Shit, now I know something’s bad. If Chloe doesn’t have the words, she’s not doing okay.

“She was thinking,” Rachel said, after she saw Chloe throw a look of some panic at her, “that maybe we could portray the setting and the characters in a sort of modern, alternative light. A lot of the storylines in A Midsummer Night’s Dream remain fairly relatable today with only a bit of turning your head and squinting.” Chloe slowly sat down, as if afraid Mr. Keaton would bark for her to stay standing. As if he’d ever say a word against his ‘rising prodigy.’ The thought would make Rachel smile if she weren’t trying to sell the idea for Chloe’s sake. A couple of voices sounded in another part of the room but Rachel tuned them out. “You know, alternative as in alternative styles and expressions of identity.” Mr. Keaton tented his fingers, humming in the back of his thought. “I mean, our fairy kingdom is already run by an on-the-outs lesbian couple,” she said, her tone thoughtful. “What if instead of big flowing dresses or worse while traipsing through a woods, maybe they’re dressed in dark colors and leather in the ‘wilderness’ of a large city? Or on the edge of a park?” Rachel turned to Chloe, who responded with an appreciative smile. “That was your idea, right?”

“Yeah,” Chloe agreed, finding her voice a bit. “What if most of our cast is just people from all different walks of life trying to survive life, while the authority figures dress serious and strict? The set could be city streets, maybe a city park like Rachel said and extravagant dining rooms, things like that.” Rachel glanced over at the artist and had to admit that now that she had taken the pitch back over she was practically glowing. This is better. This is the way Chloe should look and feel all the time. Chloe was making a point to Mr. Keaton, who was listening intently despite the muttering growing around them. She looked pleased with herself, at ease. Rachel felt pleased with herself, too, at the sight, like a small fire was burning in her belly.

“So, the only question I have,” Dana said, drawing attention away from either Rachel or Chloe, just a bit. “Is can we make that work as well in a play production as it did in film? Even if we go all alternative with it, we’ve only ever had one or two backdrops for a set.” Rachel nodded, though it
was mostly reflexive as no one was looking at her. As it should be, they were looking either at the director (Mr. Keaton) or the girl who had suggested it to begin with.

“Totally,” Chloe said. “How much more difficult would it be to paint a busy city road than a forest clearing or some high-scale place for Theseus and Hippolyta to get up to their thing instead of an old Greek palace?” Dana pulled a thoughtful face and then made a gesture somewhere between a shrug and a nod. “And making our costumes more modern would be the easy part. It’s making them fit the characters, figuring out how the characters would dress and express themselves in this time that would be difficult and that’s where most of the work goes.”

“So what about the costumes, then?” Hayden asked, “I mean you have some really cool potential for the fairy queens and their servants, but what about the rest of us?”

“Oh,” Chloe said, and she momentarily rubbed at her neck as if caught off guard or embarrassed. “Well, I mean, it comes down to your character right? I mean, you’re kind of a big deal in your area Demetrius.” Hayden grinned, and gestured for her to continue. “Just like, what do you think your character would look like if he was living in like, New York? San Francisco?—” (“You would know better than us,” Eliot muttered from the back. No one laughed.) “—Los Angeles?” Rachel watched the boy consider it for a second.

“I kind of get the feeling Demetrius would be kind of jock-y,” he said and then leaned back in his chair, arms crossing. “Like, I could see him as a senior in high school with a varsity letterman jacket and stuff.” Rachel watched, amused as Chloe snapped her fingers and shot a finger gun Hayden’s way. Quietly a person began to whisper to another here or maybe conversed more openly there.

“Dude, I think that’s a killer idea,” Steph said, drawing Rachel’s attention for the first time in a few minutes. She does like to think when she has her chance. Rachel tried not to think about the fact that Steph ‘thinking’ usually meant that the option of death was firmly present for her tabletop character. She turned toward the girl and caught her running her hand through her hair in contemplation. “So like, in my case, I feel like my character would be best off dressed like, really plainly. Solid, kind of plain colors and everything.” This sparked a few more mutterings. Rachel relaxed. Leave it to Steph to sound positive enough to make others feel positive about an idea.

When Keaton called for a vote on the idea a few minutes later, only two people did not vote for the idea. Brooke abstained, noting that she was still not sure about the idea, mostly due to not being sure what she could do for her character, even if she generally liked the concept. Eliot, on the other hand, was predictable. With his buzzcut and his newfound dislike of both Chloe and Rachel, he was somewhat reminiscent of a miniature David Madsen. He even scoffed like the man when asked what his major objection was.
“It’s just,” he said, then sighed as if stressed by the question. “It’s like we’re trying too hard to be special and edgy.” Rachel kept her voice even and casual as she replied, her meaning obscured to all but the people on either side of her.

“I don’t know, I don’t think it’s edgy.” Rachel leaned back in her chair and pressed against Chloe’s side, briefly. Chloe didn’t move away and Rachel had to admit she needed the contact. “I mean, if we were trying to be edgy we’d just go around and throw red paint on everything like we thought it was blood.” Eliot did not reply. To quote Chloe, Rachel thought as he fell silent and turned back to his script, ‘get fucked, scrub.’ She felt a little warm when she saw Chloe grinning broadly, proudly at her. Eliot grumbled from the back of the room. No one spoke up as if to change their vote. Booyah! Okay, okay. Chloe and Max have definitely rubbed off on me. Rachel did her best not to giggle or chuckle as Keaton announced that they would talk about character designs with this ‘new vision’ next time. Chloe looked satisfied.

In a way, spending the rest of practice hand in hand with a smug Chloe was satisfying. She even performed better, spending less time reading from her script. On the other hand the closeness and connection only underlined how different they had been over the last few days. Judging by the conflicted look on Max’s face, she had similar thoughts. She’s been quiet all fucking night, Rachel realized at one point, turning toward the brunette. Max looked tired but her silence was exceptionally out of character. What’s wrong? In this way, she spent most of the rest of practice watching and worrying about the photographer. If she caught Rachel staring in curiosity, Max would look away rather quickly.

Eventually, though, the two of them found themselves watching Chloe drive away. Rachel’s sense of being disturbed by their apparent distance had returned in a big way. It was enough, she told herself, that she was tempted to talk to Max about it. There was just one little problem. Despite the fact that Max had been back in town less than a full month, the past two weeks had forced the two of them significantly closer together than Rachel ever expected to get to Max. It was hard to put into words why this had happened, much less so quickly, but Rachel was not daft. It was obvious that Max harbored some feelings for Chloe and obvious to Rachel that Chloe was beginning to develop some for her. It didn’t drive Rachel to jealousy. Instead, she was more confused than anything. If she was honest with herself, she was not thinking about the photographer as one typically thought of a friend, either. I mean, we spend hours together every day so I guess it makes a kind of sense that it came on so fast.

Beside her, Max was quiet as they started back toward the dorms, as if in deep thought. I just don’t know precisely what words to put to it. She just has these things about her, about the way she acts, the things she says, the way she’s so open about caring about us both. I don’t think normal friendship should make your heart rate pick up and I’m sure it doesn’t make you consider how she would react if you tried to kiss her. Rachel sighed and it was apparently loud enough to draw a worried glance. Christ, and I can’t tell if I’m reading in too much to everything she says or does, or if she’s into me too. All of it had come on too quickly and that, more than anything, was what was stressing things between her and Chloe. No one had figured out how to talk about it yet and that included Rachel.
Either way, I can’t talk to Max about it. ‘Hey, Max, do you have a crush on my girlfriend? What about me? I think she’s got one on you and I’m kind of worried she’s going to leave me. Oh, and I kind of want to back you against the wall and see if I can make you turn six shades of red without doing or saying anything.’ She felt a bit warm at the thought and decided to bury it next to her frustration and concern. As every other time she had considered the drama threatening to grow between them, this was ‘not the moment’ to confront it. It definitely wasn’t the moment to worry about that last part.

“I think it’s a night for some Netflix binging,” Max said. Rachel raised an eyebrow at her. She had been rather tired all day but if she really thought she was down for it, who was Rachel to argue? It took Max a second to dig her key out of her pocket, butRachel wasn’t exactly in a rush. Whether it was ideas relating to Chloe’s reimagining of the play or her worries about the-- is it a triangle or something else?-- predicament between her, Chloe and Max, she was wide awake and rather deep in thought.

Max’s room was interesting: photos covered most of the wall above Max’s bed and there were a couple of posters but for the most part the walls were left clear and their standard color. Her desk was fairly neat with books and a notebook stacked on one side, a laptop and a USB mouse on the other, the mini-fridge sat beside the computer desk and her closet door stood open, revealing shirts and sweatshirts of mostly neutral or earthy colors. Among these was her favored grey hoodie. Rachel knew that it was important to her because, despite it baring a spot of blood that the three of them knew came from a horrible moment in their past, she wore it once or twice a week at the least. Max reached over as the door shut behind them and shifted the pillow on her bed. Rachel settled her bag beside the door and let Max retrieve her laptop.

“Over there?” Max asked, gesturing to the bed. This was, perhaps in retrospect, not unusual. It was fairly easy to set their backs against the wall and stretch out their legs on the bed, resting the laptop on them. They had done it several times. Tonight, perhaps especially after confronting the ideas dancing around in her head about the photographer, Rachel hesitated at first. Max did read the hesitation but, Rachel was amused to see, seemed not to know precisely what it was about. Oh bullshit, she wanted to say. You know exactly what’s on my mind. Sometimes, Rachel was fairly sure Max did.

Eventually, though, she was sitting on the outside of the bed, a good inch or so between her and Max. They weren’t cozied up or anything, there was nothing intimate about it. It was pragmatism, since the laptop was balanced across her right knee and Max’s left. On the screen, some English actors around their age were partying in a scene from a comedy/drama called Skins. Among the characters pictured was a bottle blonde who reminded Rachel more than a little of Chloe. She kind of wanted to introduce the girl to the show. They might have knocked out two episodes before a very, very faint snore reached Rachel’s ears.

Rachel stole a look at the girl beside her. Max was still sitting almost straight up but her eyes were shut. Her chest rose and fell slowly, evenly. She was damn sure unconscious. In this state, she did not look worried about anything. She did not look upset or even tired. She looked peaceful. A small
smile stole upon Max’s face in sleep. *What I wouldn’t give to be the one able to see peoples’ dreams.* She wanted to laugh at how little she had thought of Chloe’s apparent ability to see into others’ minds at night. *As if that’s the normal thing and some teenagers having awkward feelings for each other is weird.* When she realized that her eyes were lingering too long on Max, she slowly reached out and shifted the laptop from lying on both of their knees to resting on her own.

Max didn’t stir until Rachel shut the laptop and got up from the bed. Then the girl rolled sideways, eyes opening just slightly. Small slits of blue became visible and Max might have groaned at being woken up or attempted to mumble a question. Rachel wasn’t sure which, but she motioned for Max to lay down, telling her she had fallen asleep. For a moment she expected an argument but then the brunette closed her eyes, hair wild around her face as she sighed and adjusted her position on the bed. When she was laying down properly, Rachel saw herself out. The mental image of Max, at rest and at peace, with that small smile stuck around as Rachel made her way to her own room.

*Houston, we definitely have a problem.*

----

Her hand was on the knob to the front door of her house when Chloe heard her mother approaching. *Fuck*, she thought. *Just, fuck my luck.* Knowing that there really was no pretending not to hear her, Chloe turned around. Joyce stood in front of her with her arms folded across her chest, dressed for work but with a look on her face as if she was already there. *At least Officer Asshat is at the school already,* she thought sighing as she waited for her mother to speak. For a moment, they stood in silence and Chloe counted the seconds until she would be forced to open the conversation up, instead.

“Chloe, David says he saw your truck in Edgeton last week, while he was picking up some parts for his car.” *I’ll fucking bet,* Chloe thought, bitterly. She wasn’t sure if it was a result of thinking about the date or the idea that David was openly following her around that put her off. She thought she really ought to be sure. Her mother’s face hardened slightly. She wanted a response. Chloe wanted to do little more than not think until she’d had breakfast and at least seen and talked to Rachel and Max. “Well? I’m waiting. What were you doing taking that truck out of town without telling me?”

“I wanted to take Rachel to dinner somewhere other than the diner or the only McDonalds in Arcadia Bay,” she replied, frustrated but trying to stay calm. “The only other places in town are seafood, which she can’t stand because she used to have too much of it, or too expensive to go to if your name isn’t ‘Prescott.’” Chloe stepped away from the door for a moment, to show she was paying some attention to her mother. The woman’s face changed, slowly growing less suspicious and stand-offish. It turned softer, if a little more distant.

“Were you- were you two on a date?”
“Yes,” Chloe told her, lifting her chin, slightly. She was long beyond wanting to talk about this but it didn’t matter. She was not going to get embarrassed or too deep in thought about this. Not around someone who she wasn’t entirely convinced she trusted. Clearly hearing something she had not expected, Chloe watched her mother uncross her arms and calm down significantly. She did not respond. “I’m going to breakfast,” Chloe told her once, patting her pocket once to make sure she had her keys and phone.

“Alright,” was all the response her mother gave. Chloe did not mind. She was out of the door and in the truck far sooner than she would have expected, all things considered. When she was finally behind the wheel of her truck, Chloe leaned her head against the steering wheel and exhaled a breath she did not know she had been holding. The truck started faithfully and though it gave an unhealthy feeling lurch when she shifted it into reverse, she got the feeling that it would get her where she needed to go, for at least one more day.

She was not aggravated because the date went poorly or anything. It had gone poorly, but that wasn’t the source of the frustration. Chloe had thought that a little time would smooth things over in regards to this apparent problem cropping up between her, Rachel and Max. She was sure that at some point feelings would stabilize and everyone would go back to normal. What did I think ‘normal’ was, even? Instead, nearing a month after Max’s birthday party, things had gone in much the opposite direction. Not a damn one of the three of them--Chloe included--had had the courage to bring up the giant elephant in the room. Chloe still caught Rachel and Max just missing each other with looks that spoke of complicated feelings. Those looks had gone to a stage beyond and no longer left her any doubt as to the question of whether, between the three of them there was some strange Gordian Knot of mutual feelings. She had also caught herself behaving the same way toward either of them and it made her feel shitty not to speak up about it.

Chloe got to the school, expecting to walk in some solitude to the main building and join the girls in the cafeteria. Instead as she pulled the Frankentruck into a parking spot, Rachel was waiting beside the stairs up from the lot. Even from a distance it was easy to see that she perked up as soon as she spotted Chloe but it was not a look of eagerness or excitement. Something was wrong. She took a moment to look the girl over from behind the wheel. Rachel had taken to not bothering with makeup anymore, which was a bit of a turn around as Chloe had begun to experiment with it on occasion, relying on her for advice. She was also still firmly committed to just wearing what she wanted instead of dressing like one would expect a “respectful girl” from an affluent family to dress. Chloe didn’t often comment on it, but Rachel pulled off the whole ‘confident badass’ look pretty well. Where she stood waiting impatiently for Chloe, she did not look confident at all.

Does this mean she’s ready to talk about, all this shit? Her heart seemed to be beating in the bottom of her throat instead of her chest. It became difficult to swallow and suddenly she wasn’t sure she wanted to open the door and step out. Maybe Rachel read this on her face because she went from waiting to walking briskly toward the truck. Oh fuck, here it comes. Everytime she imagined the conversation that was coming, it always ended in hypothetical heartbreak. Save being a drama queen for Shakespeare, Chloe. She got out of the truck and, shifting her backpack on her shoulder, met Rachel halfway. Chloe had time to remark to herself that at least it was good while it
“Something’s wrong with Max,” Chloe blinked. Wind out of her sails, she took a moment to take stock of how she felt. *Should I be angry that when I think she’s about to dump me, instead she’s bringing Max up?* The truth was that she wasn’t. For a moment Chloe was even relieved, but then it passed. Rachel’s words and her general demeanor caught up with her and Chloe frowned. *She’s not quite in panic mode, but…* but Rachel’s face was lined with her concern and she stood leaning slightly toward the stairs as if ready to turn and take off to it at any time. “Chloe, did you hear me?”

“Yes,” she said, shaking her head once. “Lead the way.” As she bade, Rachel turned and started toward the stairs and to the rest of the campus. Chloe followed a step behind for a moment and then matched pace.

“So, like, after I got your message earlier, I realized Max hadn’t answered mine which is kind of weird,” Rachel said. “She’s started getting up earlier than *me* lately. I stopped by after I got my shower done and knocked and she basically just told me to go away.”

“What did she say, actually?” Chloe asked, wrinkling her brow. Though she wasn’t sure how she felt about it, she was sure that Rachel and Max were awfully fucking close and this didn’t strike her as the kind of way Max would treat either Rachel or Chloe. “Like, was she upset? Was she mad about something?”

“I dunno, she just said to ‘go on without me.’ When I asked what was wrong, she said to just let her ‘sleep it off.’” Chloe shook her head again. This time it was to refute the idea. “My thoughts exactly,” Rachel replied, shooting her a look. In those bright hazel eyes, Chloe saw relief so thick it was almost palpable. When Rachel looked at her like that, like she trusted her more than other people, it was enough to put butterflies in her stomach in any other situation. This was not any other situation.

With Rachel’s key they were back in the girls’ dorms, walking down the thinly carpeted hall in no time at all. For not the first time, Chloe considered what it would be like if her mother was able to afford letting her stay there. It made absolutely 0 financial sense, but she had indulged in the fantasy quite often over the last couple of weeks as the realization hit her that, on the average, Max and Rachel spent a *lot more* time together than she did with either of them. *What would it be like to like, leave my room, go next door and hang out with them both like it were nothing instead of a fifteen minute drive every time?*

Shortly, they reached room 222 and Rachel motioned for Chloe to knock. She did. There was a brief pause during which Chloe shot a concerned look at Rachel and then, from just on the other side of the door, Max spoke. In all the years they’d known each other, Chloe had heard Max in
tears often enough that the sound of Max trying to talk as if she were not desperately upset was kind of ingrained in her mind. There was a childhood full of scraped knees, arguments and other things that so often could move kids to tears between Chloe and Max. It was kind of endearing to be reminded of that even if the manner she was was unfortunate.

“Rachel, I’m sorry. I just don’t think I can go to class and see anyone today, okay?” Chloe stepped right up to the door and leaned her shoulder against it. “I know I’m probably freaking you out a little and I don’t mean to. I just don’t want to talk about it.”

“It’s Chloe,” she told Max, trying not to speak too loudly in case there was anyone else on the floor. The one thing she did know was that Max was kind of a private person when it came to her emotional state. “Will you talk about it to me?” She did her best to sound soothing instead of scared. There was a longer delay this time than last. “Max?”

“Not even you,” she said. “I’m sorry,” she added, sounding as if she was getting worse.

“Look,” Chloe cajoled, feeling a little upset at not being able to get through the door and to Max. “I get it, you want to be left alone. If you want me to go away, I’m going to need you to promise me you won’t do anything stupid.”

“I won’t,” Max told her, laughing bitterly through tears that had never sounded clearer in her voice. “I promise.”

“Alright,” Chloe said. “I’ll be checking my phone pretty often, Rachel will too. If you need something, tell one of us, okay?” For half a second, there was silence. This time she turned away from the door to Rachel, who had her arms crossed and seemed as frustrated by the door keeping them at bay as she did.

“Okay,” Max said. Chloe saw her own relief echoed on Rachel’s face. That look was replaced by a blank, stony one a moment later, when Max continued. “I love you, you know? Thank you for caring.” Son of a bitch. She wasn’t entirely sure what she thought of the comment (she rather felt like her emotions were being pulled in four or five directions at once) but she knew from Rachel’s face that the thespian was not entirely comfortable with Max’s choice of words.

“I’m always gonna care,” Chloe said, honestly. Rachel’s eyes slid slowly away from her and toward the wall opposite of Max’s door. She did not look upset, just off kilter. As Chloe stepped away from room 222 and toward the staircase, she fought the urge to pull Rachel aside and ask what she was worried about or tell her that surely Max meant it platonically. There were two problems with that, though. The first was that the idea of Rachel getting upset and exploding on her
was fucking terrifying and the second was that she was pretty sure the last part was a lie.

“Ready for class?” Rachel asked her as they hit the bottom stair. Chloe couldn’t even feel irritated that Rachel wouldn’t just talk about it because it wasn’t as if she was rushing to tell Rachel about the thoughts in her own head in relation to Max, either. Things have actually gotten really twisted over the last couple of weeks. The doors to the school were just feet ahead and Chloe didn’t even remember the walk from the dorms, though at some point Juliet had joined them and Rachel was engaging her in some sort of conversation about the play. I’m not actually jealous of them and Rachel doesn’t act jealous about Max acting like she does toward me or- Chloe swallowed. Or me like I do toward her. Chloe let herself have the thought that had been dancing around her head since Rachel first started hanging out with her, since things got even vaguely romantic.

I have trouble feeling like I’m worthy of her sometimes. She’s like a force of nature. She’s like that wildfire. Gorgeous, dangerous, confident and most of the time she even knows it. Some people are objectively special. That’s not me. That’s her. Chloe looked sideways at Rachel, watching her laugh at something that Chloe had not heard and didn’t give a damn about. That’s her and that’s Max. Chloe glanced down at the ground when she felt her eyes watering. She had asked herself if Max acting like this toward them both was wrong of her, no small number of times in the last two weeks, especially. Chloe continued to come to the conclusion that if Max was wrong, then so was she and so was Rachel. Max wouldn’t try to hurt me. She wouldn’t try to hurt either of us. And yeah, so sometimes I don’t think I deserve Rachel but I’m not about to start distrusting either of them. The day I do that, I really don’t deserve her. God damn it, why can’t we just talk about this?

Rachel lead her by the hand into Mr. Keaton’s classroom. Maybe it’d be better that way. Juliet walked past them toward her usual seat in the front. Or maybe it’d be worse. Maybe she would figure out that she doesn’t really fucking need me. Chloe didn’t think she could risk that, selfish or not. So she kept her mouth shut and tried to focus in on the world around her instead of on thoughts that existed only in her own head. A hand pressed against the side of her neck and Chloe jumped, blinking. Rachel’s face came into sharp focus and the look on it was hurt. The girl pulled back her hand quickly, as if apologetically.

“Sorry,” Chloe told her. “Guess I was spacing waaaaay out there.” The light tone in her voice sounded forced to her own ears. Steph was sitting just in front of Rachel, turned back to look at her in some concern. Dimly, Chloe thought that she needed to remember to get Steph her updated character sheet before Friday.

“It’s okay,” Rachel said, though the hurt at Chloe jumping did not entirely disappear. Chloe wondered if that was really all it was. Or maybe she’s thinking about shit, too. “You just looked really upset for a second.” Chloe ran her hand through her hair, frustrated. “Hey,” Rachel said, leaning across the aisle. Chloe raised an eyebrow on her. “Wasn’t I supposed to help you with your roots on Sunday?” Chloe nodded. “I’m sorry I forgot.”
“I forgot too,” Chloe replied, honestly. She was happy to change the subject. “Next weekend, for sure.”

“So what were you thinking about just now?” Rachel asked. In doing so, she opened a door. A door that Chloe was terrified to step through even in private, much less with Steph listening in in the middle of the drama lab. The truth was she didn’t want to start a conversation anywhere that might result in Rachel splitting with her. Didn’t I just get done deciding I should be ashamed if I didn’t trust her? The clock above the classroom door ticked loudly, incessantly. Two pairs of eyes were waiting on her to answer.

“I’m just worried about Max,” she answered. It was a half-truth: Max’s strange mood was a subject of worry but it was only part of what weighed her down. Chloe did her best to pay attention to Mr. Keaton when he began teaching. There was something to be said for offering respect to someone who had earned it and in her eyes he was one of those teachers who did that by combining actual knowledge of their subject with being a decent human being. Still, she could not bring herself to focus on anything he said throughout the entire lesson. It was not restricted to him, either.

Most of Ms. Grant’s biology lesson a little later went over her head, too. Not even Steph’s occasional attempts to jar her back to the world did the trick. It got to the point that Chloe was beginning to give up on school all together for the day by the time her designated lunch period came around. Their table was going to have one less than usual and Chloe wasn’t about to try to talk Steph and Mikey into leaving their table with a couple of the other members of the cast of the play.

Rachel met her at the door, turning her phone over in her hands. When the blonde looked up at her, Chloe raised a hand to wave. Rachel relaxed visibly and a smile that bordered on a smirk, the old Rachel Amber standard, settled into position. It was tentative at best, but she felt her lips upturn, too. It was kind of hard not to be infected by a confident Rachel. Chloe was still surprised, slightly, when the girl greeted her by wrapping her up in a hug the minute they were in range.

“Hubba hubba,” Steph jeered, playfully as she passed them. Chloe didn’t have time to feel guilty about forgetting she was walking with the gamemaster. Rachel stood a bit straighter to easier rest her head on Chloe’s shoulder. This meant the warmth of her cheek was close to Chloe’s own and she closed her eyes to simply enjoy the closeness. When Rachel separated from her, Chloe felt a little more present in the moment.

“Anything from Max?” she asked, looking pointedly at the phone.

“No,” Rachel said, “but I got a text from my mom. She says Sera sent a letter for me. She’s going to bring it by tomorrow night.” The girl’s smile faded slightly, but Chloe grinned, widely. Rachel being a little nervous made sense, but she reached out and lightly nudged pushed against her arm.
Rachel wavered just slightly. “What was that for?”

“To remind you not to overthink it. This is what you wanted. Sera’s reaching out to you. Unless the letter turns out to be really shitty, isn’t this kind of one of those rare things that are just objectively awesome?” It was cool to see the transformation in Rachel as they walked into the cafeteria. The thespian returned to smiling but it was so much more than that: when confident, Rachel walked like a fucking queen and *people took notice*. This seemed to include Chloe’s soon to be stepfather, who was posted up just inside the cafeteria glaring daggers around the room.

“Chloe,” she turned to acknowledge him against her better judgment and Rachel slowed so that she did not pull free from the arm around her shoulder. Chloe raised an eyebrow at the man, unsure if he was looking for trouble or not. He had, after all, taken to not picking fights on campus. It took her just a moment of looking into the veteran’s eyes to know that this was going to be an exception to the rule. She released Rachel and David gestured for her to join him outside. For a moment, instead of looking at Chloe or at their table, when Chloe shot a glance at the thespian she was glaring daggers at David.

“You have a problem missy?” Given the rather upsetting nature of the morning Rachel’s excitement for a letter from Sera had actually been a nice reprieve and even David wanting to talk to her hadn’t chased it away. The minute he spoke to Rachel that way, though, it retreated to a nice, shadowy place in the corner of her mind for later. Rachel shook her head and headed toward the table, leaving Chloe only after the tips of her fingers passed lightly over her elbow, as if to say that she’d be there in spirit.

“Maybe she doesn’t, but I do,” Chloe said. “You can treat me like shit all you want at home and throw your authority around like a big man here against me any time.” David shook his head at her. “What I’m not going to stand for is you disrespecting my friends. The shit you said about me and Max the other day? Not okay. And her name is Rachel, not ‘missy.’” For a moment Hayden raised his head at a table that Chloe could see just past David’s left shoulder. The man shifted forward in his uniform, drawing himself up taller and larger to be more intimidating. *Like he’s not already twice my size.* Hayden shook his head behind David’s back, as if trying to calm her down. Chloe actually appreciated him looking out for her but here was David being a massive prick, a volunteer for every bit of frustration she’d been storing up over the last month. While she was still watching Hayden, David’s hand closed around her wrist and Chloe cursed, loudly as he pulled her bodily from the cafeteria. *Mother fucker,* she thought, jerking her hand back when he finally released her.

“Don’t you ever fucking touch me again,” she said, as loudly as possible.

“You will watch your language.”

“You may get away with bullshit at home but you’re on campus right now, dipshit, and
manhandling teenage girls doesn’t look good for you.” Chloe didn’t bother to keep her voice down and that was fine. She knew at least one teacher was in the cafeteria and if one of them saw him do that, she was hoping they would have the decency to say something. “You’re the one talking about respect but I’ve never seen you show an ounce to anyone.”

“Respect is earned,” he shot back. “Not given to punk brats who mouth off to their superiors. Now, I was saying-”

“Fuck you,” she answered. “You’re not my superior officer. You’re not my superior anything. You’re a weak pissant who gets off on trying to scare teenagers. You’re actually fucking pathetic.” She stopped herself short of continuing but the next line on her tongue was sure to escalate things.

“Why were you in Edgeton last week?”

“My mother asked me that already and I answered her. I don’t owe you an answer. I think you either get to assault me or ask me a question. You’ve filled your quota of being a creepy bastard for the day.” The moment in which David passed from ‘You will respect mah authoriteh’ to ‘I’m a big scary man and you’re a weak little girl, be scared of me’ was marked by him going red in the face, jaw muscles working. His fists clenched as if he ached to strike her and only the act of crossing his arms would prevent it. At this point, as much as her heart was pounding, as much as she was scared sometimes at home that he would hit her, she almost wanted him to here, now. With witnesses, hopefully not even her mother could deny that David was bad news.

“I think you do need to answer me, and fast. See, I’ve seen your little photobug friend out on the beach where that Bowers punk likes to peddle his shit. Now you’re going out of town without warning? I think maybe you were meeting someone there and bringing drugs into the school. The number of days you come home smelling like marijuana…” as he approached making his point, David seemed to swell slightly, trying to intimidate her into telling him what he wanted to hear. “What were you doing in Edgeton?”

“I was on a date, alright?” she asked, thrusting her face toward him. If it was true that bullies feared someone willing to stand up for themselves, she hoped a little aggression in response would back him down. She was crossing the line from “getting this over with” to anger. Chloe ‘s body felt cool and her stomach hollow.

“A date?” he asked, scoffing.

“Yeah, a date,” she replied, now speaking as loudly as she so pleased. “What, do you want the ‘Dear Penthouse’ you sick fuck?” Her heartbeat was unnaturally fast. She was beginning to breathe
a little too quickly, too. David Madsen had finally crossed a line she had dared to hope he never would and laid a hand on her. The line she stopped herself from crossing a moment ago, she crossed in response. “No wonder the army couldn’t risk keeping you around, didn’t want you to fondle the recruits.” She turned away from David with the satisfaction of the impotent rage in his eyes burning deep in her stomach. His hand closed once more around her wrist, this time her left. Scared and angry, she turned ready to strike the man when, after a moment, her eyes landed on the teacher on duty in the cafeteria, come to investigate. Ms. Grant was displeased. Chloe could not remember seeing the jovial woman this angry since Nathan Prescott was publicly excused by Principal Wells for cheating on the year’s first test.

“Mr. Madsen,” Ms. Grant called, loudly. “Release that girl, right now.” When Chloe turned, she saw that his free hand was clenching into a fist almost as tightly as his other was around her wrist. What was disturbing was that it was raised. Holy shit, he was actually going to do it.

“This is a private matter,” David spat.

“This is not a private matter, Mr. Madsen. This is very public and public or not, there is no excuse that you can give me for what you were about to do. If you value your position at Blackwell Academy and want any chance at keeping it, you will release Ms. Price immediately.” Chloe would have wanted to cheer for her at any point, but she was a bit stunned that she might have been only a moment or two from a right hook to the face. If Ms. Grant hadn’t stepped out of the cafeteria, no one would have seen it. Holy shit. Her aching wrist was freed and Chloe backed away. David, glaring once at her, then at Ms. Grant, backed away, muttering in what amounted to near gibberish about Ms. Grant misunderstanding what she had seen. “I’m sure I must have,” she said. The two stared at each other past Chloe and eventually David turned down the hall and left.

Instead of bringing her back into the cafeteria within eyeshot and earshot of the others, the woman smirked once at his retreating form and then motioned for Chloe to step toward where she stood against one wall. Feeling cool still, Chloe did as she bade. Ms. Grant took Chloe’s left hand and turned it over, examining the marks already starting to form. She flexed Chloe’s hand and when Chloe didn’t wince apparently decided nothing was too badly hurt. The fact was Chloe didn’t know if she’d know how to react if it were broken in the moment.

“Ms. Price, I think we should go down to see Principal Wells immediately,” the science teacher said, fixing sharp dark eyes on her. Then, apparently deciding that Chloe was in no state to make a decision, started to tug her lightly toward the hall. Chloe shook her head and the woman tugged once more as if she thought Chloe hadn’t really understood what she wanted. “Ms. Pri- Chloe?”

“No,” she said. “You should have let him hit me.” Ms. Grant shook her head, as if to deny that was an option. “Look, the best case scenario now is that he gets fired and somehow I doubt that.” Chloe swallowed around a lump rising in her throat for the second time that day. “Do you have any idea what my house gets like if that happens? Not only will he be around all day every day that way,
he’s going to be angry. David doesn’t do angry. He either does passive aggressive sexist or he does enraged.” For just a moment, the woman faltered and Chloe drove her point home with some honesty. “I always worried he was capable of it when he got mad but he’s never laid his hands on me before and I won’t risk making him mad enough to do it again, I promise.” Even as she spoke the words, they registered as a new truth in her mind.

“Chloe, that was not your fault, he was way out of line, regardless of your inappropriate language. “

“It wasn’t my fault,” she agreed, “but it is the way it goes. If you tell anyone it will make things worse. You’re one of the smartest teachers here.” She turned honest pleading eyes on the woman. “Please. You know that the official line that the police will help kids and teenagers with shitty people in their life is bullshit on a good day. You also know that David’s got buddies in the police department and that he’s got his war vet status he’ll never let anyone forget about and that I’m a serious problem child.” Ms. Grant sighed. Her stance was weakening. “Don’t tell anyone. Let them think I was just being a loud mouth punk and David decided to walk off instead of deal with me. Please.” For a moment, Chloe focused her eyes on the woman’s face. It was easy watching several different ideas play across it. Then finally Ms. Grant released her soft grip on Chloe and backed up.

“Go get lunch and find Ms. Amber,” Ms. Grant said. “Chloe, if he does strike you, you can’t keep it to yourself.”

“I won’t, but I can’t let you or someone who might not respect my privacy find out, either,” Chloe told her, honestly. “You know, it’s crazy, Max and Rachel both say they think there’s more to David than… than this.”

“I think they’re right,” Ms. Grant answered, bluntly. “But that changes nothing about what happened here today. That makes nothing he said or did right and it does not change that you should be able to protect yourself.”

“I will,” Chloe told her before hurrying back into the cafeteria. Chloe got a feeling that Ms. Grant was going to see to it she didn’t end up in trouble for this one, when she stalked off down the hall instead of returning to watch the students. More eyes than she expected were glued to her from the moment she entered. Rachel joined her when she came up to the counter for a lunch. However much time I have left.

In a final act of unkindness on the part of the universe, Chloe dreamt that night, from the back of her pickup truck.
Chapter Nineteen: Leto

October 11th, 2010- 8:47 PM

Rachel threw aside the text assigned for the next American History lesson’s reading. *Okay, I did not need that tonight.* Her phone sat on the desk in front of her. Almost twelve hours later, Max had still not answered any messages and Chloe had clammed up hard after her run in with David. Rachel had been persistent enough to get the whole story from her, the one that the school would never get if Chloe got her way, but Chloe’s silence the rest of the day and quick departure from campus disturbed her. She just wanted *one* of them to answer her messages. It was getting *scary* to know they were both upset enough to seclude themselves. Joyce’s text asking if Rachel knew where Chloe was tonight lay unanswered. Rachel liked Joyce but she was kind of mad at the woman and there was no benefit to Chloe if she spoke her mind to her.

*And on top of that,* she thought, *we have to read this shit.* Rachel knew that the reason they had to
read it was because it was absolutely required by curriculum and Mrs. Claire had gone out of her way to make it clear that she did not tolerate the language in the book, nor agree with it but it still bothered her. If there was ever any evidence to prove that without a doubt Blackwell was messed up as Chloe often asserted, it was that the book was allowed in the curriculum, much less required. ‘African Migration to the Americas?’ she thought, feeling gross having just read the line. *Revisionist history strikes again.* Rachel considered giving up for the night, already dressed in her pajama top and shorts. She was *definitely* not doing anymore studying between worrying about her girls and the disgusting subject matter.

Three sharp, quick knocks sounded from the door. She recognized the pattern and the insistence of the knocking and got up quickly. For a moment, her stomach turned as she remembered the after effects of Chloe’s conversation with Max through the door that morning. *She wasn’t okay all day. Not that most of that probably doesn’t fall on me… or David. Please, be okay,* she thought as she opened the door to her room and, as expected, found Max standing in the hall, looking as if she had just taken a shower. Rachel turned her head when Max didn’t immediately speak or even look at her. She tried to read the photographer’s face but if there was anything written there Rachel wasn’t picking it up. *I don’t think everything’s okay.* Though, the whole sequestering one’s self in their bedroom might be a good marker of everything not being alright.

Her hair was still a bit damp and a total mess, her eyes were swollen. Most notably, a dried trail of blood went from her nose and down her chin, as if she hadn’t even felt a nosebleed. She, too, was dressed for bed and hovered outside of the door with a pillow under one arm and a blanket pressed against that. Rachel knew what Max was going to ask before she asked it. It didn’t make her hesitate any more but Rachel would have been a liar if she said she didn’t stop for a moment and think about how Chloe might take her saying yes in response.

“I promise to be quiet,” Max said, finally raising her eyes. “I just, really want to spend some time with you.” Rachel sighed. It was out of compassion and concern but she saw that Max misunderstood the sound as soon as it came out of her. The girl started to turn away and Rachel reached out to take her by the shoulder immediately. “I just, I really don’t think I should be alone tonight?” Rachel pulled her in lightly.

“You don’t have to sit there and be quiet,” Rachel told her, when Max finally started to enter. Rachel shut the door behind the girl, hoping no one who might ask questions had seen her. ”I just didn’t expect to hear from you,” she said. “I didn’t expect to hear from either of you tonight.” Without bothering to clarify she took one more look at the blood on Max’s face and reached to the box of tissues on the table beside her bed. Taking two or three in her hand she started to guide Max to sit down on the edge of the bed, when the girl spoke again.

“I need to be with someone I can stand to see today,” she said, as if offering to explain why she would *bother* Rachel. Rachel wanted to shush her up, but part of her thought that maybe it was about something other than *bothering* someone and if Max had something she needed to say, well that just meant Rachel could help *one* of the people she cared about today. “I need to be with someone that won’t make me feel like a monster just by looking at them.” Max started to move
when Rachel insistently nudged her toward the bed again. When Max was sitting, Rachel knelt in front of her briefly.

“Why would you feel like a monster, Max?” she asked, shaking her head and grinning up at her. “You’re 500 pounds of badass in a hundred pound body.” This did not earn so much as a smile. Max might have been looking in her direction but she almost seemed to be looking through her.

“I can’t tell you,” Max sibilated. It was almost quiet enough that Rachel missed it, but the girl added, “If I did I’d never be able to look you in the face again.”

“Why would that be the case?” Rachel asked. “Listen, there’s nothing you can do that’s going to make Chloe or I turn our backs on you, you get that? Nothing that is going on is going to fuck up that we give a shit about you.” This didn’t feel or sound like it was about the whole thing going on between the three of them. Max wasn’t doing anything wrong in that situation.

“Most of the time, I think an entirely different person did it,” Max said. “It and so much else. But this was the worst. This here.” Not making any sense, Rachel thought to herself. The monotone was beginning to waver. “But that can’t be right because sometimes I remember it. And even when I don’t remember it, I know about it. It’s like a- a- like how you know to hold your breath in the water or to fear the dark.”

“What is?” Rachel asked her, her voice firm. Max shook her head. “What do you remember?” This time Max squeezed her blue eyes shut. A thin trail of liquid passed from the corner of one down her cheek and Rachel gave up trying to get information from her. Slowly and carefully she lifted Max’s head, causing the girl to open watering eyes in confusion. Rachel did her best to wipe away the dried blood across her upper lip and chin without pressing hard enough to tear the tissues in her hand. She’ll need water to wash the rest off, but that’s most of it. Max was watching her with eyes alive with too many things for Rachel to pick out at once.

“I’m not here to cause anymore trouble for you or Chloe,” Max said when Rachel had discarded the tissue and settled down on the bed beside her. Despite this apparent self-awareness, Max leaned her head against Rachel’s shoulder. “I know,” Max told her. “I know it’s my fault. If I could stop it I would. I just need to be near someone who I haven’t really hurt yet. Someone who doesn’t have a reason they should hate me.” Rachel shook her head and tried to come up with a fitting response but Max pressed to her side was a bit on the distracting side. As far as things between Chloe and Rachel there was precedent for them being perfectly secure with each other being in physical touch with people who were just in need of a damned hug.

This was, however, a complex situation as Max pointed out herself. Even so, Rachel put an arm around the girl and pulled her into a tight one-armed hug. Max didn’t move. She simply closed her eyes and slowly but surely her face grew a little more peaceful, just as it did when she was
preparing to drift off to sleep. Well, that’s fine, she thought, looking at Max’s pillow and blanket on the bed beside her. We can set her up a place to sleep. Or maybe tonight she can take the bed, honestly.

“You want to lay down?” she asked Max.

“I’m tired but not that kind of tired,” Max replied quietly. Then she laughed a little. “Okay, I’m that kind of tired, but I also just feel…” Rachel waited patiently. “I feel like a little bit of butter stretched over too much bread.”

“Girl, did you just go all Bilbo Baggins on me?” Rachel asked her, putting enough distance between them that Max could see the incredulous look on her face. Max laughed again, this time more fully.

“Yeah,” Max told her, “I guess I did.”

“Everyone I know is such a fucking nerd,” Rachel teased her, ruffling her already messy hair slightly. Max seemed to perk up a little at this. “Wanna watch something before we crash?”

“No,” Max told her. “But you can. I’m feeling a little better just sitting right here. When you wanna lay down, I’ll move to the floor and lay down, too.” Rachel stood up.

“Well, I will put something on, anyway. Just something in the background.” When Max nodded, Rachel paused and looked at her phone on her computer desk. “Max, something bad happened today.” She turned back to see Max’s face contorted in some kind of fear that Rachel didn’t understand. “No, don’t worry, everyone’s okay,” she said, taking a guess. “It’s just that David almost hit Chloe today and she didn’t go home after school and she’s not answering her phone.” The girl’s face did change slightly. It was as if fear was a color instead of an emotion and this was a different shade of scared Max was wearing. I guess that is kind of how that works, Rachel thought. The cartoon cat on Max’s top stood out oddly, smiling at Rachel during a time when it was as if no one was going to really smile again.

“Asshole,” Max finally said, lip curling.

“That about sums him up.”
The next morning they made no effort to hide the fact that Max had stayed in her room. Rachel wasn’t in the mood for any bullshitting and she hadn’t been about to set an alarm and wake either of them up early just to avoid people talking. If any Blackwell staff had anything to say about Max sleeping on her floor, she would just tell them she was looking out for a distraught friend. It had the benefit of being truth. It took the both of them a little more time than usual to get downstairs for breakfast: Max had to retrieve her clothes from her room and drop off her pillow and blanket before she could shower. Rachel spent most of her early morning calling Chloe until she picked up and promised she would be at school and that she was alright.

Rachel spent most of the day trying to keep Max’s and Chloe’s moods up. For that matter, she spent a lot of it doing the same for herself, reminding herself that that evening she was supposed to meet her mother after practice and get the much anticipated letter from Sera. That thought as well as what time she got to spend with Chloe, Max, Steph or Mikey throughout the day kept her going enough that by the time play practice was scheduled to begin, she thought that even her flagging energy reserves were going to be sufficient to get through things.

“Fare thee well, nymph. Ere he doth leave this grove thou shalt fly him and he shall seek thy love.” Chloe smiled imperiously toward one corner of the stage where an exit was most likely to be. Though the entire cast was sitting around the stage in the cooling night air most eyes were on Chloe. Frankly, Rachel thought that that should happen more often than it did. Chloe had managed to keep up a decent mood, even on the couple of occasions throughout the day when she spotted David across the campus. While sitting together before practice, Max had gotten the whole story out of Chloe, who had gotten the story of Max coming to stay in Rachel’s room the night before in return. Rachel thought Max had brought it up intentionally so that maybe Chloe didn’t think she was hiding something.

Speaking of, Rachel thought as Max rose to her feet and approached Chloe.

“Hast thou the flower there? Welcome wanderer.” Max was getting into the role of Puck in a new way. Maybe she was a bit of a late bloomer, but like Chloe she did not need to refer to her script most of the time. Then again, no one’s as far along as Dana or Nathan, Rachel thought. Max moved toward Chloe, hand outstretched, a rather wild smile on her face. She played a version of Puck who was wholly enjoying herself. Perhaps it was due to having worn a lot of masks herself, but Rachel thought that maybe the two of them deserved to have parts of their characters grafted onto themselves. Chloe was happier when she was confident and decisive like Oberon and frankly Max could just do with a bit more enjoyment in life.

“Ay, there it is,” Max proclaimed, holding her hand aloft. Rachel returned as she so often did when her thoughts wandered, to the complex situation blooming between them all. Despite their recent date and individual moments where they were close like they used to be, things were still strained between her and Chloe and all things told, Rachel wondered when the inevitable messy ending of whatever this was was going to hit. A part of her worried it crept closer the closer the play got. Their stress levels were all going to rise the closer it came to the day of the play.

An excellent example of the rising stress levels, she assumed, occurred a few minutes later as practice began to wind down. It was already fairly dark out and the air was exactly as crisp and
cool as would be expected from an autumn day. Still that did nothing to keep Nathan’s hot headed nature at bay. Quite out of nowhere, as Mr. Keaton was talking to them all about finalizing their costume choices before their next practice, Nathan got to his feet. *The buzz cut works for him*, Rachel admitted begrudgingly as he rose. *Goes well with his attitude problem*.

“It was so much better when we could just wear period clothing,” Nathan exclaimed suddenly. “I can’t come up with something modern that Egeus would wear. Why would I?” Quietly, Rachel wondered how long he’d been waiting to complain about this. Judging by the cool look on his face as he crossed his arms, almost demanding that the director answer him, it seemed like he was in control of himself. He was just being a drama queen. Catching her looking, Nathan squinted once in Rachel’s direction, as if to challenge her to say something.

“Well,” Mr. Keaton started, in a long suffering tone. “I am certain if you simply ask that your castmates here would be happy to help with ideas. We are, after all, our own little troupe.” For a moment Nathan seemed to be trying to formulate a response but then, apparently having not heard what he wanted to hear, turned and leapt from the edge of the stage, stalking off into the night. Mr. Keaton sighed. “Well, alright,” he called. “I suppose that means you are all free for the night. Go forth. Keep reading and remember, start bringing me your outfits.” The man swept grey hair back on his head as if he was somehow warm. Rachel looked away to follow Nathan’s path away from the stage, mostly out of curiosity, when she spotted another form, one she had been expecting for a few minutes already. Relaxing, Rachel stood up. Chloe and Max rose as if to join her and then Chloe hesitated.

“Hey, maybe you should talk to your mom alone this time,” the bluenette told her, rubbing at her chin in thought. The artist turned toward Max. “Besides, I think I’ll drag Max somewhere and chill out for a few minutes, if you’ve got the time.”

“Sounds good,” Max told her. *Don’t focus on this*, Rachel told herself, hearing a note of earnest eagerness in the photographer’s voice. Rachel turned back from them after shooting each a smile, feeling too distracted to speak. She left the girls on the stage and eased herself down. Her mother approached with her hands folded in front of her and her dark brown hair hanging loosely around her head. Rachel wondered why she was letting it grow out so much when she so rarely enjoyed having long hair. The thought passed fairly quickly, though, as her eyes landed on the envelope clutched in her mother’s hand.

Even in the dim light from the stage rigging and from several feet away still, Rachel could see that the envelope hadn’t been opened. She tensed up, slightly. Eventually, in silence, she stopped a couple of feet away from her mother and was drawn into a hug as a result. Rachel was surprised at herself when she grabbed at the woman in a tight hug. All the aggravation that lay between them could be boiled down to her refusal to kick James Amber out of the house. All of that mattered, but for that moment Rachel needed to put it aside. She needed to remember that her mother still loved her and she still loved her mother.
She felt slightly refreshed if not inexplicably more tired when they pulled apart a moment later. For a second she tried to read her mother’s emotional state but found it difficult. The woman was already back under her ‘prim and proper housewife’ mask, which bothered Rachel enough under normal circumstances that seeing it here almost made her angry all over again. Instead of focusing on that or worrying too much if her mother was upset about her reconnecting with Sera, Rachel stepped back a bit and held out her hand. When she had the letter secure she did not rush off with it or tear it open like an eager child beneath the Christmas tree. She waited for her mom to speak because for the life of her she could not think of what to say to the woman.

“How’ve you been?” her mother asked, finally. Rachel relaxed because she knew what face to wear and what words to speak. Though she could not quite stop herself from clutching the envelope to her chest, she shot a soft smile to her mother.

“Everything’s been alright. I’ve been doing fine in classes and the play is going great.” As she watched she saw the woman searching her for lies. She knew her mother wouldn’t find those lies. It should have been heartbreaking but it wasn’t. It simply was what it was.

“Everyone getting their lines downpat?” she asked, smiling. Rachel tried her best to answer with more information, this time. Anything to seem more engaged than awkward, even though that was precisely what she was. Chloe had once gone three days without seeing her mother and talked about how awkward it was to talk to her after that. Rachel hadn’t spoken to hers in weeks.

“Chloe had a little trouble for a while. Our friend Max, too, but they’re probably ahead of most people now. I think we’ll pull it off in time. The worst part is the singing. No one who is supposed to sing can actually sing. ” She pretended to lean in conspiratorially and whispered, “just don’t tell any of them I said that.” For a moment it looked like her mother was going to give a smile at her attitude but then that moment passed and Rachel floundered about for something else to say, something to fill the silence or avoid the querying eyes. “Chloe tries, but a heart in the right place only goes so far. I bet she could if she had some practice but, it happens.”

“How are you and Chloe?” Rachel swallowed.

“It uh- it varies from day to day,” she answered. This time there was no extra attempt at clarity. “You know, I think you’d like our friend Max,” Rachel told her. “She takes awesome photos. I could ask her to give me one she took of us for you, if you’d like.”

“That would be really nice,” her mother replied. “I look forward to meeting her.” This time, Rose Amber shifted beneath her light jacket, as if to suggest she was getting cold. “Rachel, I want us to talk again and I mean really talk.”
“Mom,” Rachel started, dropping the facade. “I- I guess as long as my father is not a subject of conversation, then I’m fine.” That seemed to be agreeable enough for her mother, who announced plans to pick her up for lunch next weekend. Rachel was relieved that she would at least have some time to prepare before the awkward gathering. In the end she excused herself from the situation as politely as possible. She wanted to read the letter in Chloe’s company but by the time she got back to the dorms, Chloe had already left. Instead, sitting in Max’s computer chair, Rachel allowed herself to dig into the letter from Sera. Whether she would talk about it or not remained to be decided.

Rachel,

I’ve thought a lot about what to say to you and how. I know it’s been a while and this is not what you wanted. You wanted to know more about me and more about your past. The thing is, I simply could not risk exposing you to me if I wasn’t going to be able to take control of my life again. That man robbed me of that control and it has been difficult to find it this time. I know you won’t understand and whether you believe it or not, that is for the best. I am grateful that you do not understand what this is, what this is like. I hope dearly that you never do. Rachel, I am so sorry you had to learn about your father in this manner. I am sorry that you have had him taken away from you. I never wanted to do that to you. I just wanted to know you.

I still do.

I’ve come to gather that you’re a pretty strong person already, so even though you don’t owe me it, I’m going to ask you to stay strong just a little longer. Give me time to find out if I can find my footing again. I would say ‘beat this’ but it will never truly be gone. That’s not how this works. I just have to stand up against it again. It sounds pathetic to say but, that is not easy. Have some patience with me and I’ll do my best to tell you everything you want to know.

Sera

This night, it was Rachel who wanted to stay close to Max.

-------

Mabgzl vatgzx. Maxr xzm uxmmxk hk phklx wxixwbgxz hg max wtr. Mabl cnlm zhxl mh ltr matm maxr whg’m vatgzx. B tf nglnkx ykhf hgx wtr mh max gxqm tuhmn pah B tf. Max ixhiex B ehox zh hg pbmahnm atobgz t venx. B ptmva maxf wxte pbma max vkti bg maxbk eboxl tgw B kxxkxm innmbgz fbgx hg maxf. Kivaxe mkbxl mh ux t khvd unm mabgzl txk ghm ixkxyvm yhk axk. Vaehx mkbxl mh abwx axk yknlmntbhg tgw itbg unm ghmabgz bl hdtf yhk axk kbxam ghp, xqvxim matm frxu lax’l dbvdbgz tll tm extkgbgz axk khex bg max ietr. B yxxe ebdx B lahnew wh
lhfxmabgz tuhnm Wtobw, unnm B whg’m dghp patm.
Dine in Hell

Chapter Twenty: Dine in Hell

October 19th, 2010

She stuffed the plastic bag beneath her arm so that she could use her other hand to balance as she descended the stairs. The house was unusual in its silence. She so rarely came home so early in the day, when both her mother and David were at work. *If Keaton didn’t demand I bring in what I have of the outfit today, I wouldn’t have done it today, either.* She could get used to spending time in the house in some silence. Or well, not in silence, just *alone.* Blaring music throughout the house, laying in the backyard with a smoke or, better yet, a smoke and Rachel and Max; these all sounded like great ideas. If she had thought to bring either of them along with her, she might even slow down and indulge in just that.

As it was, Chloe came off the bottom step a little quicker and harder was necessary, rather in a hurry to get to campus before practice started and get the okay on her costume (and the inevitable criticism) so that she could just *relax* for a few minutes. Her hand found purchase on the doorknob. At the same time there came a clattering noise from the kitchen. It was a noise so uniquely ‘silverware-hitting-the-floor’ that it could be nothing else. *Okay, but David’s still busy making faces at Blackwell student who moves funny and mom’s at work so...* who? For a moment she let go of the doorknob and made for the kitchen only to walk face first into her mother, who was coming around the corner at the same time.

“Oh shit,” Chloe said, pressing a hand to her chest in a gesture she didn’t realize she’d picked up from Max.

“Chloe,” her mother said, clearly looking relieved as well. “I think we just scared the dickins out of each other.” Chloe thought she would have chosen more colorful language but she had already gotten away with *shit.* “I didn’t hear you come in, I wondered who in the world was coming down my stairs.”

“I didn’t know you were here, either,” Chloe told her. Her toes worked against the inside of the
boots. She felt the nerves come on all at once.

“Well, that’s because I called into work after you left,” her mother said, crossing her arms as if about to note how quickly Chloe ran from the house. *If she does, she’ll just make me want to do it now.* Chloe took a moment to look into her mother’s face. She found no immediate signs of illness. *Oh god, please don’t let it be the kind that comes only in the morning.* The woman’s arms uncrossed. *Okay, let’s not start that again.* “What brings you back before practice?”

“I was supposed to submit a costume for approval but I only have about half. Still trying to come up with the big final touch. Mr. Keaton told me to bring it in anyway, so I decided to run back before practice.” She hoped that maybe that would be all she needed to say and then her mother would let her go. For a moment, some small corner of her mind asked if that was how things really needed to be between her and her mother. *She brought David into my life and gave him power over me,* Chloe reminded herself. *Do not forget what he was going to do to you because you called him out for following teenage girls around.* Chloe thought not for the first time that it would have been better if Ms. Grant had gotten there a second later. “Well, I think I need to get back to campus.”

“Wait,” her mother said, voice firm, as if catching her in a ‘gotcha’ moment. Chloe stopped halfway turned toward the door and spun back around. *Shit, here we go.* “Why is it that you didn’t come home last night?” the woman asked. Chloe sighed. She had been aware that sneaking in that morning had probably taken her a bit more effort than usual and given her away. Chloe decided to try the truth with her mother for once.

“I stayed at Steph’s place last night.” That was true. Chloe and Steph had shared a pretty good night, all things considered. It was impressive how fun it could be to just sit in front of the television with someone when they bore you no ill will and had not done you wrong. That seemed to normally only happen on Friday nights after the campaign session wound down. It was fun, and all on Fridays but Steph had offered to put her up for the night and Chloe had jumped at the idea. She slept outside of her house as much as possible. “

“How about not asking permission or answering calls or texts?” her mother asked. *There’s the gotcha.* “Nothing?” she asked. “No?” Sighing, her mother stepped forward, though far from aggressively. “Then let me try. Maybe it’s because you knew you were grounded for not coming home last week and weren’t supposed to be anywhere but at school or in these walls.” Keeping the bag under her left arm, Chloe shrugged.

“That is what *David* told me. Not what you told me. Unless you’re going to look me in the eyes and tell me he has the right to hand out rules and punishments for me, now I’m going to disregard it like 90% of the hot air that comes out of his mouth.” *Don’t tell her,* she told herself. *She won’t believe you. She will never believe ill of David Madsen. Not something that bad.* “Well?”
“Chloe, of course he has that right.” Chloe closed her eyes and exhaled. Surprisingly, they did not burn, they did not begin to water. I do not accept that. A bitter laugh bubbled up alongside rage the likes of which she only ever saw in Rachel’s eyes. Chloe slammed her left fist hard against the front door. Pain through it, but she knew what that pain felt like. Any damage done was only skin deep. It was going to be little more than an annoyance. “And just what are you thinking?”

“You know your gallant, chivalrous war hero is going around accusing me, Rachel and Max of being the school’s drug runners, right?” For a moment her mother looked at her as if searching for a lie or wondering if she was making a joke. “And do you know why? Because he was following Max around one day in town and saw her walking on a beach about a mile away from where a drug dealer’s RV happened to be parked.” The fact was that Chloe knew damn well Max had been there to buy weed from Frank. Chloe hadn’t gone to him since May and her own stash was now nonexistent. What upset her was that David had no evidence of Max even visiting Frank, had not seen it, but didn’t assume that he could be wrong. He just assumed the worst. “Then he thought Rachel and I’s date the other week was us buying drugs to run. And I wonder that he just so happened to be in Edgeton the same day I was. I’ve never known him to go there.” Her voice was rising. She hated the feeling of losing control of her anger. She hated the shaking arms and legs. She could not stop them, not yet.

“You know what, Mom? I’m no angel and neither are Rachel or Max. Maybe, just maybe he’s right and all of us smoke weed.” Dancing around it was only going to piss her off. “Let’s pretend, you and I for a second that he is 100% right about that. Maybe she was buying weed from that dealer for herself. Or maybe she was out for a walk because she’s having a hard time adjusting to living at the school and Rachel was busy that day and I was fucking here being told what a worthless piece of shit I am. Or maybe, and here’s a crazy thought, she just committed the crime of wanting a burger and a nice view while she ate.” Joyce began to stand straighter, her face to grow more serious. Chloe didn’t know how to interpret that, lost in her frustration as she was. “Let’s say it’s any of those three. He didn’t even consider any of those possibilities. He didn’t consider that he was wrong. He assumed immediately the worst case scenario about Max because she hangs out with me and then, using that as an excuse, he assumed it about Rachel and I. And don’t you dare try to tell me it was a coincidence he went to Edgeton for the first time since he moved in here on the day I wanted my girlfriend and I to be away from the people who keep making us out to be assholes instead of a couple of scared teenagers whose parents have turned their backs on them.”

The last sentence came out as if she had sucked poison from a wound and was spitting it in disgust. Genuine hurt crossed her mother’s face and, as she had when seeing it many months ago, Chloe felt pleased at that. She only got through to her mother when she was at her most open and honest about her feelings. She’ll go back to complaining that I lie and hide things from her in a couple of days, that we don’t talk enough. When I tell her the truth she dismisses it unless I tell her the whole truth and stop trying to protect her feelings. Then she recoils and acts hurt. I get to be the bad guy. I always get to be the bad guy with her. If I restrain myself, I’m dismissed. If I’m honest, I’m a monster and she’s the poor victim of the bad bad juvenile delinquent.

“We aren’t saints,” Chloe repeated, pulling the front door open. “Me and Max least of all, but the idea that we’re running every hard drug under the sun into the school for the popular rich kids to
get high off of during their uber private parties is actually not just personally offensive to me, it’s intellectually offensive. If you want to know about who your hubby to be really is why don’t you as—“ Chloe shut her mouth so hard and so suddenly against her words that her teeth hurt from clicking together. The click resounded in her head. She had been close to telling her mother about David nearly punching her a week before. If she didn’t believe me, I definitely wouldn’t be able to look her in the eye. “Maybe you think David’s right and I’m a total monster, but Rachel is going to be an amazing actress one day. Max sometimes loses her shit when faced with a math test but she’s going to be in galleries some time really freaking soon. Neither of them are risking their futures for a cut of anything like that. They’re worth a damn.”

“You are too,” her mother called at her back as Chloe stepped onto the porch.

“David goes out of his way to tell me otherwise. You back him up in every way, at every turn. Don’t you dare lie to me, not about that.” She shut the door behind her to cut off any response. I want to break shit. Turning a full circle once, she found nothing that jumped out at her. A long time ago there might have been a lawn gnome or a plant pot about to meet its demise. Those things were always more the domain of her father who thought that something cute or funny on the doorstep put people in a good mood when entering your house and, who could be a rude houseguest in a good mood? There was nothing.

She was left with anger and hurt and destructive energy and there was nothing she could take it out on that wouldn’t cost more than it was worth. If I drive like this… Chloe swallowed the thought. She had made a promise to Max and Rachel a long time ago not to get behind the wheel when she was angry. Chloe would never take her rage out on either the Frankentruck or her mother’s house. Not with all of the work her father had put into maintaining it before he passed. David’s made himself right at home but his number one priority was his fucking car.

She turned and looked first left, then right. There was no good target in sight, with the exception of the mailbox which she would have happily destroyed if she had access to a nice solid baseball bat. Whoever said petty vandalism never solved anything has never wanted to brain a mailbox. Chloe left her keys in her pocket and descended from the steps of the porch to the walkway leading toward the road. As she passed the bushes in her front yard, either hand reached out to brush them and finally, with a loud thunk her boots connected to sidewalk.

“Fuck this,” Chloe yelled, head thrown back. Her vocal cords strained against the yell, her neck ached in response to the angle of her skull and eventually her lungs protested that they were trying to expend air they no longer had. By the time she turned left and started running along the sidewalk, she was already gulping in great heaving chestfulls of breath. For some time, until she shut her mouth and forced herself to breathe deeply and relatively evenly, she could not really pay much attention to where she was going other than ‘roughly in the right direction.’

Despite the cooling air of the day, when Chloe got to campus and approached the stage clutching
her plastic bag full of clothing to her chest, she was drenched in sweat so thickly that her hair stuck
to her forehead and her shirt clung to her to a point where she imagined wringing it out would
provide an almost comical effect. She had recovered her wits about her enough to not want to think
about how she smelled or about how stupid she was going to feel begging David for a ride home if
Steph were to say she was unable to take her back after practice. She was also acutely aware that
she was late.

Arrayed on the stage, several of the actors’ heads rose one by one to see her. Steph was first.
Clearly not caring if she was interrupting what by then had to be the tenth runthrough of the
opening scene, Steph snapped her fingers hard, drawing Max and Rachel’s attention almost
immediately. Mikey, who had agreed to work on the crew, also jerked his head up. This was
Steph’s Pay Attention gesture, the one she often used to call them to order when they got wildly off
topic during tabletop play. (It was easier to get lost and confused on what they were doing
sometimes, than people thought. Their first session in a dungeon last week had been proof of that.)
It was also very effective.

When she nodded toward Chloe, those three and a few others turned to look. Rachel and Max were
on their feet and off the stage almost immediately. Standing center stage, Hayden went silent. If
Chloe’s cheeks could have gone more red after the exertion of running (and then jogging) the
distance to school, they would have. Mr. Keaton made a dramatic noise and declared that they
were going to break for the first time that night. Chloe was simultaneously embarrassed and
moderately impressed with herself that she had made that trip on foot in such good time.

“Chloe, what in the hell?” Max asked, stopping just short of her. Chloe was treated to a preview of
Max’s outfit for a modern-day Puck, in the shirt she had slung over her shoulder. One look at it
suggested it was a far more blatant flavor of hippie than Max herself was. Of course she’d make
Puck a hippie. For a second, Chloe smiled. “Did you fucking run here?” Chloe did want to answer
but there didn’t seem to be any saliva left in her throat. Mr. Keaton was talking to Eliot on stage,
she saw, looking past Max just once.

For some reason she hadn’t even noticed Rachel come up on the other side of her, despite seeing
her leave the stage at the same time as Max. The girl reached out and rested a hand on her left
shoulder. Chloe could swear she heard a squish as the hand pressed down. That’s gotta be gross,
she thought, turning her eyes on Rachel. She didn’t want to tell either of them about the
conversation with her mother or that she had let herself get so worked up that her alternative to
driving angry was to run however many miles to the school. It’s not likely I can particularly hide it
from them, though, Chloe thought.

“Sorry I’m la-” she coughed. The back of her throat felt like sandpaper.

“Oh, hold on,” Max said, before looking down to open the messenger bag at her side. She sounded
exasperated. Chloe watched in confusion as Max dug into the bag with one hand and pulled up on it
with the other to bring it into easier reach without setting it down. She came up with her green-tinted metal water bottle. Over Rachel’s shoulder and past her worried eyes, Steph was approaching. Chloe accepted the bottle when it was shoved into her hands rather than let it fall.

“But vodka?” she managed to wheeze, mostly jokingly. Chloe didn’t think Max would actually hand alcohol to someone likely to be dehydrated but she still didn’t particularly appreciate Max slugging her lightly on the shoulder. The cap of the battle came off with a nice, appreciative thunk and she turned it upside down, lifting her head up. "I'll go fill the damn thing up, empty it and then fill it again for her. At some point her other hand dropped the bag to her feet, uncaring as it landed on the ground between them. Surprisingly cool liquid poured across her dry tongue and down her sore throat. Better than the vodka, mostly, she thought to herself once it was firmly empty. “Shit, that was good,” she rasped, popping the cap back on it.

“Now, mind telling us what happened?” Rachel asked her. Steph stopped behind Max and crossed her arms, a firm look on her face. When Max reached for the bottle, Chloe lightly slapped her hand.

“I’ll refill it for you,” Chloe told the photographer, before turning to face Rachel. At multiple points during her run, she wished Rachel was there alongside her. Not that I wanted her to suffer with me, or anything but, misery does love company. “Um, my mom was at the house when I got back,” she said, when she realized that all three of the girls around her were looking askance at her. Rachel squeezed her shoulder comfortingly at that. It actually ended up kind of hurting, but Chloe didn’t say anything. The contact itself was pleasant. “I sort of lost my cool with her and rather than get in the Frankentuck and have a wreck halfway here and hurt someone I decided to kind of go on a run? Then I never turned around.” Chloe shrugged. Rachel’s arms were around her before she could stop the girl and she knew that the thespian was basically getting soaked in her sweat. “Rachel, relax. Everything’s okay. I just got a workout.”

“It’s not okay when you don’t answer your fucking phone and no one knows where you are after David- you know.” Chloe looked over the top of Rachel’s head and saw recognition and understanding in Steph’s dark eyes. Rachel’s hair smelled of some type of flower. Steph uncrossed her arms and then, hurting Chloe almost as much as the miles’ long run itself had, a look of pity shot across her face. God damn it. For a moment, Max reached out as if to place a hand on her cheek and Chloe wondered if this was going to be the moment things got stressed to the point of an argument or discussion between the three of them.

At the last second, Max pulled back and Chloe gave in, hugging Rachel tight. She hoped neither Max nor Steph had seen the relevant thoughts and fears on her face but Chloe figured that her emotions were pretty raw and close to the surface. Rachel slowly disengaged from Chloe, as if to show that she didn’t give a shit if Chloe was drenched in sweat or worse. A pair of lips pressed against the tip of her nose and then Rachel pulled away completely. This time, Chloe was definitely blushing.
“I am a massive asshole and I’m sorry,” Chloe finally told Rachel, then Max and, for good measure, Steph. “But while I was running I fell into some kind of bush and I think I figured out what was missing from our ‘fairy queen’ costumes.” I hope Mr. Keaton and Rachel go for this. Because I’m running out of ideas.

-----

October 23rd, 2010

Rachel pulled her eyes away from the dark phone screen for the hundredth time to her mother’s face. Two tables away, a tall 40-something who Rachel had never seen before but immediately knew as Sean Prescott from his fancy dress (not to mention that his son had his eyes) yelled into the phone that he had hired whoever he was speaking to to ‘look after my son, not make these baseless implications and accusations.’ Rachel’s eyes wandered away from her mother’s concerned, if polite face to once more glance around the restaurant. It was impressive how quick she forgot how to be comfortable in a place like this. One of about two “good” restaurants, if you asked her father, this place was so expensive that a fair portion of the town couldn’t afford to eat there except on special occasions. And sitting this close to Overlord Prescott… yeah, not a good sign.

“Rachel, are you listening?” Rachel snapped her head back around and for a moment, one of those rare instances, she looked at her mother with her actual face. Today it showed the woman discomfort and concern. It took one long, shaky exhale to put a mask on that was more fitting. Did you ever think that’s where you got it from? Rachel asked herself, staring at the ‘prim and proper affluent woman’ opposite of her. Did you ever think that you two are playing the same game? Rachel shook her head, to answer honestly. “Honey, what’s wrong?” She wanted to tell her mother that this place felt fake to her. She wanted to tell her mother she hadn’t heard from Chloe for eighteen hours and that was unlike her. She wanted to tell her mother that she thought she was losing her girlfriend. The problem was, her mother was going to respond as her mask allowed her. My entire life you’ve worn that face, she thought as she opened and then shut her mouth as if unable to speak. Instead of answering, she lifted a glass of water from just in front of her plate and drained a good half of it. How many times have I talked to the real you? God, have I ever? And have you ever actually talked to me? Is this what we’re supposed to be? I could tell you all of this and would you only respond as the mask allows you? Rachel shook her head as she sat the glass down. This is nuts, you’re hurt over something that might be as simple as a broken phone charger. Rachel knew that that was a cop out. The Price-Madsen household had a landline and if she wanted to talk to Rachel at all and had no other way, Chloe could have come to see her.

“I got lost for a moment,” she said, which felt like a pretty lame excuse, but it was pretty close to the truth.
“Are you well, Rachel?” her mother asked, leaning across the table slightly to pat her hand.

“I’m sorry,” Rachel told her, in as cheery a voice as she could manage. She shrugged. God damn it, Price. “I’m sorry I really don’t know what to say.” Even without the constant specter of the cute bluenette’s silence and unresponsiveness standing over her shoulder, Rachel had to admit that this whole lunch was throwing her off. The last one had, too. It was just pretense. Rachel wore her nice clothes; a respectable blouse and dressy pants and she put on a bit of light makeup and talked about things in a manner that you would expect the privileged daughter of a wealthy family who sent her to a prestigious boarding school to talk. To top it all off, she was biting back every thing about the big murderous elephant sharing a house with her mother. He might as well have been sitting at the table with them for as uncomfortable as she was looking her mom in the eyes. Though, I’m on quite a streak of not seeing his ass. We wouldn’t want to ruin that, now would we? Perhaps she was so caught up in that that the truth came out accidentally. Perhaps she just needed to find out who would respond, her mother or that mask. “Honestly, Chloe and I are having trouble and it’s really upsetting me.” Her mother waved her hand dismissively.

“You’re young. If there’s meant to be something between you, you will both get past it.” This was said emphatically enough but there was something about the tone of her voice that suggested she was forcing herself to say it. Rachel was forced to confront for not the first time that her mother disapproved of the punk who obviously smoked and had an attitude. Perhaps it was because she was involved in Rachel learning the truth about Sera. Rachel looked down at the pale linen tablecloth. Or maybe she was just an elitist. Or maybe she’s a closet homophobe. Which of those would be worse? Her mother returned to the leafy green salad on her plate. Rachel, having felt a little rebellious, stuck with her far too expensive cheeseburger.

“So,” she said, after giving herself time to swallow a fairly large bite, “practicing for the play has been kind of intense this time around.” This one was a bit of a gamble. Her mother could either break their truce by asking to bring her father to the play or not. Worse still would be if she dared to do it without asking. That would be some kind of nightmare, Rachel considered. I mean, I’m supposed to be a little miffed off early on in the play but I would hate to get all hotheaded the minute I saw the bastard.

“And how is practice going?” her mother asked, apparently choosing the safer, fairer route for the moment. Rachel watched the woman set aside her fork again as if it was impolite to even hold a utensil while they spoke. Perhaps out of sheer stubbornness, Rachel picked hers up, speared a bit of her baked potato on the end and lifted it.

“Well Chloe had this really great idea for a twist on the play, and most of the cast got behind it. Since then everyone’s gotten really good about memorizing their parts.” Rachel kept the potato-laden fork halfway aloft, trying to read something from her mother other than slight discomfort with her horrible manners.
“Isn’t that lovely?” the brunette responded. She paused to wipe at her mouth with a napkin, removing the absolutely nothing that was present. Rachel almost lost the war against rolling her eyes on the spot. “How are you finding Titania?” Mom’s had a love-hate relationship with Shakespeare since she was in school, Rachel recalled. Photos of her mother’s performance as Juliet in her own high school play could still be found if one knew which attic-bound box to dig into. For a moment Rachel lamented that if she and Chloe were going to play any two lovers in the Shakespeare canon that they couldn’t go out in a proper murder suicide as in that ‘tragic love story.’ In reality, the story was about a pair of teenagers who let their lust overrule everything, even to the point of leaving seven bodies in their wake, but that final image would have really stuck in the craw of anyone who might be concerned by same-sex imagery in the play.

“In the end, I think I like her better than any of the other leading lady roles. None of those were characters I think I could play very well. All too damsel-in-distress for me. I think I can get away with Titania.” She tilted her head a bit. “Besides, acting opposite of Chloe is helping. I’m on stage with her and Max for a lot of the opening act.” As if she hadn’t heard a word of what Rachel was saying, especially in relation to her girlfriend (Rachel’s eyes snuck to the still and silent phone on the table beside the silverware) her mother folded her napkin up on the table and made a point that Rachel hadn’t seen coming.

“You know, you really are such a good actress,” Rachel shut up, aware that she was now to be privy to something her mother had been working up to all meal but was only now coming out with. “And I really wish you would do more with that. This is the sort of thing you should celebrate and take full advantage of.”

“What do you mean, mother?” she asked, speaking through the constraints of her own mask as was now proper and expected.

“What do you want to do with your life?” This was not the first time her mother had asked her that question. It was not even the first time she had brought it up over some private meal between them. However, this time felt different in that Rachel suspected that, lurking there somewhere inside that dark pantsuit, her mother was harboring an answer and a specific agenda.

“I’m not sure,” she replied, half-honestly. The truth was that one of her major overarching was to blow Arcadia Bay like the glorified popsicle stand it was. Once they graduated, Max would have no reason to stay in Arcadia Bay and thus, Chloe would not have as much reason to want to stay. For Rachel, she was coming to understand that the only person other than the aforementioned girls who she had left to feel connected to, her adoptive mother, spoke through a mask at her so often. She had agendas and maybe they were even motivated entirely by love, but that just meant that they were the wrong actions for the right reasons. It was difficult to let go of the idea that one day Arcadia Bay could wake up and she would be a ghost to it and that would be alright.
“My friend Laura is still in the Film, Theater and Television department at UCLA,” Rachel closed her eyes, this time. She imagined the open road, the cab of the Frankentruck, Chloe behind the wheel. The image was comforting. Imagined Rachel was just reaching at for Imagined Chloe’s hand when yet another closed overtop her free one. Rachel opened her eyes and shook the thought and all of its implications away. Her mother’s voice rose in pitch slightly, as if to signify that she did not enjoy this behavior out of Rachel while she was trying to decide her daughter’s future for her. “She might be willing to pull some strings to get you in when the time comes.”

“Mom, that *time* is still a ways away.” The restaurant around them was nearly empty. Herr Prescott was picking at the last bits of his ribeye. This was not the society or the life she intended for herself.

“It might sneak up on you far quicker than you expect, Rachel.”

*Maybe.*

She got back to campus a little under three hours later. The light was beginning to dim a bit by that point and Chloe still had not contacted her. There were no other distractions in her mind as she traveled the campus’ well maintained paths. She excused herself from a potential conversation with the groundskeeper, Samuel quickly, who returned to repairing a bit of low fencing outside of the dormitories. Rachel tried to keep a friendly connection with Samuel. Much like Max and Chloe, Rachel was of the opinion that for some reason, Samuel knew a lot. If there was something to observe about a person, the man generally observed it. His strange speech patterns made him the target of gossip for both parents and student with bad attitudes about those different than themselves, but Rachel couldn’t recall a moment where Samuel had done anything more aggressive than ask a student not to scare the squirrels. *He likes nature, leave him the fuck alone,* she thought to herself, before shutting the door of the dorm behind her, and on that line of thinking.

That of course, left Chloe and her silence. Rachel actually felt like she had had enough of thinking about that. *All I want to think about now is the back of my eyelids. If Chloe’s finally done with me, I can wait until tomorrow to find out.*
Chapter Twenty-One: Parode

November 19th, 2010

The sun was already beginning to dip low outside of the small, makeshift dressing room in the form of a canvas tent. For reasons that Chloe could not recall, she found herself standing absently in front of the mirror. Save for the two parts of her costume which she would call the coup de grâce and little things like makeup, she was all set for the big moment. Almost as necessary to keep in mind due to her outfit as her lines was the blocking she would need to keep in mind to deliver the full effect of her costume and character: an otherworldly being masquerading—albeit poorly—as a human. In this modern-alternative twist Chloe dressed Oberon almost like she was ready to visit the kind of punk rock show which would send a conservative parent into a conniption. This was the surface layer, the ragged pale tee with the dark shape of a flower stem and its bulb standing out in stark contrast. Resting over yet another tee which was close to the color, it was hoped, of her skin (at least when under bright lighting) the white one was the most plain, unaligned shirt she could find to go with the dark leather pants. *Which I am not entirely sure I hate.* It also, she hoped, nodded toward one well recognizable symbol of Oberon’s.

Chloe’s eyes traced the intricate pattern which a light outline made down her face in the mirror. Steph had taken the most intricate care with both Rachel and herself, using a steady hand and patience that Chloe felt grateful for, contrasting her own jitters, to bring a winding depiction of ivy down one side of their faces, down their throats to vanish just beneath the neckline and then down each arm, onto the backs of their hands. This outline still needed filled in with the special paint secured at some cost by the theater department. The general plan, Chloe knew, was for her to do Rachel’s and then Steph to come and do her own. If they could pull that off, attend to stage makeup and then install their wings in time without any significant disaster befalling them, they would *finally* be armed to go into the school’s production of A Midsummer Night’s Dream on neutral ground.

Chloe had not felt much like smiling for a couple of weeks. If anything were going to be able to do it, she would think the sight of her in a mirror would be the thing. Whether it was the outfit, the ivy outlined on her face or the short, vivid neon-green hair that now resided on her head in place of the
blue she had begun to become a bit attached to, it should have moved something. At least, Chloe thought to herself, I’m with it enough to be panicking. On the table in front of her sat four thick, sharp dark-green wings. Slit into the back of the overshirt on her back (and through the undershirt, too) were spots just for each of them. If we can get them angled just right they’re going to look pretty good.

After a point, Chloe was simply sitting in silence, bouncing between frustration and worry. This is nothing like last time, she mused. Last time if I fucked up, ‘oh well.’ This time I’ve put hours and hours into this shit. The extra time helping people with their costumes alone is... crazy. If this gets fucked up because of something I say or do... Chloe shook her head at her reflection. Pull it together, Price. She jumped as a hand came to rest on her right shoulder and dragged her eyes away from her reflection to that of the photographer behind her. She hated how hyperaware she was of Max’s hand, of its warmth. She hated how hyperaware she was of being touched. It had been some time since there had been any physical affection between her and Rachel. Chloe had almost gotten used to the lack of physical contact in her life again. There were even people she valued that from.

“Hey,” Max greeted, lips curling into a reassuring smile that looked like someone had pasted it on to cover their own insecurities. Chloe felt like the least she could do was try to do the same. Max Caulfield was already in costume, herself. She and Chloe had taken turns changing a few minutes prior but Chloe had been too in her own head, in her worry of the wall between herself and the only two people who mattered, truly, deeply. She had not really seen Max in her full Puckish glory. Chloe turned to look at her more directly and the gesture must have meant something different to Max than it did her. The brunette stepped back, slightly. Chloe admired the intricate time and effort spent braiding her hair. Rachel’s was even more extreme, but compared to Chloe’s, Max’s hair had taken a while. At least Keaton has one hell of a hair and makeup team.

“You alright?” she asked Max, aware that that false smile had slowly faded from her own face. A voice in the back of her head told her to seize the girl, clothed in a stereotypical 70s Hippie outfit, in a tight hug and not let go until they felt better. She told that voice to go fuck itself, because it did not come with answers to whether that act would have been right or wrong.

“No,” Max deadpanned, “scared shitless.” Chloe nodded, one corner of her mouth rising. “Wanna sneak off a bit and, you know, relax, like, really relax?”

“Hippie stoner,” Chloe shot back, rolling her eyes. This, at least, made Max smile for real. The honest truth was that yes, she absolutely wanted to run around the few shadier parts of campus with her Super Max and get high off her ass. She also wanted to keep her head in the game, on her lines, on blocking, on not letting her issues with Rachel ruin the play. As if summoned by the thought, the girl entered the tent, flanked on either side by Juliet and Steph. Even without the bodypaint or makeup done, Rachel looked like a beautiful, dangerous demigoddess in disguise. She was walking like Titania, holding herself like Titania, and even though she started and smiled at the sight of Chloe (a smile that pretended everything was alright) there was an extra confidence around her that Chloe recognized as the mask of her character fixed firmly in place. When it came to people
Chloe wanted to grab onto and never let go of, there were now two in the room with her.

Still, Chloe knew that the dirty-blonde wanted to pretend, just for this day, that everything was alright. That was why her smile seemed so out of place and forced. Chloe wasn’t sure she could commit to that kind of deluding herself. She was engaged in enough of that when she pretended that she hadn’t gone back to living out of her truck a few days before. David threatening to call the cops if I don’t come home soon... how low can you get? Chloe turned her lips upward once in a mimic of a smile and then looked back down at the table in front of her. Max released her shoulder. The room grew uncomfortable still. Juliet made a humming noise in the back of her throat and then Chloe could hear her leave.

“Hey, Rachel,” Chloe finally said. “You all ready for me?”

“Yeah,” Rachel’s voice was even and friendly enough but Chloe knew that at best she would see a mask if she looked into the girl’s eyes. She had for the last week. “Keaton wants you, me and Steph to get the body paint bits done so they can dry in time for makeup and stuff.” Chloe could almost feel Max wanting to speak behind her. Chloe wanted to say plenty, herself. She just knew that if she got started it would be her undoing. She could not be undone, not today. If the world had to fall farther to shit, that could wait until the play was over and gone. Oberon, she told herself, lifting her head. If Rachel could hide behind Titania, she could hide behind Oberon. Chloe matched her own eyes in the mirror and then pushed herself to her feet, grabbing both the wings and the specialized body paint.

“Let’s do this, then,” she said, turning Oberon’s calm but self-consumed gaze upon the girls behind her. There was some comfort in the act, in being Oberon, here in interactions with others. After so long practicing for the role, Oberon felt like an old, cherished blanket. Even if Oberon is actually a creepy motherfucker. Most of the cast is a creepy motherfucker. As Rachel informed Max that she had been summoned to makeup, Chloe stared at the scene before her and allowed herself to be selfish. I want to talk to them both about all of this. Right here and now. I want to tell them that it’s hard without them. I want to tell Steph that she’s been a lifesaver for letting me shower at her place and not telling anyone about it. I want to ask Rachel not to leave me. I want to tell her, no, I want to tell her and Max both that I’m fucking lonely. She wanted more than this, but Chloe stamped down on the thoughts before they went any further or deeper. Some of them were too much to put into words at this point.

A couple of hours later, Chloe retreated to a small corner of her own mind and Oberon stepped out onto the stage. She was lit by the spotlight and various smaller lights arranged on and above the stage for a moment, only long enough to catch a glimpse of Rachel- of Titania. Behind Oberon, her train ( a few people who had volunteered for no-speaking roles ) slowed. Oberon, through Chloe, trailed her eyes trailed over a spare fairy beside her dear Puck and then the lights faded. The crowd mumbled to one another, no doubt in wonder as to why the lights would be falling mid scene. Calm, measured steps in the near dark drew her toward center-back stage. Barely an outline in the darkness opposite her, Titania stopped only a foot away. The lights did not rise all at once, but a powerful blacklight came up.
The part of her that was Chloe shivered in delight as muttering ran through the crowd, appreciative murmuring. Even from her spot so close to Rachel she saw the girl’s pale blue wings glowing brightly beneath the light and knew her own were doing the same faithfully. The ivy down their faces and arms shone more effectively than Chloe had expected when she suggested the idea. Judging by the nigh imperceptible flick of Rachel’s (or was it Titania’s) eyes from her face to her hair, Chloe knew that the light was playing nice with it. Only two or three seconds passed before the murmuring went down. Backstage, Mikey was on point with the lighting. The stage lights rose around them first and as slowly as the dimmer setup allowed them to. When the spotlight joined in, still focused on Puck and the unnamed fairy, they were standing precisely where they had been a moment ago. Oberon, Titania and their trains had moved into position in the darkness, like beings flitting between moments in the natural world.

“Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania,” that Chloe part of her wanted to shiver again but restrained it. The voice, the emotions in it did not feel or sound like her. They were the character. This was, Chloe had to admit, disconcerting. Opposite of her, Rachel’s face was composure on the outside but Chloe saw the fire in her eyes as Titania turned to face half toward the crowd and half her train. As the lighting grew brighter and the spotlight shifted from Max and Brooke to Chloe and Rachel, the ivy lost its effect. The blacklight set into the bottom of the set shut off. It was something of a joke at that point.

“What, jealous Oberon! Fairies,” Titania said, speaking less to the crowd and now to her train. “Skip hence; I have forsworn her bed or her company.” Chloe blinked slowly through her mask and exhaled. Rachel was better at this business than her, no matter how much she said otherwise. Even so, Chloe knew from the moment that that line was delivered that they were channeling themselves and their issues into Oberon and Titania. The fire in Rachel’s eyes was all the proof of that. Chloe could not stop herself: she joined that practice wholeheartedly.

At times the crowd stayed dead silent through their extended exchange. Chloe had expected to feel awkward about this scene, about all of the people arrayed around them on stage while she and Rachel (or rather, as it should have been, Oberon and Titania) had it out with each other. She did not. Instead, every bit of this was cathartic as hell. They were doomed, it seemed, to play out their emotions on stage as they had the year prior. Fuck it, Chloe thought as she took up a place in the forefront of her mind beside Oberon. Dressed grungier than her fairy queen, Titania looked fit for the kind of show where it didn’t matter who you were, you were likely to come away with a black eye, shitfaced and laughing with a complete stranger until you split and made your separate ways through the night.

As the scene progressed the anger dimmed in Rachel’s eyes. Chloe’s own frustration and feelings of imminent abandonment did not vanish, but she felt more and more control over them as they spoke the words of someone long dead. In the end, for as horrible of a ‘person’ as Oberon was, she was only one part jealousy. She was also scorned lover, kept at arms length from her partner but too sick to know how to respond to that. In ways, Chloe could sympathize. In other ways, this exorcising of some of her demons had a detrimental effect. Oberon, Chloe was fairly sure, should not be tempted to seize Titania by the chin and tilt her head up for a kiss. Not, at least, here and
now. Chloe wanted little more by that point than Rachel’s lips, or the feel of her fingers intertwining with her own. She wanted Rachel to try to tease her about those thoughts and she wanted to tease back. She wanted everything they had been. Thusly, it was easy to lace yearning beneath Oberon’s words.

“How long within this woods intend you stay?” Oberon asked, standing as tall and as proudly as she could, trying to offer her lover an alternative, to bow to her whim and be reunited with her. Objectively, Chloe knew this was not a good thing. Subjectively though, she had to embrace this part of Oberon. This, in Oberon’s mind, beneficence toward them both: ‘just cave to me and we can sneak off, love each other again and laugh. We can set the world right.’

“Perchance,” Rachel said, turning herself briefly more toward Chloe and then back toward the crowd. “‘Till after Theseus’ wedding-day. If you will patiently dance in our round and see our moonlight revels, go with us; if not, shun me, and I will spare your haunts.” A certain finality tinged these words anew and Chloe wondered if that finality was Rachel’s or Titania’s. It was hard to tell, in the moment.

“Give me that boy and I will go with thee,” she challenged. Rachel paused, slowing the pace down slightly, in a way she had not done in practice. It made perfect sense in the moment. It implied the passage of emotions and nonverbal conversation between the characters as Rachel’s eyes locked her own. This is what a good actress can do, in the moment. These small changes that, if you put them into words, would be robbed of their power. Forget Titania… Rachel is the force of nature.

“Not for thy fairy kingdom,” she declared suddenly, quickly, finally. Several people in the crowd chuckled. That was alright, sometimes Chloe still chuckled at the line. “Fairies, away! We shall chide downright, if I longer stay.” It was impressive watching Rachel turn and storm away with Titania’s train at her heels. It was a gesture that looked more like it was made for someone wearing a long, flowing dress that could spin along with them and give the moment more drama. Yet it worked perfectly for the character even clad in a torn, dark, grungy tee, tattered jeans and a pair of Chloe’s old chucks. It was almost like the gesture itself told the story of that flowing dress even in its absence.

Rachel got to bail from stage, but Chloe knew her part was not done yet. She watched the girl go and then turned on her heel toward Max, who, as Puck was pretending not to be amused as she watched the exchange. Puck, a sort of hippie-jester in Oberon’s employ, approached slightly but stopped just short as Oberon spoke to herself. She did her best to keep her composure for the rest of the scene. It was actually easy. Somehow, everything felt easier from that point. Eagerly, when the lights went down and she knew she could bounce back stage to find Rachel before the next scene began, Chloe hurried off stage right, watching Max shoot across to stage left in the dark. Clearing the stage in some swiftness was not in the spirit of their practice, but Chloe was eager to actually spend one stolen moment with Rachel.
There was no sign of the girl back stage right. With some care so that her wings would not be bent or injured in any way, Chloe wormed her away around back. Polite clapping sounded from the crowd. It was dark behind the set, so Chloe gave up and pushed her way through the back curtain. She was rewarded by the sight of Rachel, but stopped dead in her tracks. Something is waiting for me, Chloe realized as she took in Rachel and Max wrapped up in each others’ arms. And it’s going to fucking hurt. Reasonably, Chloe could tell herself that this was excitement. Shit, she might have hugged Max herself if they had exited on the same side. The thing was, when the girls pulled apart, there was something in their eyes, in eyes locked on each other. Chloe had seen the looks on their faces directed toward her on more than one occasion, by either of them. She had seen this happen before, of course. In this case it was so blatant (there was no taking turns stealing glances at one another when they thought no one was watching) that Chloe could not help but wonder that it was not followed by some sort of passionate gesture like a kiss. And if you and Max had walked off stage on the same side and Rachel found you in a hug with Max? If she had seen you both look at each other like this, she asked herself. What then?

The answer came to her mind as the girls took notice of her. Confusion and guilt wracked each face. Chloe had seen and felt that combination herself plenty in the last couple of months. She stood frozen to her spot. It’s different, she thought. Because those two are the kind of person the other deserves. At one point, Chloe opened her mouth to speak. Neither of them managed to find words, either. She shut her mouth and turned to vanish behind the curtain. The stage was small enough that there was no hiding between scenes. The only good news was that in half a minute or so Rachel would need to be on stage for scene two with Titania’s attendants. Chloe would follow shortly after. She would have no cause to speak to either Rachel or Max until she was firmly entombed behind a new, if temporary mask of her own. One which she named, I Don’t Give a Fuck.

As they took their final group bow some time later, to general applause, Chloe tried to remember that she should feel good. Instead she was confused as to what she was supposed to feel with her right hand in Rachel’s hand and her left in Max’s. She had trouble focusing on the general positive response from the crowd that Mikey reading her name and Chloe’s appearance on stage had brought when the play was done. All she knew was that until the metaphorical curtain fell, she had to smile. She did. It was the most forced smile she could remember giving since her mother brought David Madsen into their home, but she smiled. On either side of her, Rachel and Max did the same. Chloe tried not to look to where she knew her mother was sat. She even tried not to look at the Caulfields who had made their not-so-surprise appearance in town that morning, sending their daughter a group selfie with Chloe’s mother at the diner. Under normal circumstances she’d be gungho to see Vanessa and Ryan again.

In this case, though, the minute that the lights went out, Chloe released the hands of the girls on either side and turned. Having spent all night jumping between the stage (whether in dark between scenes and acts or not) the pitch black backstage or the dimly lit area behind the stage, Chloe crossed to exeunt into the night without a problem. She didn’t bother trying to refocus her eyes once she was behind the set and instead felt around for the break in the curtain blocking her from the backstage area where she knew Mikey was sitting in wait on the sound board. Fucking hero, she was able to spare a thought for the boy. He looked exhausted when she pulled to a stop in front of him and disconnected the microphone from her shirt collar. Running between sound and lights with only one other stage hand all night will do that to you. Mikey looked up at her once, his face
"You kicked ass," she told him, uncaring as to whether he had had time to cut peoples’ personal mics or not. When his lips curled in an appreciative smile, Chloe dropped all further pretense and started to walk briskly away. He called out her name in confusion. Another voice, this one Rachel’s, promised someone she would text them later. Probably Max. Chloe did not turn back to see Rachel emerge from the curtain. It was not too difficult to find a route to the parking lot that didn’t take her by the front of the stage.

What was difficult, Chloe found out a moment later as she worked her legs a little quicker, was shaking Rachel when she was determined not to be shaken. Rachel was hurrying along at a pace bordering on jogging when she caught up with Chloe. She’d probably blame it on shorter legs. Still dressed and made up as Titania, Rachel momentarily inspired in Chloe the delusional urge to speak in character. She might have laughed if she didn’t just want Rachel to take the hint and back off. Chloe fixed her eyes in front of her, despite feeling Rachel’s boring into the side of her head. A couple of wandering students already down the path toward the parking lot spotted them. Chloe did not recognize them, so they were likely of Mikey’s year.

“Hey, fairy queens!” one of them shouted. Chloe did not give him a second look as she hurried past. “Just make out already!” I should let their teeth make out with my fist. Something shot out of her mouth in response. It was supposed to be scathing and obscene but instead when she closed her mouth again, she knew she had just spoken a gibberish of obscenities toward a complete stranger. The unknown boys’ laughter reached her ears. Chloe kept walking, but this was apparently the wrong choice.

“Chloe,” Rachel said, emphatically. I need to sleep this off, Chloe thought. I need to get away and get some sleep. That was not what she said when Rachel repeated her call, this time more demandingly. Maybe it was the whole situation between her, Rachel and Max, maybe it was what she had witnessed backstage, the surety it had left in her that she was about to be alone or maybe it was the idea of driving out of town and off into what little in the way of ‘country’ she could find to find somewhere to sleep in the cab of her truck, but she snapped a bit.

“I’m not okay,” Chloe told her, head shooting around without warning. She hated that she was raising her voice anywhere in Rachel’s direction but she felt trapped and more than a little bit desperate. “I need to go.” This was supposed to express the idea that she needed to go alone, but Rachel did not perceive it that way, judging by the way the girl picked up pace to match Chloe’s jog. “I can’t talk about this,” she told the blonde beside her as they reached the steps to the parking lot. A few people were funneling toward it already from the stage, predictably. Chloe shot past a man who was severely overdressed and down into the lot. Rachel followed suit.

“Not talking about this is the worst part,” Rachel told her, still in pursuit. “I think it’s why this all hurts so bad.” Echoing thoughts that Chloe had had herself, Chloe realized the girl had said the
only thing that might get her to slow down.

“I’m not talking about it here,” Chloe shot back as she turned around. Rachel took two sudden steps back and Chloe realized she had been outright yelling. God this hurts, she said. None of this is supposed to hurt like this. Not tonight. Tonight we should be ditching the wrap party to get shitfaced on the shittiest beer that no money can buy. We should be laughing.

“Fine,” Rachel finally retorted, sternly. When the girl walked clean past her toward the Frankentruck, the surety from before rose back up inside her. It warned her that if she drove them someplace private right then and there, she would end the night more profoundly and completely alone. Sometimes Chloe thought that the line ‘Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all’ was bullshit. She knew deep down that after Rachel split from her she would be more miserable than she was before they even started hanging out. A tiny part of her was already making plans in her head for the small amount of money she had to her name and how much gasoline she could purchase with it, how far from Arcadia Bay she could get before either the gas ran out or the Frankentruck died on her.

Though Chloe hated the idea, Rachel rode the entirety of the trip in the bed of the truck, as if to remove the temptation to speak. Eventually, though, Chloe shut the engine off with herself, Rachel and the truck firmly ensconced in the “private” walls of the familiar and almost nurturing junk that made up the American Rust junkyard in Arcadia Bay’s outer limits. She could not bring herself to open the door. There was a whole world of hurt waiting out there in what she feared would be their place for the last time. The truck shifted as Rachel climbed from the bed of it. Having slept in the back of her truck no small amount of times lately, Chloe knew how uncomfortable even sitting in it was. Part of her hoped Rachel was not too cold after the trip.

The sound of the wind through trees always conjured up specific images in Chloe’s mind. It was pirate forts, buried treasure, the laughter of a younger Max. It was the fairgrounds as a kid with all the sights, sounds and smells found there. It was long walks they would get in trouble for taking through the woods, climbing over a half collapsed stretch of fence and passing from a regular old Arcadia Bay park into a National Park which mostly only meant that it was larger, more well protected and funded. It was the sound of nostalgia. The sound Chloe was listening to in the moment was wind whistling through hollowed out shells of vehicles, past junk of all kinds, all shapes and sizes. That sound was Rachel’s hand in hers. It was the warmth of the girl pressed up against her, it was learning to get used to physical contact, to cuddling. It was their raucous ribbing of each other, shoving one another about in laughter at some joke no one else would find funny. It was a stolen kiss, it was a moment when they, alongside Max, conquered Damon Merrick simply by not letting him steal this place’s meaning from them. It was the birthday party they held for Max, happiness, beer, celebration, rolling dice. It was Their Place, hers and Rachel’s and, yes, Max’s. It should not have sounded so hollow in her ears that night.

Inevitably, the popular, confident, talented girl with her long, gorgeous braided blonde hair and burning hazel eyes looked once through the window of Chloe’s driver side door and then, when Chloe did not entirely match her gaze, opened it herself. Chloe swallowed. To stay sitting there,
still and silent at this point, would be cowardice. She was not going to be a coward, not about this. The mask of Oberon might as well have been solid and real (not to mention laying discarded on the front seat of the truck) because when her feet touched the ground and the door shut behind her Chloe FELT everything with such an intensity that she did not think she could move quite yet. Rage and hurt, sadness and fear danced in equal measure together like fae in a circle beneath a full moon. Upsetting was how she saw the same dance taking place not behind Rachel’s own mask, but in and on her face, in the way she furrowed her brow, in the way her cheeks tinged red in the dying light, in the unnatural frown or in the way Rachel swallowed more often than normal, as if trying to keep something down. Then, as if someone had fired a pistol at the starting line of a sprint, Chloe Price and Rachel Amber sprung on the offensive simultaneously.

“If you’re going to fuck off and leave me, you can stow the bullshit,” she told Rachel, unconsciously mimicking the first words Rachel had ever spoken to Max. She recognized it the moment the line came out. “I fucking get it alright. If you’re going to break up with me for Max, I get it. Just get it done. I’m tired of waiting for it. It’s like looking over your shoulder for someone to come at you, swinging at your skull and I’m fucking tired of being scared of the people I love!” Chloe expected any number of responses to this exhausting, open proclamation. Anger, rage, or even just a defeated sigh that washed away Rachel’s emotions and was followed by an admission that yes, it was over. She did not expect Rachel to laugh, once, loudly, humorlessly in her face.

“Ha! I could say the same thing to you,” Rachel practically yelled. Her voice echoed off the old cars, boat and bus shells around them. Chloe wondered if hers had echoed the same. A gust of wind struck. Rachel’s stray hairs flew wildly around her head. Chloe actually staggered back against the truck under the force of the wind. Rachel stepped back once and Chloe realized that there was no word for the kind of upset on her face. It was as if someone had taken every negative emotion Rachel had been feeling, poured them into a glass and shook them so hard they could not be distinguished. Another gust of wind slapped them both in the face but Rachel did not so much as wince.

“You’re always stealing looks at her when you think neither of us is watching and the look on your face, man ... there’s all this shit that you’d only do or say to me before. Now you do all of them with Max, short of actually kissing her. Don’t lie to me about it, I’m a big girl, I can take it.” Why this last part came out pleading, Chloe wasn’t sure.

“Yeah,” Rachel declared, loudly over a rising blast of wind. Chloe looked up despite herself, for clouds and found none in the night sky. Rachel threw her hands up and then slammed them back down at her sides. Rachel could almost swear she heard thunder in the distance. “You know what?” Rachel asked her, though it was the kind of rhetorical question which seemed dangerous to answer. “You’re right. I like Max. I really like her. A lot. In the same way I’m into you. She feels the same, and I know it. You know it. The entire fucking school knows it. Some of them look at me like they’re waiting to see if I’m going to be a total dick to you. They know. You know what though?” Again, this seemed rhetorical, so, more upset than angry, Chloe waited. “You can’t even pretend you’re not in the same boat.” Rachel’s mouth slammed shut exaggeratedly, a fight seemed to be fought and lost on her face and then she spoke again and her words and the feelings behind them felt so familiar that she might have preferred for Rachel to stab her.
“You two do the same shit, Chloe.” Rachel seemed to take a step left, then right, as if she wanted to move in some way but was unsure of how to do this without making it look like she was trying to run away from the conversation and that was sure as shit not an option. Chloe could feel that same nervous energy in her legs. “Sometimes it even makes sense for you to tell me, ‘I’m sorry, I’m just not into you anymore.’” That’s fucking absurd, Chloe wanted to shout at her. That’s absolute nonsense. “Look at you two. You’re so fucking alike. You’re so artistic, you’re so emotional, sometimes I don’t know if I am even capable of feeling like you both do.” Rachel’s hands were clenched so tightly part of Chloe worried she was going to hurt herself. “You fuckers live life so real that the rest of the world looks like a god damned movie set that is falling apart.” She’s picked up my ‘inappropriate language.’ “And you know what? Fuck it. Some days I feel awed by that and it’s nice to feel close to you both and feel like you’re my friends but I can’t help that a part of me wants more than that from either, from both of you. If that makes me an asshole that’s fine, but to hell with all the bullshit dancing around.”

Though Chloe was being almost rocked on her feet by the strange wind which was making horrible noises as it passed over the junkyard, it ironically felt that all the wind in her sails was gone. That did nothing for the feelings inside of her. It did not rob her of them. It didn’t even dull them. It just made her feel powerless because she knew that screaming and yelling and cursing would not be a release valve for them, at least not as completely. That would be a waste of time and energy and fuck all of that. She had- they had already wasted enough of both of those things. Rachel seemed to be deflating under her confession, too, but her fists didn’t unclench.

“I’ve thought the same shit,” Chloe told her, her voice lowering as the wind began to die down. She still shivered. “I’ve thought all of that same shit. That I wasn’t worth you. That the feelings you were getting for Max would make you see it. That you’d see her and realize that here’s someone that neither of us can help but feel this way about and you’d realize I wasn’t worth a fuck in comparison to either of you. A spark in front of a forest fire.” This time it was Chloe’s turn for a bitter laugh. She had not meant to allude to something that dark in their past. Rachel did not look any more or less hurt. She looked like she was trying hard to hold her tongue and let Chloe finish. “Because I know right here,” her fingers jabbed into her own chest, hard. “I know right here that she’s worth more than I am and I’ve always known you are.”

“God damn it,” Rachel suddenly yelled, like a balloon bursting under too much air. That balloon popped right in Chloe’s face and she jerked back so hard she slammed her head against the door of the Frankentruck. Pain throbbed in the back of her head. “Yeah I’ve got a fucking crush on Max. Same as you. Fucking look at her. She’s amazing. She’s funny, she’s probably as smart as you are and she’s stronger than the both of us put together. Of fucking course we have a crush. Does that mean I don’t still feel like a different person when I’m with you? Does that mean that those things I can barely fucking put words to, those real reasons, the ones deep down that I caught feelings for you are gone? Fuck no.” Chloe remained pressed against the side of the truck as Rachel approached. The girl placed her hands against the truck on either side of Chloe’s shoulders. “Do you feel any different for me?”

“That’s stupid,” Chloe replied, far more measuredly but surely. “That’s a fucking stupid question to
ask me.” Rachel pushed off of the truck and took a step away from her. There was a moment where Chloe watched physical pain in her eyes as the girl bent down and forced one pant leg up, far and fast, to the point where it was probably squeezing unbearably against her leg. There, even in the moonlight, Chloe could see the dragon outlined bold, twisting down the outside of her calf, powerful and permanent. She had always thought of it as a guardian force, something she had given Rachel that might protect her. This time though, with it barely visible in the starlight, something else began to fall into place.

“Would you still fight a dragon for me?” Rachel asked her in that voice that said she thought she knew the answer already. The meaning of the tattoo Rachel had begged Chloe to design for her months ago hit Chloe as if it were the freight train she and Rachel had hitched numerous rides on. Burning, hateful guilt rose in her chest and then in her throat like the blackest bile. She had told herself time and time again never to distrust Rachel and the feelings that the thespian held for her and in the end, despite this refrain, she had. Chloe had never actually realized the depth of these feelings. It had never been Rachel whose emotions she should have questioned. It had been, from the start, her own. Chloe looked once into the hazel orbs that would always open for her and show her the truth about how Rachel felt and then immediately looked away. The fire in her eyes, Chloe thought. She did not think she could bear to match the girl’s gaze again, yet.

“In a heartbeat,” Chloe told the ground between her feet. The answer was broken by a sudden body-shaking sob. She didn’t stop the tears that came pouring down her face in the next moment nor blink against them, but when she perceived Rachel moving toward her, as if to embrace her, Chloe stepped to the side hard. When she looked up, Rachel was staring fiercely at her, not as if hurt by the action but determined to understand it.

“I don’t see how you could possibly ignore Max,” Rachel told her. “But if you tell me that you’re not going to leave me then I believe you, because Chloe Price will never try to hurt me.” The bile in the back of her throat threatened to make a reappearance. Chloe shook her head hard. “I’ll believe you and we’ll figure out what to do about the rest of it after that.” For a moment she could swear that Rachel was channeling Titania, in just the slightest. Then again, Chloe thought. Maybe this was just where the character of Titania overlapped with the person, Rachel: passion, confidence, strength.

“I was right,” Chloe finally managed, “you are being stupid. Of course I’m not going to fuckin—who would be dumb enough to have Rachel fucking Amber as a girlfriend and ditch her?” Chloe wanted to sound lighthearted, like she felt better, like she had recovered. She wanted to answer, too. This was the best she could do to accomplish both goals but she knew Rachel saw through her bombastic attitude. Rachel would always see through her and Chloe would always try to reassure the people she loved that everything was going to be alright. The two of them could make their relationship last from teenage lovers to wilted old ladies and Chloe did not think either of those things would change or that they would need to. “Are you, you know, jealous?” Chloe asked her. “About me returning Max’s feelings?” It felt like an important conversation to have, the last big barrier between them. She was happy Max wasn’t there to put herself in this conversation in any manner. It needed to happen between her and Rachel and it wouldn’t have been fair to ask the girl to just sit to the side and let herself be talked about.
“If I was, I’d be a raging hypocrite, wouldn’t I?” Rachel asked. When Chloe did not respond, she repeated, “Wouldn’t I?” Chloe was forced to nod. Rachel reached down to remove the torn shirt she wore on top of a more appropriate, properly put together pale tee. The discarded shirt flew past Chloe’s head and through the open truck window. Titania’s wings followed suit, one by one. Chloe didn’t blame her. Cold as it was, the tee that served as her own overshirt was uncomfortable. She hated the feeling of two shirts on top of her. It wasn’t the same as a jacket over a tee, that was comfortable. This felt constricting like she had issues drawing breath and right in that moment, she knew they both needed to breathe. Trying to stifle her tears and breathe normally again, Chloe pulled her own overshirt off and wrapped her wings up in it, depositing it in the cab of the truck beside Rachel’s. They were both dressed far more casually, in this manner, no longer trying to keep up the image of the fae queens in the mortal realm. The bile seemed to settle. She hoped that the guilt burning in her stomach would die down soon, too. Chloe continued to avoid looking at either Rachel’s painted face or tattooed calf. The dragon would be waiting for her there, accusing and judging. It would be right to judge her.

“I’m not actually jealous either,” Chloe told her when she finally wiped at her eyes and found no tears there to replace the discarded ones. “I thought I was for a long time. I was just fucking scared. Is that fucked up of us?” Chloe laughed, her eyes coming to rest on a particular ruined car close to fifty feet away from them. For a second she wished she was dreaming. She wished she was dreaming so that the man who that car stole from her could come out and offer her some advice that was probably just from her own subconscious speaking through him. Rachel took a step toward her and Chloe sidestepped again, this time moving toward the car a few steps.

“What happens now?” Rachel asked her, her voice patient. It was also tinged with a kind of affection that Chloe wasn’t sure she had heard in it more than once or twice and in the moment made her feel small and more unworthy than she ever had before. The idea that she had ever doubted Rachel when Rachel chose to make her promise, her feelings so permanent and glaringly obvious was tearing at her. Chloe knew the answer to ‘what now.’ She just didn’t think Rachel was going to like it.

“I need air,” she told Rachel, turning to walk away.

“What do you mean?” Rachel demanded of her. Judging by the volume of her voice, she had followed Chloe a step or two toward the ruined shell of William Price’s car.

“I just need some air. We can keep talking, we can do this right. I just need some space for a second.” Chloe exhaled and was surprised she did not throw up her guilt in the act. “Just a walk.”

“Be careful,” Rachel told her. This did feel like a command, a demand, a declaration that she wouldn’t forgive Chloe for getting herself hurt.
“I promise.” Chloe shifted her sights from the car to the direction of the railroad tracks. Careful was relative. To them a walk along the tracks was commonplace. To her mother, being in the junkyard at all would have been seen as dangerous. Chloe knew that Rachel understood. She knew, deep down, that Rachel would be waiting for her when she got back. I’ve been such an asshole.
Chapter Twenty-Two: Aristeia the Second

November 19th, 2010

Rachel was nervously pacing the length of the shed when her phone rang. Hoping against hope that it was Chloe saying she was coming back, that they could finish talking, she answered. An apology was on her lips for daring to sound upset that Chloe just wanted some air alongside the thought that there was so much going on and all they needed to do was talk about it until the sun came up and everything would be alright. The voice on the other end of the line was distressed. It was not Chloe’s voice but Steph’s. It was utterly jarring to hear Steph anything but cocky and projecting.

“Rachel? I can’t get ahold of Chloe. Her phone goes right to voicemail.” She was speaking quickly; there was no ‘hello, how’s it going, why did you leave before the wrap party?’ Also conspicuously missing were other voices. A wrap party, even unofficial as it was, was typically given permission to be held backstage and most of the time everyone stayed. In other words, for some reason Steph had abandoned the wrap party for the first time since she started partaking in the play in any form. That made the panicked tone more concerning. When Rachel didn’t respond immediately, Steph nearly yelled, “Rachel?”

“Yeah, Steph, I’m here, take a breath, calm down.”

“No,” Steph said, and from her tone Rachel could imagine the girl’s painted nails gripping the phone as she pressed it close to her mouth. “You don’t understand. I think Max is in trouble.” Rachel stopped pacing. “She’s been acting weird for the last twenty minutes. Like, I thought she was just tired and everything? So I went to the bathroom. When I got back, she was completely out of it. Like, not looking at anyone, not really talking to anyone? She was just kind of sitting alone.”
Rachel relaxed. Steph was just overreacting.

“She’s probably just having a bad moment, if you can, just hang out with her for a few. She’ll be okay, I know it can be a bit-”

“No, you’re not getting me. She started acting like she was fucking out of it, man. Like, asleep on your feet kind of out of it and like, two or three minutes ago, she just left.” Rachel frowned. “Dana says she left with Nathan Prescott.” Frowning stopped. Doubting the seriousness of the moment stopped. Every horrible thing that Chloe or Max herself had ever suggested about Nathan came back to Rachel. His rage and how he took it out on one of his only friends after he lost most of his hair supported the idea that he wasn’t exactly the most stable.

There’s no way Max would go anywhere with that fucker, Rachel realized. The day had been taxing, so far. The idea that it might not be over should have been devastating. First, the play had been draining in more ways than one, especially trying to keep Max and Chloe on their game. Her fight with Chloe had been enough that she had wanted to scream and panic. Now, when it looked like that danger had passed, this. I should be mad, Rachel thought, imagining Max being lead away from the stage by Nathan. No, no I shouldn’t. It’s not her fault Chloe and I didn’t talk. It’s kind of mine. I made her think she couldn’t talk to me. She thought she wasn’t worthy of me? What a fucking joke.

“Rachel, we need to find her.” It sucks I can’t just freak out right now, but there’s no way in hell that Max went with Nathan by choice. If she’s really out of it, something might be wrong. Maybe she’s panicked about something and he took advantage of that. Then the horrible thought that he might be about to take advantage of her in a literal sense made Rachel tear from the shed, calling a response into the phone.

“I’m coming,” Rachel told Steph. She hung up before the girl could respond and ran outside. “CHLOE!” Her voice echoed off the decrepit shells of cars and all manner of garbage that she could not be assed to identify. “Chloe!” She called again and again, the cooling night air answered her only with her own voice. God damn it. What do I do? “Chloe, god damn it, you asshole!” It was anger she felt rising. Who the fuck turns off their phone after shit like that? Not even the image of Chloe in tears, trying to stumble away from her calmed Rachel’s frustration. Rachel turned her head toward The Beast, Chloe’s huge Frankentruck. Max is missing. Chloe is missing. The keys are on the dash. Rachel exhaled. Chloe’s sulking. Max is in trouble.

Me

Prescott has Max. Took truck. Sorry.

The truck roared to life under her hands. She had never particularly driven it: her limited driving
experience outside of driving class or her test involved her mother’s car and her distance with her mother meant she had not really continued to practice. No choice, Rachel told herself. You know how to drive and you’ve seen Chloe drive this thing a hundred times. She shifted and let off the break. The truck lurched forward eagerly, a puppy happy to come to its master’s call. Rachel blew through the exit of the American Rust junkyard going too fast by far and turned right down the road without bothering with something as silly as turn signals. This was, as it went, not her favorite night after a play ever. Tearing down the street she looked once at the bobblehead on the dash.

“I’ll talk to her more soon,” she promised the diminutive figure. “Chloe and I have forever to finish this talk. Right now there’s ass that needs kicking and she’d be doing it too, if she could.” It nodded at her. Damn right, and she’d do it for me too. Warmth spread from her stomach to her extremities. Chloe cares about me. I care about her. I want that to be all that matters. She forced herself to focus on the road, lit poorly by the truck’s clouded headlights. But it’s going to have to matter later. Each time she passed a vehicle she crossed her fingers that it was not a cop car. The Arcadia Bay Police department weren’t likely to be too happy about a truck that sounded like it was going to fall to pieces doing seventy in a fifty zone.

Rachel took only the time to pocket the keys and slam the truck door behind her as she ran from the parking lot at Blackwell Academy to the stage. Predictably, the stage was empty save for one person. Steph was not sitting, she was not even pacing. She just stood, frustrated, fists curled. Behind the stage, the wrap party was continuing as curfew approached. Rachel heard voices, music and tried desperately to block them out. As she sprinted down the aisle in the middle of the sea of chairs, her foot hooked one. It slammed into a chair beside it and drew Steph’s eyes.

“Fuck me! Where is Chloe?” Steph asked her. Rachel shook her head. Steph took this as some sort of bad sign judging by the way she angrily hurled her beanie to one side of the stage and her fingers curled now into her own hair. “I’ve checked the dressing rooms, I’ve checked all around the stage. I’ve checked the parking lot. There’s a side door unlocked on the main building. I’ve been in there. Everything’s quiet, everything’s dark. I haven’t even seen the night security.” Go to the absolute worst case scenario, Rachel told herself. Because when it comes to the girl who bashed Damon Merrick’s face in with a baseball bat, anything is possible. “I should’ve just called the fucking cops!”

“No,” Rachel said. “You made the right call.” This wasn’t the sort of thing Max was going to want the choice taken away from her on. Moreover, if there was one thing Rachel never disagreed with Chloe on it was that the Prescotts owned Arcadia Bay, even-no, especially-the parts of it that carried a badge. “Try the doors at the pool. If you can’t get in or don’t find anything, check inside the school again.” Rachel rushed toward the curtain behind the set.

“Where are you going?” Steph called, still nearly tearing her hair out in frustration.

“I’m going to go where I better not find her and if I do, no amount of daddy’s money is going to
save that son of a bitch.” Rachel let the curtain fall behind her and turned a corner, stepping away from the backing for the set. Stretched out on the bit of manicured lawn behind it, around a folding table moved out of the cafeteria, most of the cast and crew sat arrayed in celebration. Mikey was popping a coke beside Dana mere feet from where Rachel came out through the curtain. Mr. Keaton had long since abandoned the scene and his co-director was nowhere to be found. That just made everything easier. No one noticed her at first. Not even Eliot with his prying eyes who was always glaring at her.

By the time she even pinged on anyone’s radar she was leaning down beside Hayden, who turned suddenly to face her, surprised. And a tiny bit guilty, Rachel told herself, currently well acquainted with how that looked on another’s face. The guilt went away and was replaced by relief when he saw who had grabbed him by the shoulder. His eyes said that he was not entirely sober, that he had snuck something in despite the fact that security or Mr. Keaton could come out and catch him at any point. He was still half-costumed. Rachel realized in seeing that, that she was, too. Then again, tattered jeans and chucks weren’t so bad. She shifted her feet in the converse, impressed she had managed not to wreck on the way over, with them being a size too large for her.

“Hayden,” she said, trying to keep her voice low. “You keep your mouth shut and discreetly pass me the key to the boy’s dorms, forget this conversation ever happened and I’ll toss you fifty bucks tomorrow.” For a second he looked confused and when he spoke it was as if he hadn’t heard her at all. She groaned internally.

“Yo, Rachel,” he said, grinning broadly at her as if in greeting. The one thing she would always hate to admit about Hayden was that he was more or less classically attractive. In retrospect he was probably one of my first tip-offs that I was into guys, too. For a moment he waited for her to answer and when she only fixed a glare on him, he continued. “What? You can’t stay? Well fuck,” he swung his hand once, suddenly, and seized hers, as if in a high-five turned into a hand shake. Something kind of small and sharp, clearly made of metal was pressed against the palm of her hand. Oh, fuck, I’m being oblivious.

“Yeah, sorry, just might get some rest,” she said, loudly. “Long night. You guys have a good time!” Rachel palmed the key and tried not to be too obvious about it. She patted him once on the shoulder she had just been holding in as blatant a gesture of thanks as she could give and then turned to walk away. It took all of her power to stay calm until she was out of view of the people behind the stage but the minute the cast and crew couldn’t see her anymore, Rachel ran. Worse case scenario, Rachel told herself, he took her back to his room. I’d think about the best case scenario, but let’s be fucking real.

It didn’t take her too long to find the key on Hayden’s ring. He only had two others on it and in general it looked not too different from the key to the girls’ floor. The door gave in the same way and she was sprinting down the hallway in a second. Two months ago she and Chloe had been sneaking down this hall, both all in for an act of petty vengeance. For a fucking jacket, she hissed at herself. If he does something to Max just because of what we did to him…. In that case, Rachel wasn’t sure she could ever forgive herself.
At some point she had stopped feeling her lungs heaving as she tried to breathe or the aching in her
legs or even the shaking of her limbs in general. Mechanically it all worked and felt like it was
working overtime but only a tightness in her chest really stood out to her. Tunneling in on the right
doors, still fairly sharp in her memory after those two months, Rachel stopped in front of it and
pressed her ear against it. It was soft, mind you, but she was able to hear Nathan through the door.
Without a doubt, though his words were obscured, Nathan Prescott was on the other side of it,
speaking to someone. Son of a bitch. His tone was strange, a mix of aggression and something
else. Eagerness. He’s eager. She closed her eyes and listened, hard for anything that might tip her
off.

“That’s right,” Nathan was saying, so giddy he almost laughed as he spoke. “Just stay right there,
you mouthy little bitch.” Without bothering to step back, Rachel threw her entire weight against the
door. It did not budge, but Nathan’s voice changed. “What the fuck?!” Stumbling back a step
Rachel kicked the door this time, the bottom of Chloe’s shoe resounding soundly off of it. Her goal
was not to knock it down but to make it clear that the noise was not a one off. There came a soft
click. Rachel realized that the doorknob was being turned. Nathan was just going to open the door
with Max in his room, almost certainly against her will. Now, Rachel told herself, determined to
make sure she did not hesitate and miss a perfect opportunity. Chloe had made her watch enough
action films with her to recognize a good chance when she saw one. Rachel backed up three steps
and then charged. She was breathing so hard that she wanted to vomit. Her arms buzzed and tingled
as she turned sideways and slammed her weight into the door. Chest hurts.

The door flew inward as she ran into it. A nice solid thud followed by a grunt rang out. It swung
wide and a louder, more audible thud sounded as Nathan Prescott dropped. She wondered how
many people were in the dorms at this hour. Would someone come in time? Nathan slammed into
the ground hard enough that he should have been audible from the stage and Rachel struggled to
stay standing. Dimly she realized what was happening to her, that she was hyperventilating. She’d
seen Max do it on more than one occasion and even tried to help her through it. This was different
though. The room began to spin and wobble almost as soon as she got her bearings. It looked
mostly unchanged, except that Nathan was sprawled on the ground and there, in his computer chair
with her wrists tied to either arm of the chair by some strip of dark cloth, was Max. She did not try
to look at Rachel or Nathan. Her head was barely up. Her sweatshirt hung half off of her, revealing
most of Hippie Puck outfit underneath, though Rachel was disturbed to see a tear at the tie-dye
shirt’s neckline.

*She’s completely gone,* Rachel realized, staggering uncoordinatedly toward the chair. Something
knocked against the wall as she threw herself down toward Max, grabbing at the cloth around the
photographer’s wrists. Even in her panic, she got her fingers into the knot on top of first Max’s left
and then her right wrist. Max was trying to talk as she slumped forward in the chair but when
Rachel leaned forward to listen a set of fingers wrapped into her hair and jerked her back, hard. Her
sight blurred as her head slammed against the wall, propelled by the force of Nathan’s arm shoving
her. Enraged, she pushed against the wall and spun herself around. Nathan had released her and was
reaching back for something heavy. His camera lay discarded on the floor between his feet. *This
motherfucker!* An eerie focus grabbed at her as Nathan stumbled backward, nearly falling. She no
longer heard his feet, his words or anything but the sound of her own heart. He was moving as
wildly as her heart beat, all rage and instinct. *No different than me. I can beat him.* His hand found purchase on a lamp, and he jerked it forward suddenly.

*No,* Rachel thought, eyes slamming shut as she raised her hand to block the first blow. The lamp struck, probably meant for her head. Pushing it to the side, she didn’t notice the pain, but she heard the sound of bone cracking. Nathan cursed this time at the top of his lungs, bringing the sounds of the outer world back.

“No,” Rachel told him, aloud. The room felt like a sauna, thick and hot. Her head swam, spun and threatened to darken. She was simultaneously alive in a way she could not explain and felt like deadweight. Nathan brought the lamp back toward her head and, screaming, Rachel told him to fuck himself, throwing her hands out. In the tick of a second hand the dorm room went from a seething hot sauna to frozen wasteland. Bright light flared inches from her face and she jerked backward out of pure reaction, hands falling to her sides. She felt the sensation of pushing something or someone away with another set of hands which *did not exist* and the lamp swinging toward her face burst into flame in Nathan’s hand. Shocked, the boy looked at the lamp, crying out, recognizing what was happening just a moment too late. The world slowed down and and the sight sharpened in front of her. Her rage was gone. Her breathing was slowing.

The lamp didn’t shatter so much as explode. Burning pieces of it scattered to every corner of the room. One buried itself in that thick, black rug Rachel had once admired. It began to smolder immediately. Nathan fell back clutching his head. Rachel would not sleep that night, thanks to the mental image of one hot, burning piece of ceramic or plastic burying itself in Nathan’s face, just below his eye. There was no blood from the wound as if the superheated projectile cauterized the wound but if Rachel watched she knew she would see just how much damage it had actually done to his eye. She had been unable to look away in time to avoid seeing a glimpse of it. She never wanted to remember that glimpse. Rachel crossed the room, pushed her shoulder roughly into Max’s side and lifted her. Max tried to walk. She also tried to talk but her words were nonsensical in Rachel’s ears. Nathan began to scream in agony.

Rachel had just barely gotten them both from the building, not seeing another soul, when the fire alarm began to blare. *Oh god,* Rachel thought, desperately turning left to right. She was breathing normally, despite being cold enough that she might have been submerged in the ocean. The only warmth there seemed to be in the world was varying between draped over her and trying to walk beside her. *Oh god.* She thought again, dragging Max around the corner, to the back of the dorm. The girl’s feet threatened to leave drag marks at one point and then at another she was again trying to walk. *Don’t get seen,* Rachel told herself. *They can’t find you here.* Her heartbeat was not normal yet but her heart was no longer threatening to tear through her chest. Her teeth chattered in her head, louder than either Max’s mumbling or the alarm. *So cold.* She might as well have been wearing nothing in subzero temperatures. Part of her thought she must be sapping Max of all of the warmth in her body.

All of the attention of campus was on the dormitory. It made perfect sense to Rachel that by walking through the grass at the back edge of campus she was able to carry Max, who at one point
began to finally find purchase and walk, to the parking lot without being seen. She still felt
astounded by her luck. Max was not that much smaller than her. It took a great effort to lift her into
the truck, especially because she was in no state to help. Not once did Max say a full word as she
was almost stuffed unceremoniously into the passenger’s side of the vehicle where she came to rest
on top of Titania’s wings.

*If she has any idea where she is, I’ll be surprised. Does she know she’s with me?* Rachel hoped so.
She hoped Max knew she was safe. It was when Rachel tried to pull herself up and into the driver’s
seat of the Frankentruck that she first noticed the pain shooting from her right hand up her arm. She
only made the mistake of looking down at it once. The urge to vomit returned. With some
difficulty, her ring finger and thumb came together to shove the key into the ignition, but adding
the damaged hand to her incessant shivering and it became almost impossible to turn it.

From where it lay discarded between her and Max, her phone buzzed once. Max did not sit up but
she did show one small bit of self-awareness, curling in on herself. *At least I hope it’s self-
awareness,* Rachel thought, realizing that if she did not get the truck started shortly they would be
found there in that state when the firemen and police arrived. *Oh my god the fire!* The truck
stuttered and then came to life as she turned the key. She reached across herself, leaning over so
far that her elbow pressed into Max’s back, and with her left hand turned the truck’s heater up and
on full blast. She wasn’t even sure it worked. *The cold never bothered me anyway.*

For a moment, she waited and wrapped her arms around herself, trying desperately to get warm.
Once more the world began to dim around the edge of her vision and now that she was not moving
she could no longer hear her hammering heart. The intelligent choice was to drive away: The
vehicle wasn’t hers, Max was still delirious where she lay, curled up on the other half of the seat.
In this case and in this state questions would be asked that she could not or would not give answers
for. Rachel shook from the cold but it grew worse each time she drew a breath. The alarms blaring
throughout the campus and that same, burning, seething rage slowly seeped into her arms, bringing
no real warmth but at least some feeling in her arms and with that an understanding about herself
that Rachel had never had before. Part of Rachel didn’t want to drive away. That part of her wanted
to slam the truck door behind her and hurry back to the dorms. She wanted, in full sight of the staff
and students to stalk Nathan Prescott from one end of campus to the other.

She wanted to run him down in the night like the criminal on the loose that he was until his puny,
entitled ass could no longer run and then- and then…. *I want revenge.* Rachel shook her head hard
and then shifted the truck into gear and pulled out of the parking lot with some surprising care. *I
need to warm up,* she thought. Rachel passed flashing lights and blaring sirens a block out from the
school before she began to gain some control. Beside her, Max was still gone to the world.
Knowing that nothing she could do was guaranteed to bring Max around, Rachel allowed herself to
scream at the road in front of her until her throat hurt and the conflicting emotions and concerns
quieted down to let her think. Max lifted her head and looked at her but did not speak.

Fumbling with her phone between them, she opened it with her damaged right hand and considered
who she really ought to call first. Instead of Chloe, who she knew was going to have to be
informed, argument or no argument, she dug into her recent calls and called back Steph. When the girl answered, the sound of sirens and alarms drowned out her voice out for a second. Rachel did not speak. Slowly, the sound grew quieter and quieter as Steph ostensibly moved away from the school and the parking lot. Rachel wondered how best to tell this story as she balanced the wheel against her raging right hand and her knees. It’s not mine to tell.

“Rachel? Did you find her? Is everything over?”

“Y-y-yes,” she chattered, body jerking against the cold. “Did you tell anyone…” the tail end of the sentence died to the cold.

“No, I haven’t seen any security but I’d guess they’re dealing with the alarms. They’re coming from the dorms. Was that you?” Rachel wasn’t sure how to answer that. The truth was, she had the most absurd certainty that it was her. She was the one who had started that fire, she was the one who made the lamp explode, she was the one who had injured Nathan Prescott. The honest truth was, she would do it again in a heartbeat if she thought he was going to try to hurt Max again.

“Don’t tell anyone. You were right, Nathan had her in his room. The- the rest of it’s not my story.” Steph’s exclamation of ‘fuck’ was a fair echo to the mental dialogue of her own thought processes. Though, those often included, “I’m cold.”

“Are you two okay?”

“She’s out of it still. I th-think I broke a couple of fingers. I know he broke more than that. I’m f-freezing.”

“What’s the fire alarm about?” Rachel wanted to (wait, she thought, I actually do want to) tell her about the lamp which had become a spontaneous fireball as she hit the height of her rage. She actually wanted to tell Steph about this stupid idea that she might have caused it somehow. The thought was enough to trigger a memory of a night she tried not to think about and the phone dropped from her hand. A trash can. A photo. Chloe’s lighter. A tree. A forest. A fucking county. She had gone cold after that, too, though it wasn’t anywhere near as bad. Regret, vengeance and fear rose back to the surface and she again yelled at the windshield of the truck, throwing every curse she had ever heard, including a few Chloe invented when David pissed her off against the road and hoping they would take the thought, the realization from her. They did not. She was still certain and did not think she would be able to forget it. Never again. My girlfriend shares peoples’ dreams. I burn forests down and ruin lives.

She came back to herself in time to realize that the reason headlights were blaring into the cab of
the truck was that there was a car bearing down on her and she was in the wrong lane. Rachel swerved hard and only barely stayed on the road. The horn of the passing car gave a comical demonstration of the Doppler Effect (you’ve been hanging around with Chloe a lot lately) and Rachel steadied herself. On the floorboard, her phone almost shook with the sound of Steph’s voice (or maybe that’s the engine) calling Rachel’s name repeatedly, panicked. Rachel just put the gas pedal down.

*Focus,* she told herself. *Calm down.* She laughed but the sound was lost over Steph blaring through her phone’s speaker, over the truck’s rumbling. *Before you blow up Chloe’s truck or some crazy shit!* She slowed the vehicle and pulled over, calling for Steph to calm down. When she could finally reach down and retrieve the phone with her functioning fingers it fell from her shaking hand twice before she found a grip. There was no more yelling. It took a second but she took the call off of speakerphone.

“Oh, everything’s okay.”

“What the fuck was that?” Rachel once again didn’t know how to answer. What it was was her realizing that she might be a fucking monster.

“Near c-crash,” she lied. “I’m not used to driving this thing and the adrenaline’s not slowing down.”

“Take her to the hospital. Get your hand looked at, too.”

“No,” Rachel said, imperiously. “You’re smarter than that, you’re one of the smartest people in the entire school. I can’t take her to the hospital. The Prescotts own half of it and most of the police force anyway.” *If she walks into that hospital, she is a ‘party girl who can’t handle herself’ before the night’s over. Then if she decides she wants to make an accusation against Nathan, they throw it at her over and over until no one listens.* Rachel wanted to hit or kick something. Why can’t I warm up? I can’t think straight!

“If he gave her too much of whatever he dosed her with, she could die, Rachel. You’re angry, I get it. I want to stomp on Nathan’s stump right now, myself but this isn’t about the Prescotts. It’s about Max.” Rachel turned sideways, ready to take one last look at Max. When she did, though, the girl’s eyes were open. They looked dazed and she did not seem like she could hold her head up well, but she did match gaze with Rachel once. Rachel did not need to be able to hear her whisper. It did not take a lip reader to recognize ‘No, please,’ being formed in exaggerated, emphatic movements. For just a second, Max stared at her as if to make sure Rachel had seen her and then laid her head back down on the seat and closed her eyes. For all intents and purposes she might never have moved at all.
“Absolutely not,” Rachel told Steph, feeling sure of herself, now. “Max wouldn’t want me to. Besides, she’s coming around. She just needs somewhere safe to rest.” No sooner had she spoken the words than that surety slipped away. Please let me be doing the right thing. For Max.

“Can you make it to my house?” Steph asked her. “I’ll be there soon.”

“Okay.” Rachel replied, gratefully. I don’t want her to wake up out at the junkyard right now. “Steph, I need to ask o-one more favor.”

“Anything, Rachel.”

“Hang up and try to call Chloe again. Tell her what’s going on, please.” There was a longer pause than usual and she could almost, if she strained her ears, hear the alarms still going.

“You know I’m going to drive you to the hospital once we’ve got Max inside, right?” That’s not an answer, Rachel thought, aware her flaring rage was misdirected. “I’ll call Chloe, but one of us is getting you to the hospital for your hand. We should be taking Max there too.”

“This is the way she’d want it.” Rachel wasn’t about to argue about a trip to the ER until after Max was safe. This is fucking bizarre. “I’ll beat you back to your house.”

They did, as it happened, beat Steph to her home given the significant head start they had. In all that time Max did not try to speak to her again nor even move. She showed no sign of the momentary clarity, the one that came just in time for her to save Rachel from a moral quandary. The two-story dark brick house was dead in front of them, every light out and the security system armed. Rachel knew the security system’s password from nights at Steph’s but for the life of her if she had ever been told where they might keep a spare key, it had not stuck out to her as something to remember. She sat for a moment, cradling her screaming right hand in her left, the driver’s side door to the truck open and then reached for her phone. If she sat there doing nothing she might look down at her hand and start thinking too much about the pain. It took almost a minute to get into her phone with only her left hand and call Chloe, but eventually the call went through.

“Hey, Chloe?” she said, before Chloe could answer. A loud engine threatened to drown her out but if Rachel focused she could hear her words. Yet, it was no easy task to focus. Her teeth had begun to chatter again.
“Oh thank fuck, listen, I’m almost there. I got picked up halfway back to town by an old friend. I’ll have him drop me in the area in a minute.” Rachel was about to ask who she was talking about when Frank’s voice sounded clear from just beside Chloe.

“Oh what, you don’t trust your old friend to know exactly where you’re going?”

“It’s not my house, dude,” Chloe answered. “Now give me a second. Rachel, is Max alright? Are you? Steph said you were hurt.” Rachel squeezed her eyes shut and tried not to focus on the memory of the forest fire or a mental image of the dorm burning down. This was not the time for some kind of petty fear. Max was still delusional beside her on the seat. She shivered so much that she thought she might throw herself out of the truck and to the ground. “Rachel?”

“Max is still tripping. I don’t think he got to hurt her. I think I broke a couple fingers. I’m so cold, Chloe.” Chloe started to speak, to try to comfort her, judging by the tone, but that irrational corner of her brain was coming into full control over her actions. Hearing tears in her voice which she did not feel on her face, Rachel spoke over her. “I think I almost burned down the dorms. I think I burned down that forest. I think it was me. I think it was all me. People lost houses, Chloe. People lost everything.”

“Rachel,” Chloe said, loudly. “You’re not making any sense. It’s like, shock or something, right? I’ve been through it, when Damon- at the Mill.” Chloe’s voice had at least distracted her but it was doing nothing to rob her of the idea that she might have been responsible for at least one fire in Arcadia Bay. “Listen, I’m like ten minutes out. Did you tell Steph that Nathan Prescott like, took Max?”

“O-other w-way around. Steph called me and told me that Max was just sitting there and acting weird, then she went off somewhere with Nathan pulling her. It sounded fucked up to me, like, really weird. She was scared and couldn’t get ahold of you so I took the truck and I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for that, you did the right thing. I was the stubborn bitch who turned her phone off.” Rachel wanted to argue but that exact thought in those exact words had already gone through her head twice since pulling to a stop outside of Steph’s house, as she tried desperately not to look at her hand, tried desperately to stop shivering. The truck’s heater either didn’t work or her core body temperature was dangerously low.

“S-Steph told me it looked like Max was out of it. Like, really really out of it. I thought maybe she was just having a bad night until Steph couldn’t find her or Nathan anywhere.” Exhaling, Rachel continued. “So I got a bad feeling. She was like, absolutely gone by the time I got there, Chloe. I don’t think anything else happened.” Another thought occurred to her. “Maybe Max had something other than water in that bottle of hers, but I don’t think she would have brought that down with her during the play or the wrap party and no one else was drinking anything.”
“You saying you think Nathan dosed her?” Chloe asked. Rachel could hear the sudden sharp edge to Chloe’s voice and she felt an absurd feeling of guilt accompanying the thought that she, Rachel, should have just let Chloe storm off and stayed at the wrap party with Max.

“The fuck are you looking at me for?” Frank was audible from beside Chloe.

“You know why.” Maybe he did or he didn’t, but it took Rachel a moment to get away from guilt and the pain in her hand to figure it out herself.

“S-she’s out of her fucking mind, barely making any sense, but it doesn’t matter,” Rachel said. “He took her to his room and there’s no way he was up to anything good.”

“You’re right, it doesn’t matter right now.” Headlights signified that a car was pulling into the driveway on the other side of the truck. Not an RV, Rachel thought. “It’s going to matter later though, when I muss up pretty boy’s face.”

“Beat you to it. Chloe, get here, please. I have to go, I can’t do anything with my right hand.” Rachel turned to see Steph staring through the driver’s side window, her face stony and determined. It was a warmly comforting sight.

“Nearly there.”

“Ok Kay, please hurry.” That was all the salutation she had time for before Rachel dropped her cell phone on the seat of the truck and raised her cradled right hand up for Steph to see. She didn’t look at it herself. “I’m gonna-a need your help.”

It didn’t take them long at all between the two of them to get Max inside. Rachel had her right hand wrapped up in Steph’s sweatshirt, but she discarded it when she realized they needed to climb stairs. Max, jostled more awake by the movement, mumbled their names in the first relieving sign that Rachel had seen from her since her odd moment of clarity a few minutes before. Steph didn’t say anything that didn’t involve directions the entire time they half-carried her upstairs. Rachel was still shaking cold when she was admitted into Steph’s room. Never been here before. She did her best to keep Max upright as Steph tore her covers down toward the end of the bed and together they lowered her onto it.

“I don’t want to go,” Max said, suddenly speaking up. She was looking into the air above her. “I
never wanted any of this. I didn’t ask for it!”

“I know, I know you didn’t,” Rachel told her, kneeling beside the bed. Steph began to cover Max’s legs with a blanket but that didn’t seem to go over too well. Max jerked, halfway sitting up.

“Why did you kill her?” Max screamed, directly into Rachel’s face. She jerked back despite herself. “I trusted you!” Max wasn’t looking at her. She was looking over Rachel’s shoulder. “You killed them both! Rachel Amber, Chloe. You sick fucker, I worshipped you!” Max swung a fist from her sitting position and Rachel fell back on her ass to avoid being struck. Steph threw herself forward onto Max, who jerked against the sudden restraint. “You were my fucking hero,” Max told this phantom. “I wanted- I trusted. I promised her, I promised her we’d find Rachel. I promised her.” There was no longer violence in Max’s voice, but desolation. She continued to beg someone that was not in the room with them to tell her why, just why they’d kill Chloe. Why would they take her friend from her? This went on for close to five minutes before Max began to cry and words failed her. Rachel had never heard screaming and wailing merge like that. She realized she might have only ever seen the girl in tears once before. It was not a sight she had ever wanted to see again.

Wrapped in a blanket after Steph noticed that ‘your lips are blue!’ Rachel reached out and took Max into her arms. She wasn’t sure if Max was aware of who she was or where they were, but by the time Chloe came hurtling up the stairs, she had her face pressed into Rachel’s shoulder as Rachel tried desperately to comfort her without jostling her damaged hand. Chloe appeared in the doorway, framed by it. After their earlier conversation she could have looked on the scene and seen it as something it was not, but this was Chloe, and she had a far larger heart than that.

“I didn’t think it was Nathan, Chloe,” stopping beside Rachel, Chloe shifted, kneeling a bit closer to them both so she could listen. Max was speaking against Rachel’s shoulder, muffling her words. “I thought it was all him, thought he gave Nathan the idea. Nathan gave it to hi-.” Her words cut off mid sentence. For a moment, she thought Max was speaking quietly, but when the girl’s hands curled against her shirt, she recognized the quiet, muffled wail. She stayed quiet for some time once it ended but inevitably spoke again, as if struggling to give out much needed information. This world she was in in her mind was so much more real than Steph’s room, Rachel thought. “He groomed him but didn’t have far to go. I get it, I get why Rachel Amber died.”

“It’s like a story, the whole thing. Why the hell does she keep calling me by my full name? ‘She was Nathan’s first strike. Then he took over. I have to stop them both this time.’

“Max,” Rachel told her, “I don’t know if you can hear me, but I’m not dead. I’m right here.”

“Not now,” Max responded, “before. In the past-future.” Delirious. I won’t be able to talk any sense into her. “I followed the plan. My plan. Her plan. Thought she knew everything. Didn’t know anything. Don’t know anything.” Max’s hands relaxed against her. Chloe stood up to stretch, in this way she did not hear when Max lifted her head and whispered emphatically to Rachel: “Stop
Nathan and Jefferson.” In return, Rachel spoke to Max who looked away with her dazed eyes. It was not about whatever hallucinations she was having, whatever delirium she was in. It was about silly things, inconsequential shit: the play, Sera, her fights with her mother, conversations over breakfast, their long nights marathoning one show or another on Netflix, how Max had turned her into a Trekkie and she hadn’t admitted it to anyone yet.

Max did not regain her senses for several more minutes but Rachel had one of Chloe’s arms around her to try to lend some support. One way or another, whether they intended to or not, both Max and Chloe contributed enough body heat that she began to feel normal again. Or at least, as normal as grown up Charlie McGee can be, she snarked to herself. At least this meant she was right, coming to her senses. At one point, Max pushed away from her and Rachel in turn separated from both of them. It was then that Rachel realized Chloe had not actually spoken to her since her arrival.

“Did I- did I say a bunch of weird crap?” Max asked first, as if that was the important thing here. She turned her eyes not on Chloe but on Rachel and Steph, who was sitting on the opposite side of the bed, grim faced and paler than usual.

“That doesn’t matter,” Rachel told her. “It was just a- a horrible dream, probably because of whatever Nathan hit you with. We’re at Steph’s now.” Steph rose to stand, though she had not yet spoken. Max turned her head, her face contorted in fear and confusion, her eyes clear for the first time. Steph did not look at her, but pointed directly at Rachel, who Chloe was finally letting go of.

“You. My car. Right now.” Rachel wanted to argue but she looked down at her right hand, cradled against her stomach. It drew Max and Chloe’s attentions and the two of them had almost identical reactions. They were not far off from her own the first time she saw her pointer and middle finger, either. They both recoiled, slightly. “Chloe, go downstairs and get Max some water out of the fridge. Max, stay in that bed until the sun comes up or I’ll hold you down when I get back and not in a way any of you fuckers are gonna like. Rachel, off your ass and down to my car right now.” Rachel turned to look, but neither Max nor Chloe looked ready to disagree.

“But the words you’re looking for here are ‘yes, Steph,’” the half Punk-Oberon Chloe told her, eyes narrowing. “There’s no reason for you to be in pain anymore.” Pain that’s getting worse. Dimly Rachel realized it was getting worse because she was warm again. Just as the heat made no sense but seemed to actually exist, the cold she felt after her fight with Nathan seemed to be real in its numbing effects, too. Rachel stood and followed Steph from the room.

The next day was not as peaceful as it should have been. For starters, Rachel and Max had to get their stories straight: that she had tripped coming downstairs trying to bring Max back to the party and broken her fingers. Wells and David had interrogated them about their absence from campus and this was the best they could do to answer for it. In the end, Wells had come to begrudgingly accept that while they were on their way to the hospital for Rachel’s injuries, they got news that the dorm might be on fire and chose to stay off campus until they got more information. He had,
however, assigned them detention the first Monday after they returned from Thanksgiving break for a failure to check in during an emergency situation. Rachel thought it was strange that he had taken time to congratulate Max on taking initiative to get her friend treatment. The strangest part of it all was David’s relative silence throughout the whole thing.

Whether it was the long day before or her pain medication, Rachel spent much of the day asleep or half-asleep on Max’s bed. After the excitement and anxiety of the play followed by the rage and cold of the evening after, Rachel didn’t entirely mind the quiet day. The unfortunate thing was the series of dreams in which she heard the screams of people being burnt alive. I haven’t told anyone else. Chloe didn’t understand, she didn’t believe me. On one of these occasions in which she lounged, half awake, Rachel rolled over and slowly sat up.

Dying sunlight rolled in through Max’s window. Rachel tried to figure out precisely what had drawn her attention. Max’s quilt begged for her to lay back down, to go back to sleep. A noise distracted her: rapid clicking. She looked up toward Max who was sitting up at her desk. Rachel had already been nauseous at the sight of Max in any kind of office chair. The clicking was coming from the desk. A part of Rachel’s mind that was firmly awake recognized it as the clicking of a pen top. She’s watching me, Rachel realized when she saw that Max did not have her back to her, but was sitting turned sideways, a book in one hand. She was side eyeing Rachel.

Realizing perhaps that the jig was up, Max turned completely from her desk, slammed her book down and pushed the computer chair away. Her sudden irritation was both uncharacteristic and completely unhelpful in the whole ‘keeping cool’ thing. Even with the dreams Rachel had done her best to stay calm and not think about anything serious for several hours. Rachel looked up into Max’s eyes. They were alive, not like last night when she looked like she was nearly dead. Don’t even think that, Rachel told herself. She was still tired, sitting half up a moment before, probably thanks to the medication given to her for the pain of broken fingers. Now she was wide awake.

“Okay, that’s it,” Max said. “I know I’m probably the problem and I should be quiet and introspective and more focused on poor me and all that bullshit,” Rachel found the tone of her voice a little disturbing. This might be the girl who ambushed Damon Merrick in the junkyard. After a moment of consideration she realized that if this was the same Max, that also meant it was the one who had saved a stranger’s life a couple hours after meeting her. That meant she ought to listen. “But you have not pulled out your phone since your mom called you. No one has called anyone. You haven’t even talked about Chloe since I woke up at Steph’s. You haven’t spoken in three hours and the room is really fucking hot. Why aren’t you two talking?” This is what was weighing on her mind? And what does she mean the room is hot? Does she know? What if they both know?

Rachel chose her words carefully. The honest truth is that Max played a part in the fight between herself and Chloe but only in that she was the object of their mutual affections. Nothing Max had said or done put her at any fault. Not once had Max crossed a line. Not once had she pushed herself on either of them or even really said anything inappropriate. Not once had she been anything but respectful and supportive of their relationship. The fault for the argument that left Chloe walking
the train tracks in the middle of the night fell entirely on Rachel’s and Chloe’s shoulders.

“We had an argument,” Rachel finally settled on. Max stood up. *Shouldn’t you be more concerned with what Nathan tried to do to you? Or what he might have done? How much do you even remember about yesterday?* Rachel wondered if the girl remembered the elaborately constructed delusion she had recounted, of Chloe and Rachel dead at the hands of Nathan Prescott and someone called ‘Jefferson.’

“About me?” Max asked her, bluntly. Rachel nodded. She didn’t find the girl’s attitude threatening, just irritable. “I mean, I knew it could happen.” Rachel didn’t respond to that. That had too many connotations. “I just thought if I kept my mouth shut it wouldn’t be that bad.”

“We had a bad argument.” Rachel told her, realizing she wanted to say this. “She was scared I wanted to break things off. I was scared she wanted to. It wasn’t a long argument but it hurt and it made me realize we hadn’t been talking about things. We finally talked about them and we were going to keep talking but she wanted a walk and I left before she could get back.” This made Max still slightly and she shut her eyes for several seconds. “I don’t know what would have happened, but she didn’t say much last night to me after she got to Steph’s.” Max shook her head twice, hard. Rachel stopped talking. For a moment as Max approached her and reached out with both arms, she expected a hug. More than that, she readied for it and *wanted* that hug. Just some comfort, some warmth, some understanding that this was scary for her, too. She didn’t expect Max, who had moved rather weakly all day, to dig her fingers into the fabric of Rachel’s shirt, then through to her skin, grabbing her tightly by each shoulder. She sure didn’t expect Max to shake her bodily, twice. *And hard,* she thought, frustrated.

“What the hell?” she asked when Max did not let her go. Max’s hard eyes bored into her own and the girl drew a deep breath. When she spoke, it was loudly, both words drawing out for emphasis.

“Call! Her!” Rachel shook her head.

“What if she doesn’t wa-“

“Call! Her!” Max repeated, louder, more emphasis on the words. “Jesus, this is the first time you two have actually had a fight isn’t it?” Rachel nodded, dumbfounded by this sudden transformation. *Max has barely said three words to anyone since Wells told us the dorms were open and David ‘escorted’ us here. It’s like she was saving all this shit up.* “And you didn’t even get to finish it.”

“I mean we made up and all. We were going to keep talking, but what if she-,”
“The hardest thing,” Max started, still emphatically but now less loudly, “that any new couple can do, is figure out how to act toward each other after a fight.” Max wasn’t blinking. Her eyes held Rachel’s eyes. She looked slightly more herself as she stared into them. It was uncomfortable, only because genuine care was starting to seep through her stony exterior. *She genuinely does care.* 

Rachel remembered Max wailing the night before, demanding answers from thin air as Rachel tried to hold her. *What kind of hallucination was she having?* “Even if you made up, everyone thinks, ‘but what if they don’t want to talk to me right now?’ Well here’s some fucking news, Rachel: they’ll *tell* you. If Chloe’s sitting in her bedroom right now thinking the same damn thing, you two will *never* talk about this right.” Max released her and stood back up to full height and turned toward the door when Rachel did not argue again. The feeling where Max’s fingers digging into her arms as they had the night before, stung slightly.

“Where are you going?” Rachel asked her. Max turned back and reached out to Rachel, extending her hand. *God, why haven’t you talked about you yet? This shouldn’t be about us. This should be about you. What did that fucker do? Where is he so I can rip his fucking balls off?*

“You’re gonna pass me your key, I’m gonna go to your room and lay around on your super comfy bed for half an hour and you’re going to *Call. Her.*” Rachel shook her head to clear her thoughts.

“That makes no sense, this is your room, I should go.”

“Call. Her.” Rachel shook her head again but not in denial of the advice, just in surrender. Max waited, one hand on the doorknob as Rachel deposited her keys into the photographer’s other. How did a girl who was shorter than *her* feel imposing, ever? It took longer than expected as she had to retrieve them from her pocket with her left hand. *We were literally sitting in silence two minutes ago. I thought it was comfortable silence.* Rachel wouldn’t have dreamed that Max was thinking about her and Chloe or any perceived lack of conversation. *She still hasn’t talked about Nathan. She hasn’t answered any questions. I don’t know how to ask them.* That was going to have to change before Max left for Thanksgiving Break. “I’m not leaving the room until I see you dialing.”

Rachel dialed, however long it took. *I hate this.* Rachel thought in regards to her hand. The fact that she had yet to hear any information about Nathan’s wellbeing after the ‘fire caused by an electrical malfunction’ did not bring her any comfort. *At least they managed to contain it. At least it only ruined his room. At least I didn’t destroy everyone else’s lives.* By the time Max shut the door to her own dorm room behind her Chloe was already answering.

“H-hey,” Chloe seemed cautious, as if treading on glass. *Max shouldn’t have had to do this. I shouldn’t have been laying here all day sleeping. She should have been resting and I should have been sitting by the bed screwing around online and waiting on her to want to talk.*
“Hey,” Rachel returned. “Look, I’m-”

“Don’t apologize,” Chloe told her, a little more life coming into her voice. She could imagine the girl sitting up, alert. “Just don’t, you did the right thing.” Rachel tried not to feel crushed by the words, especially because an apology is exactly what she felt she owed Chloe. Instead she focused on the tone, moved to hear gratefulness and pride.

“I don’t want to fuck this up,” Rachel said, echoing words Chloe had once thrown at her a long time ago. “I don’t want to fuck this up like everything else in my life.” Silence met her ears. “Can we please talk? Like, really talk. Like we did last night, talk about the shit that scares us and the shit that we think is going to hurt each other.” Rachel waited, mentally counting back from ten. She reached ‘two.’

“Nothing changed between today and last night,” Chloe told her. “I just ended up having a little more time than I expected or could handle. Can you hang out? You know, face to face?” Rachel closed her eyes and exhaled. “Rachel?” Chloe seemed concerned by the delay. In that moment, burned into the back of her eyelids, she could almost see Chloe in the moment: her pale brow furrowed, her eyes asking questions that Rachel could not figure out how to answer and her long fingers fidgeting with something, maybe a pencil, a pen or one of her tagging markers. I need to actually see her.

“Please,” Rachel told her. “Please.”

“Be right there,” Chloe told her into the phone. “Don’t you go anywhere, this time.” It was a playful comment that did not cause her any pain, but Rachel wondered if a part of it wasn’t a serious request.

“Never. They’ll have to kill me first.”

-----

End Part 2

Obstacles
Interlude I - The Mountains Say

Disclaimer: Anything familiar to you, I don't own. This is a work of fanfiction for personal amusement, fulfillment and maybe a bit of self-therapy. I make nothing from any of it. Cheers.

Notes: If anyone's read my other Life is Strange work, formerly generically titled 'Life is Still Strange' (it was originally supposed to be a one-shot, not a several chapter long story) then I thought I'd let you know that the title has now been changed to Fools of us All. If you haven't, I really recommend you go give it a read through. Really recommend. Finally, I wanted to fill you in on what's coming in this story.

Due to personal life, I've been slowed greatly on my planning for Kaukasos. You're tearing through backlog. I generally am going to try to post on Sundays and Wednesdays (I'm going to be a couple hours early this time) but as noted, things are a little intense right now and my progress has not been what I want it to be. As of today I've finally jumped back on the horse and proceeded with outlining Part 3 of Kaukasos. So, as long as that remains possible I will keep up a Sun/Weds schedule. If it looks unlikely to be maintainable, I will let you all know in a coming chapter. I appreciate the patience.

Finally, today I post the first of four Interludes. These four extended sections of story exist to bridge a gap between the setting and themes of Parts 1 and 2 and Parts 3 and 4. Here in Interlude I, I want to begin to curb the edges on plotlines from Parts 1 and 2. In the next Interlude, we ease toward forward progress. I hope you enjoy, but be forewarned these are longer than your typical chapter.

Interlude I: The Mountains Say

November 23rd, 2010 - Early Evening.

It was expected that as the days grew shorter, the days and nights of Arcadia Bay would grow colder. They did. That being said, Chloe hadn’t expected the turnaround to be so immediate and so severe. If this was what the end of November was going to be like for the town of Arcadia Bay then before long, days like the one they had just experienced would be difficult without a few extra layers of clothing. For a moment Chloe shifted, pressing her back against the truck’s cab behind her. Air that was not so much chill as freezing brushed past her, not really dulled even by the body curled up at her side nor the sweatshirts either of them wore as they sat in open enjoyment of the setting sun. Now, as Chloe looked out at the horizon and not the blonde at her side, the orb hung low enough that soon it would touch the outer wall of junk that lined the edges of American Rust.
In response to Chloe sitting straighter up, Rachel did too. She did so much more slowly than she might have otherwise and, as Chloe moved her left hand, she recognized that it was to avoid any undue jostling to the thespian’s injured right. Eventually that right hand rested on top of her left, softly. Chloe tightened her arm around Rachel’s shoulder for a second, an attempt to distract her from any thoughts of pain or discomfort, either from the (frankly) uncomfortable trunk bed or her splinted fingers. The blonde looked up, gave Chloe a brief smile and, almost sleepily leaned back against her, head resting against Chloe’s side. *Then again, Choe thought, kind of a long day today, wasn’t it?* It was also, she admitted to herself, one of the most fun she had had in months. *Ahah,* Chloe thought as she spotted a small twig stuck in her girlfriend’s thick hair.

“Hold still,” she told her, and carefully freed it. Rachel glanced up when Chloe loosed the twig and waved it once, for emphasis. “Okay, so maybe we ought to stick to actual paths?” Chloe asked her. Rachel shook her head as if to say that she was fine with whatever Chloe wanted when they were out wandering the woods, but before she could talk the thespian had to stop and stifle a yawn. *Damn, I’m lucky to have her. How many people are down for just being dragged off into the wilderness because their girlfriend’s feeling dissatisfied with society?* Chloe only grinned at her and let the girl think she was teasing. Rachel’s customary raised eyebrow met her in response. Chloe just hugged her more tightly.

*Between all the bullshit leading up to the play and the joys of Thanksgiving ‘Break’ when was the last time we actually did this? When did we actually just sit down with each other somewhere?* In all too short a time Thanksgiving would have come and passed. Chloe had to be honest: other than the joys of the joint Madsen-Price-Amber ‘early Thanksgiving dinner’ and getting to spend some time with Rachel, talking about their feelings, their needs and their frustrations, she could see the break firmly behind her without too many tears. Spending so much time in the same building with David, even if his attitude had changed toward her, was grating. At any point, he seemed likely to become a danger. *And when school starts back up, we won’t have to spend all day either in a house with him, in a house with James Amber or in the truck.* Given how fast it was getting cold, they couldn’t keep making a habit of spending long hours in the truck, even if its heater *did* work, contrary to Rachel’s apparent hypothermic experience.

As if to remind her of the concept, a gust of cold wind screamed over the junkyard. It sometimes sounded like a very literal scream if Chloe closed her eyes and focused on it. She shivered, causing Rachel to look up, face contorted in concern. *Yeah, just because you’re wearing like two more layers than me doesn’t mean you have to freak out every time I move.* Chloe responded to the concern by rubbing Rachel’s shoulder lightly, as much as to say she was okay as to work any warmth into it. Knowing Rachel, she would have been fine without a layer or two. *At least the fact that she can literally warm up rooms makes sense… if anything makes sense anymore.*

“Thanksgiving Dinner was worth coming back to the house,” Chloe told Rachel as the girl searched her face for something. Chloe did not try to obscure whatever it was, but she wasn’t sure. Rewarded with laughter, Chloe leaned her head back slightly, toying with memories from the night. Equal parts awkward and empowering, Chloe had learned a few lessons from that dinner. None of them really came from Rose Amber’s stoically upper class attitude though there had been a moment there where Chloe wondered if David was going to ask to marry her instead. He seemed to
be quite the fan of her ‘manners.’ When Rachel didn’t stop laughing, Chloe reached up and wiped hair behind the girl’s ear, leaning in to whisper and ask what was so funny. *Bingo,* Chloe thought when she grew still and did not turn immediately to face her.

“The look on David’s face when you kissed me on the cheek in front of them,” she finally said, though there was less humor in her voice. Chloe continued to grin. Then suddenly, Rachel turned, raising both hands halfway up as if gripping something small between them. “It was absolutely—” the girl mimicked settling a pair of glasses on her nose, invisible frames around hazel pools, “Priceless.” Chloe groaned, pulling her right arm from around Rachel’s shoulders and crossing both of hers over her chest. “Oh come on.”

“That one was *horrible,* ” Chloe insisted, “you’ve spent *way too much time* with Max and Mikey and you should *feel bad.* ” When Rachel nudged against her shoulder as if to admonish her for moving her arm, Chloe replaced it. Horrid pun or not, Rachel was right. Though David had been less than his usual self the look on his face in that moment had been almost the essence of unadulterated frustration. Chloe was still not entirely *sure* of where it was coming from but she was going to be damned if she was going to let that get in the way of her and Rachel patching things up as they still had been. Perhaps it was the asshole’s recent peak in assholery, but Chloe could not quite laugh at the image, even if she did enjoy souring his mood. After a second, she realized the blonde was looking searchingly at her again. *Is she trying to make sure I’m not upset?* In response, Chloe went back to stroking Rachel’s shoulder in slow, repetitive motions, just a gesture of *peace* and affection.

Rachel relaxed against her and Chloe moved her left hand carefully beneath Rachel’s right, almost cradling it. The injury must hurt her but it brought back a lot of unpleasant thoughts and considerations for Chloe. David was not the only demon to exorcise in their immediate vicinity. *I still regret that I wasn’t right beside Rachel when that call came in. I wish I could have kicked that shithead right in the face.* Then again, with still no information on his ultimate fate and only the knowledge that part of the dormitory smelled of smoke as a mark of Rachel’s vengeance (*self-defense,* Chloe reminded herself; revenge was still to come) it was hard to say whether or not Nathan Prescott could be moved to the backburner (*pun so, so intended,* ) and David brought forward. Nathan had crossed lines that could not be uncrossed and in doing so, hurt Max. That was an unforgivable crime where Chloe and Rachel were concerned. Still, their thoughts were clearly on two different pricks that needed dealing with.

“What are we going to do about David the Douchefaucet?” Rachel asked. “He’s playing possum right now, but that won’t last forever. Not with fuckers like him.” Chloe didn’t need telling that, but she knew Rachel was just trying to jolt her into taking care of herself.

“I thought we were going with David the Douche canoe this week?” Chloe protested.

“ *You* decided on ‘douche canoe,’” Rachel corrected her, using the outer edge of her right hand to
pat Chloe’s leg a couple of times. It was a fair way to make sure she didn’t mistreat her injured fingers, but Chloe had to stifle a laugh at the mental image of Rachel karate chopping someone. “I think douchefaucet rolls off the tongue better.” Chloe gagged loudly.

“God, I hope not,” Chloe said. “Phrasing, damn it.” This seemed to be amusement enough for Rachel, who leaned back against her properly. She felt warmer than a moment before and part of Chloe wondered if she wasn’t getting worked up thinking about what David had nearly done to Chloe. I mean, don’t you get worked up about it? She asked herself. Marking that down as a fair point, Chloe went on. “I’m kind of scared to be in the same house with him, but less than I was.”

“Why’s that?” Rachel questioned.

“Because he’s scared I’m going to tell the truth,” she told Rachel. “For now he’s scared I’m going to out him and mom’s going to get pissed off or he’s going to lose his job because Ms. Grant saw it.” Rachel’s hand moved from on top of hers back to her leg and her ring finger, pinky finger and thumb tried to squeeze it comfortably. “I think I’m going to start using the lock on the door at night. If he breaks it down, I’ll tell mom. It’s that simple, either I get to protect myself or I spill.” In response to something she said, Rachel perked up slightly, turning her head upward a bit. “What?”

“I meant to ask, when I came up to your room yesterday,” she started and then cut off. Chloe looked into the girl’s scrunched up face for a second but couldn’t read the question. “I mean, what happened to it? Why does it look like that?”

“You mean why is there not much sitting out other than on the bed, the desk or the walls?” Chloe asked, carefully. She absentmindedly went back to rubbing Rachel’s shoulder. Perhaps by now it was the physical act of the gesture, but it was as comforting to her as she hoped it was to Rachel. The girl nodded. “Um,” Chloe considered the best way to say it.

“I’m just worried that you’re… you know.”

“Going to up and disappear?” Chloe asked. Rachel nodded once, and then pressed back against her, trying to either get comfortable or soak up more warmth. Chloe sincerely doubted that the second was the case. “I’m not planning to run off,” Chloe told her. “I mean, when I thought that maybe you were done with me… the idea occurred.” Rachel gave one more squeeze of her knee, as if to spur her on. “I didn’t feel like the house was home, so I put everything I cared about up,” she finished, feeling lame. “It felt good. It felt like saying ‘fuck you’ in a way they couldn’t really yell at me for. As for the desk, bed and walls, well I wasn’t going to not have the bed ready, or not have the stuff I need for school sitting out and I wasn’t going to repaint the fucking walls. I even decided to put a lot of the pictures Max took of all of us up everywhere.”
“I noticed,” Rachel told her. “It was cool. Everywhere I looked there was Max or me or Mikey or Steph.”

“Yeah,” Chloe said. “Isn’t that what you’re supposed to do, keep pictures of your family around?” This time, Chloe didn’t really understand how she was supposed to interpret Rachel squeezing again. She also didn’t bother trying. “Besides,” she changed the subject, “I need my graffiti practice space.” This last seemed to cause Rachel to sit up halfway, turning to face Chloe more directly.

“That reminds me,” she started, her voice chiding. “There was a lot of new tagging on your walls.” Chloe shrugged.

“I basically practice any tag I think is going to be really cool. What better place?” she asked. “If you want to maintain aesthetic, you’ve got to get it right.”

“And is there a reason that the new line on the door to that stall in the girl’s room looks like it’s in your handwriting?” Rachel asked her, squinting slightly. Chloe only fixed the largest smile she could on Rachel, who waited.

“Yup,” she said. “That was me.” Rachel sighed, dramatically, her left hand rising as if in frustration.

“*These hallowed halls can suck my balls*’?!” Rachel asked her. Chloe’s grin did not falter. Instead, borrowing a tactic from Rachel, Chloe simply continued to smile at her until Rachel looked away in faux disgust. *Oh yeah, two can play at that game,* Chloe gloated, gleefully.

“Anatomically incorrect in my specific case, but the rhyme worked and the sentiment felt so true to my heart. I don’t rhyme often, Rachel. You have to indulge me when I do.”

“No I don’t,” she disagreed but the rueful smile overtaking the disappointed look undermined any air of judgment the girl was trying to give off.

“Damn it,” Chloe started, stretching now that they were both sitting more completely up. “I missed this.”

“The junkyard?” Rachel asked her, tone innocent and naive. Chloe shoved her lightly in response.
Scooting bodily closer, Rachel retaliated once and then added, “Today was awesome actually. I just haven’t gone running around in a woods since I was a kid.”

“It’s been a couple years for me,” Chloe told her. “But I missed it. Like, a lot.”

“I think mom and… my father thought that there was a point at which a good proper girl stopped doing shit like that,” Rachel told her. “I guess part of me listened.”

“We all make mistakes,” Chloe responded, sticking her tongue out.

“Mom passed me a little money at dinner yesterday, said to do something fun with it,” Rachel told her. Chloe paused, waiting. “I was thinking, give me like an hour to soak up some extra Chloe time and then we call Steph and Mikey and we go get absurd amounts of greasy delicious burgers and bullshit for a while.” Chloe reached over and tapped the side of Rachel’s head, about at her temple.

“You need to stop reading my mind,” Chloe told her.

“Says the person who goes into peoples’ dreams. ”

“You might find something in there that makes you blush,” Chloe continued, as if she hadn’t heard her.

“Nothing in that head of yours is going to surprise me,” Rachel responded, flatly. Her voice was flat but her eyes screamed for Chloe to just go ahead and try her. How different is this from like, a few days ago - from being stupid and standing out here not knowing what the other was thinking even though who else but maybe Max has any excuse to know us as well? “You kicked ass in the play,” Rachel told her, showing that perhaps she was thinking of that night, too. At least, Chloe thought, grimly, she’s able to think of a less shitty part.

“You too,” Chloe told her.

“You should read the school paper’s article next time you get on your laptop,” Rachel suggested, a peculiar tone sneaking into her voice. The girl turned slightly, legs resting over Chloe’s lap. She scooted closer.
“Why?” Chloe asked her, leaning in closer. “Is it bad?”

“Juliet wrote it,” Rachel started glancing off toward the setting sun. The bottom of it was disappearing behind twisted metal and old vehicles. “If I didn’t know better I’d guess she has some sapphic tendencies of her own.” Sapphic, Chloe thought, now there’s a word I wouldn’t have known without Rachel. Still….

“What do you mean?” Chloe asked, more directly, though she was beginning to get the feeling she might not really want to know. When Rachel spoke, she was speaking in a slightly more formal voice, yet every once in a while her tone turned absolutely sultry. Chloe realized quickly she was quoting the article.

“Chloe Price, who last year made a brief appearance in the school’s production of the Tempest, was breathtaking and otherworldly in her performance as Oberon,” Chloe shook her head and told Rachel that it was alright, she could stop. Rachel did not. Chloe glared slightly, leaning in closer. Chloe did her best to not think about the color creeping into her cheeks. “After giving a show stopping performance-” Rachel started. She was cut off as Chloe reached out with both hands and lightly shoved against her shoulders, rocking back just slightly. When the girl opened her mouth to protect, Chloe leaned the rest of the way forward and pressed her lips against Rachel’s.

The kiss was brief in comparison to their last one but Chloe was absolutely no longer cold and had no delusions about whether she was capable of taking someone’s breath when they pulled apart. She could feel just the slightest dampness-maybe her own, maybe Rachel’s- cooling on her bottom lip in the breeze as they split, and she could not be bothered to mind. She was lost to the sight of Rachel, just a little bothered but smiling wildly up at her, as if she were the successful one, as if this had been her plan all along. I’ve been played, Chloe realized. I’ve never enjoyed being played before. I hope that doesn’t become a common thing….

“I should read you the news more of-” Revenge, Chloe thought, pulling Rachel closer, all at once. She could almost feel Rachel’s eagerness as she was cut off. She pulled up at the last moment, lips pressing against the tip of the blonde’s nose. This earned a frustrated noise which Chloe took as a mission accomplished before she turned out toward the sight of the junkyard herself, a hand rubbing casually up and down the length of the girl’s right calf, just over the dragon whose ferocity she would never again doubt.

Rachel did not immediately speak to her. Gloating silently to herself, Chloe closed her eyes. Not distracted by sight, other sensations became easier to focus on. She could swear that Rachel was oozing warmth. Being near her was like huddling around a small heater. Oh yeah, we’re two of the weirdest fuckers Arcadia Bay has ever seen. Circus freaks. Rachel did want to run away, I just don’t think she had joining the circus in mind. Sometimes it felt like a workout to smile. In that moment it felt impossible to stop. It felt hard to believe anything could wipe this feeling away from her. She was Rachel’s and that was something that meant the world to her.
“Are you ready for Friday?” Rachel asked her. Chloe only nodded. “Me too. And what are we not going to do the minute we see her?” This leading question earned a small, if tongue in cheek pout. “Chloe?” Rachel asked, scoldingly.

“Bother her about why she barely answered her texts,” Chloe relented, still not quite opening her eyes. This was peaceful. Besides, it was no mystery why Max might be partly incommunicado. They could both easily guess that she was upset about the events of the 19th, about what Nathan Prescott did or might have done to her. Or might have done if Rachel hadn’t shown up like the badass real life Warren Peace she is. Only less douchey. When the bottom of one of Rachel’s shoes nudged her leg twice, Chloe opened her eyes.

“Hey, you, are you okay?” Chloe nodded and then stretched her arms again.

“Yep,” Chloe said. “Just keep thinking about Nathan’s chestnuts roasting over an open fire.” Rachel was notably and very obviously unamused. “Sorry, not funny.”

“No,” Rachel agreed. “Not funny.”

“It’s just, I get it, she doesn’t wanna risk running up against Nathan without evidence but when I asked if we could go looking for other witnesses she got like, really upset about the idea.”

“I mean, think about it. Would you really want Max and I going around asking everyone about it if it happened to you? People would start asking questions, gossiping, talking about it behind your back.” Chloe shook her head. She wouldn’t enjoy that, no. “And all the time it’s fucking Nathan Prescott so if you accuse him of drugging you he says you took the drugs and came back to his room by choice. Then, he says, you left early anyway, because you weren’t there when the fire broke out, right?” And that, Chloe thought, brings us back to the fire, which Max wouldn’t be able to talk about even if she does know. “Then he’s already a sympathetic figure because he was hospitalized and no one’s even seen him since.” Chloe threw her hands up once, as if in surrender. She recognized when Max and Rachel outhought her, she just didn’t like the idea of letting Nathan get away with this, not even in the short term.

“If he does come back, I’m still kicking him the balls the first excuse I get.” Chloe told her, stubbornly. Rachel didn’t really argue against the idea though she did look down at her hands for a moment. Chloe tried to distract her. “It’s gonna be alright, you know?”

“Do you think Max is going to go for this?” Rachel said, moving her legs from Chloe’s lap to
stretch out in front of her. Chloe lifted her hands to make the process easier and then raised an eyebrow.

“Kicking Nathan in the balls?” Chloe asked. “I think so.”

“No,” Rachel insisted, her voice louder, more emphatic, more confident. She gestured to the empty space that remained between them. If, Chloe thought, she wanted to, Max could fit there. Chloe sighed, knowing precisely what Rachel meant. “I mean this.”

“I’ve kind of been thinking about that ever since we decided,” Chloe confessed, pulling the beanie down farther over her head, so that it covered just the tip of her ears, which were starting to feel cool again. I picked a shitty time to cut my hair this low, she thought. The light was rapidly slipping away from them. “Like, a lot.” Chloe paused. “A lot, a lot.” Then again, as if for emphasis, “A lot, a lot, a lot.”

“Chloe,” Rachel exclaimed, frustration in her voice.

“Sorry,” she chortled, unable to pretend to be sorry, unable to pretend she hadn’t been stringing the thought along to give Rachel a little hell. If they stopped giving each other hell they would have lost what made them them. “I actually really don’t know,” Chloe added, finally. “I hope so. I mean, I know I wanted to approach it like, more one-on-one?” Rachel nodded, her face understanding. “But I still can’t come up with a reason for us not to sit down together to start with. I want it to be clear, you know? I want her to understand this is serious and it’s not more drama or more bullshit.”

“Me too,” Rachel said. “I’m glad you understand.” Chloe reached out with her right hand and rested it on Rachel’s knee. Their fingers intertwined. “If Max is having trouble with shit--which, if she’s not then I’m worried--we’ll need to take it carefully and maybe give her some time.”

“Which is going to suck,” Chloe said, “after all this, but I see your point.” Chloe cleared her throat and said, “Hey Max, welcome back? How was break? Any nightmares about Nathan Prescott? Wanna get involved with me and Rachel? Yeah? No? Okay.” Rachel shook her head, giving one humorless chuckle as a pity laugh. Really, this was just Chloe working some nerves out about the coming discussion. “I mean, it’s not like things change a lot if she says yes, but they actually kind of really do?”

“I was thinking the same thing earlier,” Rachel replied, “but I mean, I don’t see how it’s not for the better.” Chloe hoped she was right. “Alright, lover girl, I’m hungry and you’re cold.”
“I am also hungry,” Chloe corrected her. “I am never not hungry. It’s actually kind of a problem.” After a pause, Chloe freed her phone from her pocket. “I call Mikey, you call Steph?” Rachel nodded and, with her left hand, began to dig around in her own. *Burger time, mother fuckers, answer your phones.*

November 26th, 2010 - 2:32 PM

*What’s in your head?*

*In your head*

*Zombie, zombie, zombie-ei-ei-ei*

Rachel allowed herself to casually sway to the music pumping into her left ear. It was a lot better than sitting on the steps to Blackwell Academy’s parking lot, silent and anxious. The music was slightly less effective in Chloe’s case: Rachel watched the girl’s leg bouncing up and down on the step below them. She reached out and found Chloe’s hand waiting for her, as if on instinct. Turning, she offered a smile and received a dose of Chloe’s eagerness in exchange. It wasn’t that she didn’t share it, far from it. The issue was the old refrain that Chloe and Max both just tended to feel more than anyone Rachel had ever met before. Gripping at Rachel’s left hand, Chloe’s checked the time on her phone for about the third time. *Nothing’s going to change,* Rachel wanted to tell her. *Max is still a little late and it’s still going to be okay.* She figured that was her own anxiety making her want to calm Chloe’s, though.

Rachel leaned her head to one side to make it easier to reach across with her injured hand and free the earbud from her left ear. She didn’t want to let go of Chloe’s hand. The earbud slipped from between her ring finger and thumb, bouncing harmlessly against the dangling blue feather hanging from her ear and then hung within the rough grasp she could get on it. Chloe, having apparently been paying some attention to her or the music, stopped running her hand through short, neon-green hair and jerked her own earbud free with far less trouble. *She also has more fingers than me,* Rachel felt like protesting to no one. Grumbling about it wasn’t going to make her fingers heal any faster.

“Alright you,” Rachel said, once Chloe paused the MP3 player, silencing The Cranberries. “You’re going to drive me crazy if you just sit there freaking out.” Chloe gave her a look as if she was halfway to rolling her eyes and then sort of hunched forward.

“You’re right,” Chloe told her. The girl loosed her hand from Rachel’s and carefully wrapped the earbuds around the MP3 player and put it away. Rachel adjusted her position a bit to watch Chloe. Maybe it was their argument in the junkyard still fresh in her mind but sometimes she couldn’t help but wonder if she comprehended even the surface layer of how and what Chloe was feeling at any given moment. It was hard for her not to watch the way her girlfriend’s mouth turned downward, the way her leg shook, the way she chewed on her bottom lip (it was similar to something Max
sometimes did, where she would absentmindedly trap her own bottom lip between her teeth, but
Rachel was fairly certain it meant something else entirely when she did it,) or the way her eyes
seemed to openly proclaim everything she was feeling when she got nervous. One thing that
Rachel noticed in the moment was that where Rachel kept shooting her looks toward the turn-in to
the parking lot, Chloe was looking at the ground or back at the school or maybe at Rachel herself.

“You’re not just excited to see her,” Rachel realized, “You’re nervous to see her.” There was a big
enough difference between the two that Rachel felt guilty for not having caught it earlier. This had
been building for a couple of days.

“No,” Chloe said. “Well, yes, hell yes, but that’s not what’s going on up here right now?” Chloe
shifted. The dark red sweatshirt she was wearing rode up slightly. Rachel had at first thought this
was an endearing enough sight, but she had come to wonder what the sweatshirt was all about. It
was clearly ancient and torn in multiple places. Then again, Chloe didn’t particularly care if her
stuff was ratty, it was just that this was also too small for her. It couldn’t be keeping her too warm.
This was just one more kind of mystery for Rachel to try to figure out.

“Then what’s got you so upset?” Rachel asked, pursuing that mystery first. Chloe reached across,
hand halfway to Rachel for a gesture that Rachel had come to find incredibly personal. It was
simple, just the physical act of wiping a lock of hair behind her ear but the first time Chloe had
done it, only a couple of nights ago, it had been accompanied by the first time Chloe had ever said
the words, ‘I love you’ to her. The words were difficult for Chloe for some reason but the gesture
wasn’t. This was Chloe’s reassurance, her confession, her repetition of this fact. Rachel only smiled
when Chloe did it again, at the feel of fingertips against her skin.

“Last night something happened,” Chloe told her, settling her hands together in her lap. The tone in
the girl’s voice was bizarre, like she wanted to talk about it but at the same time wanted Rachel to
change the subject immediately. Rachel crossed her arms--jarring her injured fingers in the process-
-and waited for Chloe to continue. Seeing that she had no easy out of the conversation and could
not backtrack on it, the punk nodded. “Do you know,” Chloe half-whispered as if she was exposing
a secret, “how we’re not exactly average people?”

“Do you mean the whole thing where we’re trying to figure out how to ask another person out or
the fact that I start fires with my brain and you can spy on peoples’ dreams if they’re sleeping close
by?” It sounded utterly ridiculous to put voice to the thoughts but it felt, perhaps, a little stranger
that they did not think about those last two points anywhere near as much as they thought about
cuddling in the cold in the back of an old pickup or how they were going to convince Max that they
weren’t nuts.

“The second,” Chloe said, put at ease by the candor. Rachel smiled at the punk opposite of her,
happy that Chloe no longer doubted her realization about the fire. Rachel could not help but want
to talk to her and Max about it, to tell them about her guilt and to talk about the homes that burned
down.
“I’ve thought about you being able to go into other peoples’ dreams a lot, actually.”

“I absolutely do not want to know why,” Chloe deadpanned. Rachel responded with a grin and a gesture for Chloe to continue. *I’ll leave it to her imagination for now.* “It’s just, it turns out they don’t have to sleep all that close by and it doesn’t have to be an accident.” This seemed to be the heart of the matter, the part which had her so concerned she could take her mind off of Max’s impending arrival or the fact that she was late which was concerning Rachel just a bit more than she had let on. “So last night I was having this stupid dream, right?”

“Right?” Rachel prompted.

“I was trying to cut down this tree, don’t ask me why. I just know that every time I swung at it, I couldn’t even make a mark. So I wasn’t going to cut down the damn tree.” Rachel couldn’t help but chuckle at the mental image of Chloe dressed as a lumberjack. *She could handle the plaid, at least,* Rachel thought. “Stop laughing, dammit,” Chloe complained. Rachel dutifully swallowed her amusement, but nothing could wipe the smile off her face. “So, there I was and it hit me, *why am I doing this?* Then I realized there wasn’t a reason, right?” Chloe was eager in her explanation suddenly, turning to face Rachel and wrapping leg up beneath her to make that easier. Rachel just thought it would hurt her knee, instead. “I figured out I was dreaming and I got annoyed. This was a stupid dream. It didn’t mean anything. So I started to think about how to change it. I didn’t come up with anything. I could have like, called up anyone or anything.”

“Your own private high def fantasy world,” Rachel said. Chloe shook her head, perhaps sensing precisely what version of ‘fantasy’ Rachel was referencing and passing judgment. “I’m not going to pretend I’m not jealous.”

“Well, I couldn’t come up with anything. So I just wanted the stupid dream to end, and then it did.” Chloe seemed to come to a pause in her story and Rachel wasn’t sure if she wanted to see some particular reaction or was just thinking. She responded with the first thing that came to mind.

“That’d be useful during a nightmare,” she offered. Chloe seized onto it.

“Yeah,” Chloe mused, “Yeah it would. But, like, instead of waking up, I just kind of… floated there.”

“There where?” Rachel asked.
“Well, it was like, grey, everywhere. And it felt a little like floating in water, only I could breathe just fine. I don’t even think I needed to.” Chloe hummed for a moment. “I couldn’t really feel anything or hear anything or even see anything. It was just grey at first. Like, a void.” Rachel’s stomach twisted itself up at the thought. Her right hand rested on it in an unintentional physical gesture against a wave of nausea. “What? What is it?”

“I just, hate shit like that,” Rachel responded, waving the worry off with her left hand. “The idea of it, of a void. I think I’d lose my fucking mind.” The truth was, if she thought too terribly about the act of going to sleep, the act of sleeping, it started to feel unnatural and disturbing to her, as well. *Maybe I’d rather have the nightmare,* she mused. Chloe took her silence as a cue to continue. A car turned into the lot, momentarily cutting Chloe off. They both rose in silence and watched, eager to see their friend’s face looking through the back window of some kind of vehicle or another. Hayden pulled his truck to a stop in a favored parking spot. *Son of a bitch.*

“Well, anyway, it wasn’t really a void,” Chloe said, once she settled back down on the step and managed to wipe the look of defeat off her face. Her own stomach settling, Rachel felt a little beaten herself. *So much for pretending to be calm,* she thought, before settling herself down beside Chloe and wrapping an arm around the girl’s shoulders. It was *easier* for Chloe, since she was taller, but Rachel wasn’t about to give the girl the satisfaction of letting *that* stop her. “I started to *hear* something. I thought it was like, a sick ass drum beat or something and I kind if… *heard* toward it. It’s really hard to describe.”

“Yeah, I don’t quite get it.”

“Like, I heard it and by hearing it, I went toward it? It’s not like I could walk or anything. Or fly or swim. Though maybe next time I’ll see if I *can.*” *Next time?* Rachel thought. *She’s really thinking about this stuff a lot.* Rachel ran her left hand down Chloe’s left arm. For a moment, Chloe stopped talking and shivered, staring Rachel directly in the face as if challenging her. Rachel stopped, but moved her hand back up to Chloe’s shoulder. She was rewarded with a taunting smile. *Asshole,* Rachel thought at her, eyes narrowed. “Anyway, one second I was kind of *going* toward the sound and the second I was standing on a street.”

“Where?” Rachel asked, forgiving Chloe her petty victory. There was plenty of time to win the war and she was confident in her ability to do that, if nothing else.

“The road was dirty, sandy. There were a lot of low, small buildings all pushed up together and looking like they hadn’t been painted in a while. It wasn’t the kind of building you’d see here,” Chloe said, before chewing on the corner of her bottom lip. Rachel reached out and pressed her ring finger to Chloe’s lip, as if in admonishment. The girl stopped, but Rachel counted it a blow struck back when her face lit up brighter red than Rachel remembered ever seeing before. She
pulled her right hand back and waited for Chloe to continue. “A-anyway. The drums weren’t drums. It was a firefight.” Cooling down slightly, Rachel was almost sure she knew what was coming next. “I was kind of, standing in the middle of a road, and David and some guy were hiding behind a building beside me.” Chloe’s voice quieted as she spoke until it was back to being nearly a whisper.

“Oh shit,” Rachel said, “I’m so sorry. It was bad, wasn’t it?” This time she tightened the arm around Chloe’s shoulders and pulled herself in closer. Chloe gave a crooked half smile, as thanks.

“It really was. I uh, I kind of don’t want to go deep into it, but… people got shot. The guy with David was bleeding bad, and I don’t think he made it.” Rachel squeezed her shoulder. “It kind of felt like the dream you had about the night of the fire. I think it might’ve been him reliving some kind of memory and, I never want to get shot at again.

“You got shot at?”

“No,” Chloe told her, shaking her head twice, “But it’s kind of weird. I could feel what it felt like to get shot at,” she confessed. Rachel was going to press her for more information when Chloe’s eyes drifted from Rachel toward the road and she sibilated, “Shit.” Rachel followed her gaze to the large, old yellow car turning into the parking lot. “That piece of shit still runs?” It was hard to get a good look at the people in the front of the vehicle but a woman with dark, cropped hair was behind the wheel. The man in the passenger seat was a little on the rounder side, with a thick reddish-brown beard. “That should not be allowed to run still,” Chloe told her. “Ryan is absolute shit under a hood. He basically used to come to mom and dad for help with that thing.” It was easy to forget sometimes, that there was an entire lifetime behind Chloe’s connection with Max and that extended to their families.

“Think it’s time to go find our girl?” Rachel asked, pressing her hand between Chloe’s shoulder blades. It was supposed to be a comforting gesture more than a teasing or enticing one but Chloe still shivered. Have I been reading her reactions wrong this whole time? Rachel mused, moving her left hand down to curl around Chloe’s hip.

“Think so,” Chloe told her, when she recovered. The vehicle in question pulled into a parking spot still open near the stairs where they sat. Chloe stood and all but pulled her over to the car. Rachel tried to slow them down, to approach casually in an attempt to not crowd the Caulfield family as they tried to get out of the car after what was probably a long trip. Try as Rachel might, the two of them were still at the back right door to the vehicle before Max could get it open. It’s not fair, Rachel thought, grumbling at Chloe’s back. You have longer legs. You could drag me damn near anywhere. The thought faded from her mind as Chloe exclaimed, “Whoa!” Rachel leaned down to look into the window as Max pushed her door open.
“Whoa,” Rachel agreed as the brunette leaned out to stare up at them. Rachel hoped her face wasn’t shock personified. She wouldn’t want to give Max the wrong idea, it was just….

“Whoa what?” Max asked her, giving an amused chuckle as she shifted the messenger bag onto her shoulder. It was as if she thought they were supposed to completely miss the fact that her hair had gone from between her shoulder blades to almost as short as Chloe’s new style in the span of a few days. *It’s kind of super fucking cute,* Rachel thought.

“Whoa this,” Chloe proclaimed. She reached up to pat Max on the top of her skull. Max’s head dipped just slightly under the attention. “Trying to steal my gimmick?” The front doors to the vehicle opened and Rachel shot a glance toward the man stepping from the passenger seat. He wasn’t round like she first thought. It was more that Max’s father was broad like a bear. If there was someone you wouldn’t want to get into a fight with, it might be Ryan Caulfield. “We’ll talk about this later, young lady,” Chloe added in a stern voice before Max could respond. Rachel matched eyes with Max’s blue and rolled her own. It earned a wide smile that could make her heart skip a beat. “Ryan,” Chloe called, jutting her chin up as she tilted her head back to look him in the eyes. “How the hell did you keep this thing running all these years?”

“Get the fuck over here, champ,” the man demanded. Chloe crossed a couple steps between herself and Max’s father and he opened his arms up wide. The two shared a quick embrace which ended when Chloe pulled back to escape the ruffling of her hair. “Look at you giving Max shit about cutting it all off? You should be tripping over your hair by this point. You’re way too young for male pattern baldness.”

“Yes, Ryan, *that’s* what’s wrong with that,” Chloe retorted. Rachel tilted her head for a second and watched the way Chloe looked up at him like he was… like he was her own father. Even confused as she often was about how Chloe felt so intensely, Rachel’s heart hurt a little as she realized Chloe was connecting with the Caulfields on a borderline parental level.

“And who says he keeps this old bucket of bolts running?” Max’s mother teased as she stepped around the front of the vehicle. Chloe grabbed the woman in another hug, which Vanessa returned with a chuckle. Chloe was over the moon. *I guess if you grew up with someone always around, you miss the hell out of them.* “Who do you think your mom and dad were always teaching about this stuff? Ryan just stood in the corner with a beer.”

“Hey Vanessa,” Chloe said by way of answer. Rachel was watching the interaction between the two when she felt a pair of arms around her shoulders and turned to react. It wasn’t her intent, but the minute that she realized Max had reached out to hug her, Rachel’s eyes shut and she squeezed back hard enough to earn a grunt from the girl in her arms. “Now,” Chloe declared, when Rachel released Max and stepped back to eye the short, side-swept pixie cut, “my turn.” Rachel stepped to the side, swearing she was able to hear Chloe throwing herself at Max. *Impressive,* Rachel thought to herself as Chloe lifted the girl just high enough that only her toes dragged the ground. *Very*
“We’ve missed the hell out of you, Max Caulfield,” Chloe muttered, refusing to let go of Max quite yet, despite Max tapping at her back as if someone trying to get out of a chokehold. “Don’t go thinking you’re getting away from us for the next few hours.”

“Alright, alright,” Max laughed and over Chloe’s shoulder Rachel watched Max’s face intently. She didn’t look like she’d been suffering for the last few days and this was the most rested Rachel could remember Max looking. Maybe Seattle had done her some good. Or maybe Arcadia Bay is bad for her, Rachel wondered, concerned as she recalled the girl’s confession that sometimes Blackwell ‘fucked with’ her. Then again, she looked happy. “Okay, Chloe, I need to breathe, put me down.”

“Hey, killer, if you’re feeling strong and all,” Ryan Caulfield started, stroking his thick beard, “You can carry this box up to her room for me.” Chloe released the girl and Rachel realized in that moment that Vanessa was looking at her. Oh right, Rachel thought. I’m sort of not invisible and should do something other than stare at people. Max glanced from Rachel to her mother for a second before talking.

“Mom, this is Rachel,” the photographer said.

“I remember,” Vanessa replied, her voice a little serious, if amiable. “It’s lovely to meet you. You were incredible in the play,” she added, then, glancing at Chloe, finished, “both of you.”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Chloe apologized. “I was kind of upset and didn’t want to be around a lot of people. Rachel kept me company.”

“Oh, it’s alright,” Ryan said, “we’ve heard more or less nothing but ‘Chloe and Rachel’ this or ‘Chloe and Rachel’ that, for about three days straight.”

“Dad,” Max said, sounding mortified. Her cheeks flared. Rachel grinned brightly, which was only made worse when Vanessa turned so that her daughter could not see her face and chuckled. Max really did strike her, in a lot of ways, as having picked up so much from her parents. She could be more serious than her mother was acting when shit hit the fan but when she was in a good mood-especially drunk-she was as goofy as Ryan seemed to be, any day.

“Well, if no one’s going to help poor old me with this really heavy box of blankets and pillows,”
Ryan said, leaning into the car and pulling loose a cardboard box, “Then so be it. I guess I’ll bear the burden.”

“We’ll mourn for you, dear,” Vanessa responded. The man’s beard twitched as he smirked at his wife’s back. Max continued to look slightly as if her parents made her want to crawl into a hole. To Rachel though, this was a kind of dream. The Caulfields were so emotionally available and obviously doted not just on Max but also Chloe. Even in her parents’ softest moments there was always some sort of air or distance between them, some sort of need to be upright. Chloe took the lead toward the dormitories, giving Rachel a second to fall back and toss an arm around Max’s shoulders. The girl stiffened slightly beneath it but Rachel promised herself it was going to be okay: soon they would be able to be honest with her about everything and she wouldn’t have to get so freaked out over something so simple as a one-armed hug. She slowed Max down a little so that the two could fall behind the group and get a little freedom to talk.

“Don’t worry,” she told Max when she thought they had some privacy at a mumble. “Everything’s a little better on our end, okay?” For a moment Max looked her over for any sense she might be exaggerating and then seemed to decide Rachel was telling the truth and calmed down under her arm. “We did kind of miss the ever loving shit out of you, though.” Max bumped against her, as much in acknowledgement as in affection. It was odd how universal that gesture seemed to be between the three of them.

“Chloe made that pretty clear when she followed up you trying to break my ribs by doing the same.”

“Yeah, sorry,” Rachel said, though her voice made it clear she didn’t mean it. “It’s just kind of great to have you back.” The girl looked momentarily touched but Rachel wiped that look off her face when she asked, “now what’s with the hair?”

“What?” Max mumbled in return as they turned down another path and passed Samuel hard at work. “Chloe can cut like three inches off of her hair, dye it bright green and no one bats an eye. I cut mine and it’s the grand inquisition?”

“Fair enough,” Rachel responded, backing down from the subject. She wasn’t sure if Max was actually being touchy about it or just playing. “It’s just a radical change.”

“You like?” Max asked her. “I just wanted a change. It felt like a good idea to get a good, fresh start.” She does look fresh. Transformed. A little. Not as much as she might think, though.

“I like it,” Rachel replied. “Chloe did too,” she couldn’t help but grin a little wolfishly at the
photographer. When Rachel released Max, she stepped up just slightly and called past her parents to Chloe.

“I’m glad to see you wearing that,” Rachel realized she must be referring to the hoodie. That probably explained it, it had some meaning she wasn’t privy to. “It’s kind of short on you.”

“Affirmative,” Chloe replied from the front, turning to walk backward as she talked to Max.

“Hey, you don’t get rid of a classic,” Vanessa told her daughter. “It’s why I keep your dad around.”

“Ouch,” Ryan replied, seeming to stagger backward for a second. “Max? Rachel? Can one of you pull that knife out of my back?”

“I’m gonna retire it after today,” Chloe spoke over Ryan’s antics. “Though, I think maybe instead I’m going to put it somewhere special for safekeeping.” Max nodded with a smile. “I’m glad you kept it all this time,” Chloe added. Their stolen moment or two of discussion set Rachel more at ease than she first thought it would. Though Max still looked conflicted and as if she was having trouble closing the door on a lot of different emotions, she moved as if she was more sure of herself than Rachel had seen in a long time. She sounded self-aware but kind of proud of herself, as well. It reminded her not so much of Max in May, but maybe back in early September when they were still dancing around getting to know each other, when Max was trying to figure out what Rachel was all about and vice versa. Oh this is gonna be an interesting few weeks. She glanced past the Caulfields to Chloe, who winked once at her before turning around so as not to trip on their way to the dorms. Can Chloe make it to Christmas break if it takes Max that long to feel a little better? I suppose I can distract her, if I have to.

December 22nd, 2010 - 4:45 PM

Max was still closing the door when Chloe found herself an empty stretch of the dorm room floor, swung her backpack off her shoulder to hang from her hand and unceremoniously dropped to a sitting position. Rachel follow suit, placing her own bag on her lap, but not opening it as Chloe did her own. Max turned back to them and blinked in surprise when she realized she was looking down at them both. Chloe simply smiled at her, waiting for her to say something. This was a habit she’d picked up a long time ago from Rachel and it was deliciously cruel. The idea of confusing the hell out of someone and then, when they looked to you for answers, simply smiling at them only had one purpose: to frustrate or fluster the person until you got a reaction from them. Max looked at them as if they were crazy.

“There’s a computer chair and enough space for us all to sit on the bed,” Max informed them, as if
speaking to two people who were a little too drunk.

“Yeah, and there’s lots of space on the floor,” Chloe insisted. “What the hell are you doing up there? Are you nuts?” Max sighed exaggeratedly and Chloe turned her smile on Rachel. The girl was in a good enough mood, she saw, to get in on the act a bit. Rachel scooted closer to her and glanced up at Max with the same ‘I’m so confused’ look on her face. Chloe watched the two of them stare at each other for a good ten seconds until Max crossed her arms across her chest and then sat down on the floor in front of the two of them. Chloe would have called it a pout coming from anyone else.

Max’s attitude had still been rather unstable when she came back from Thanksgiving Break. It was nearly Christmas Break, now, almost a month farther down the line, but Max seemed to be getting a bit back to her old self. The change came over her all at once a few days ago and when pressed for explanation, Max told them that she had ‘gotten some answers.’ Those answers, she explained, didn’t fix anything but they put her at ease for now. Considering the number of times Rachel had slept on Max’s floor since then and reported that the nightmares had become far less frequent, the girls had agreed to trust her on that. They didn’t, however, tell her that Rachel was keeping tabs on her bad dreams. Even if I probably would be the logical choice for that.

Chloe dropped her backpack in her lap and Rachel sat her own aside. Max glanced between them in the second or two of silence, still looking utterly confused about their behavior and then sighed in surrender. About any time you got that reaction out of Max you counted yourself a victor, in Chloe’s book. Price and Amber 1, Caulfield 0! The crowd goes wild! Instead of confronting them quite yet, Max took a second to remove and set aside her shoes, suggesting to Chloe that she had only narrowly beat them to the room. And where was Max hanging out, she wondered. Maybe she went into town to get a little puff-puff-pass? The thought was enough to remind Chloe that she was going to have to face Frank and talk to him soon. To do that she would probably need to think about whether she actually blamed him for what Nathan did. I mean, I guess not. I’ll blame him if he does it again, though.

“Alright, alright,” Max said, finally. “Present time.” Chloe pumped her fist and promptly unzipped her bag, smirking at Rachel as if to say, I told you that would work. Turning and stretching a bit, the photographer reached behind her head and brought down a plastic bag from the pile of stuff dropped hazardly on the bed. As Max adjusted herself, leaning back against the frame, Chloe got a good look at the bag. It was bulky and oddly shaped, whatever was in it was dark and heavy. She shot a look to the girl to her right, intending to see if she noticed, too, but paused. Rachel had one hand on her backpack (as Chloe did) but was not looking down at it. She was glancing from Max to Chloe and there was a look about her. Not just her face, not just her eyes, but her whole body. She was practically humming with excitement. Rachel’s really big on this holiday season shit, Chloe thought to herself, remembering the numerous times Rachel had gotten lost singing Christmas songs that made Chloe cringe. Everyone around me is fuckin adorable, and I can’t even be mad at them for it. Their excitement, at least, was infectious. Chloe nudged her, harder than usual. Rachel responded in kind. It took a lot of effort not to just reach out to the girl.
“Me first,” Max said, and she reached into the bag. First she came up with a small, wrapped stack of red solo cups. Oh shit, Chloe thought, getting a little eager herself. “Look at the way your eyes lit up,” Max told her. Chloe shrugged, not looking to deny it. While Rachel secured and sat out three cups, Max reached back into the bag and pulled out a large, thick looking dark bottle. Chloe read the purple label across the front of the bottle and listened to the satisfying pop the cork made when Max grabbed hold and pulled it out. Whether it was Max sitting happily opposite of them exchanging Christmas gifts with them, or both girls’ eagerness for the holidays or maybe the promise of alcohol, Chloe felt in the moment like all the bullshit of life was worth it for moments like this one. There were always ways they could make those moments a little better, but there would be more of them if she lived her life the way she wanted to. It was about not looking a gift horse in the mouth. “This one is a gift for all three of us.”

“Mead?” Rachel asked, sounding a little incredulous. “What are we, viking warrior princesses?”

“I could think of worse group cosplays,” Max deadpanned before beginning to half fill each cup. “This stuff’s about 19% so take it easy. It’s really awesome for cold days though, even if they’re cold wet days and not cold snowy ones.” Chloe ignored the glare Max shot at the window as if the weather had wronged her. So she’s had this stuff before, Chloe thought, taking the proffered glass.

“I’m not complaining,” Chloe told her, squinting at the label again. “But is it healthy or ethical to drink something called Viking Blod?”

“What,” Rachel teased, “Got a problem with Nordic vampires?”

“Cheers,” Max called, as soon as the three of them each had a glass in hand. With her cup halfway to her mouth, Chloe paused.

“To next year not sucking anywhere near as much.”

“Yeah,” Max said. “I’ll drink to that.”

“Sounds good,” opined Rachel. Chloe realized they were both staring at her as if waiting permission.

“What the hell are you waiting on, fuckers? Drink.” Chloe tilted the cup back. There was a fair amount of alcohol burn as the drink hit her mouth. It was, however, honey-sweet and fruity, with something bitter added on top almost as an afterthought. In the end it was way too good to carry as
much alcohol as it did. Chloe realized she didn’t want to think about what it cost or what it would
do to her if she just drank a fair amount of it without paying attention. *Rachel and Max would
definitely have to hide me in their room. I’d be floored.*

“Shit,” Max called, before coughing into her cup. Rachel’s left hand reached out to steady her own
cup as she sat it down. Chloe waited, not too concerned as Max continued to cough, probably in
response to a bit of the drink going down the wrong pipe. “Holy crap, that’s sweeter than I thought
it’d be.” *Okay maybe she hasn’t had it before. She talks like she has.*

“Cute,” Rachel muttered, seeing the girl’s face redden in embarrassment. It only worsened in
response. Chloe understood that.

“So, I’ve never seen the ID you use to get this shit,” Chloe told her. Max waved a finger back and
forth, as if to say ‘tsk tsk.’

“Just you wait,” she coughed. “I can’t exactly hook you up with my guy back in Seattle but I know
someone here who knows someone.” Rachel raised an eyebrow at her.

“Who do you know and who do they know?” Rachel asked, scooting a bit forward. This caused
Max to slowly regain her composure as if making sure to set herself straight and not say or do
something which might upset one of them. *Yeah, we’re gonna have to make our move tonight,*
Chloe thought. *Before the mead starts to matter much.* Somehow, Chloe felt like she was being set
up to fall on that grenade.

“A good magician never reveals her tricks,” Max told her, eyeing Rachel a little suspiciously.
“Let’s just say the gifts I’ve got here aren’t the end of it, but it’s gonna have to wait until after
break.” Then, as if the subject was closed, Max took another sip of her drink and seemed to handle
it better. *It’s better than that fucking vodka she likes,* Chloe thought. This did make her realize that
Max *drank* a bit more than either of them. Certainly more often. *Probably more than both of us
combined. With that in mind, I probably ought to bring this up before I get all tipsy. Well, you know
what they say: there’s no time like during presents.* Congratulating herself on the pun, Chloe
decided to kick things off. From her backpack Chloe pulled a plastic bag of her own, something
wrapped in the center. With Rachel still slightly *humming* beside her, Chloe pushed the bag toward
Max.

Max took one look at it, saw that Chloe had wrapped it fairly tight and that the plastic bag was
obviously old and already had a hole in it, then simply extended the hole, tearing it open. Chloe
laughed to herself: Max had always been this way at Christmas. Wrapping paper usually ended up
laying in shreds all around her. Max paused a little as she seemed to realize what she had her hands
on. Chloe watched Max’s confusion as she looked up at Chloe.
“I know it looks like regifting, but then again it was kind of regifting when you gave it to me in May,” Chloe told her. Max pulled the old sweatshirt free of the bag and unfurled it. It made Chloe smile looking at it in her hands. Yeah, she couldn’t wear it anymore; it was just too short. Max, on the other hand, was also a little short. If she chose to, she could wear it and she was about the only person in the world who would really get what something silly like that sweatshirt meant to her. “I told you, though, that I was going to send it somewhere really special. I guess I should’ve said to someone special.” Rachel let out an exaggerated ‘awwww’ and then took a drink from the mead. Chloe knew she was trying to embarrass her but found it a halfhearted attempt, this time. For just a moment, Chloe saw Max on the borderline of tearing up, and then the emotion was buried beneath general happiness. If it wasn’t the mead, then the girls’ attitudes were going to warm her inky, frozen black heart before the night was up.

“I actually don’t know what to say,” Max replied, even if could not wipe the touched smile from her face. Chloe wondered how much of that was because Max thought she had to watch what she said to them both, now.

“Check the pocket,” Chloe said in answer, feeling a bit cheeky as she the tables were turned from their conversation in May. Max reached in and pulled out two objects.

“That one’s from me,” Rachel said as Max held up first a card. “I wanted to get you something camera related but I have to admit I’m fucking clueless about that. So I kind of wanted you to be able to get something you wanted or needed.” Max glanced down at the gift card for the one specialized camera shop in town and then, red in the cheeks again, reached back up onto her bed. Chloe thought it was to store the card somewhere safe, but she came down with the camera that used to belong to Chloe’s father in her hand. Of course she’s been hiding that, waiting for the perfect moment. Photobug.

“Thank you, Rachel,” Max told her, settling the camera on the floor beside her knee. “I’m really fucking happy to have you in my life.” Something about the way Max said it was so painfully honest that Chloe did not blame Rachel for reaching carefully across and hugging Max for several seconds. Judging by the look on Max’s face when they separated, it had been a tight one, too. Chloe reached behind Rachel as she got comfortable and rested her right hand on her right hip.

“Okay, we’re all getting waaaaaay sappy,” Chloe said. Unfortunately, it was too little too late, because Max picked up the second object to come from the pocket of the sweatshirt. Chloe smiled at the look on the girl’s face. Trailling a thin chain behind it, the ‘amulet’ from their childhood pirate fantasies rested in Max’s right hand. The reality was that it was the bottom of a busted jar that they had carefully worn the edges down on to make as not deadly as possible. Drawn on it in marker that was rapidly fading from the years, a miniature map of sorts was visible even from here. “Look,” Chloe said. “I’ve got the spyglass somewhere, and it doesn’t seem too smart to me to keep both the keys to our treasure in one spot.” Max chuckled at her. “Just, keep it for me, okay?” Maybe it was all in Chloe’s imagination but the room seemed to be smaller, quieter (even though
they were the only ones in it making sound) and more self-aware when she continued. “If you ever doubt how much you mean to me, bust down my bedroom door, grab the spyglass hidden behind Mr. Sharkie,” Chloe congratulated herself on not feeling silly as hell as she said the words, “and go find the treasure.”

“I will,” Max told her, seriously. Several seconds of silence hung between the three of them, during which Rachel leaned over and pressed her lips to Chloe’s cheek and then shoulder. Chloe didn’t try to psychoanalyze the action, she just enjoyed it. “Now it’s my turn, you two,” Max declared when she looked to be more in control of her emotions. Chloe took a long drink as Max opened her own bag more fully, revealing some large, black mass. This was the first thing Max pulled out. “I’m not sure you’ll like it but I think it’s down your alley,” Max told Rachel, passing her this mass. As Rachel reached out to take it, Chloe saw what it was and understood why Rachel exclaimed, ‘oh fuckin’ awesome!’

The jacket was made of nice, sleek, clean leather, with far too many zippers along the shoulders and arms and long, thin strips of black leather hanging down from those arms. As Rachel unfolded it and turned it first one way, then another, Chloe saw that on the back, in a white outline against the dark material, was the shape of a raven. It looked familiar, Chloe thought, like it was something she had seen in a dream, just briefly a long time ago. You know, it could be, for all I know. Rachel gave a low whistle in appreciation, something she’d picked up from Chloe.

“God damn, this is awesome.” Rachel took a second to pick up her cup as she stood so it wouldn’t spill. Eventually, she sat the red solo cup onto Max’s bedside table and pulled the jacket on. It looked from where Chloe sat like a perfect fit. Rachel swung her arms wide and then crossed them across her chest as she stared into the mirror and then turned back to the two of them. Chloe was struck by the memory of the Firewalk show, by Rachel’s appearance, looking some mix of punkrocker and ass kicker. Rachel threw her arms open. “What do you think?” she asked them both.

“I think it kicks ass,” Chloe said, glancing between her and Max. And I think I forgot how nice Rachel looked in leather. “Don’t tell me you don’t think that’s hot, Max?”

“No, sorry, but ‘hot’ doesn’t cover it,” Max finally said, though she looked a little awkward as she spoke, not quite matching either of their eyes. Oh right, I need to get a move on there. Still, it would be rude to interrupt before Max was done. Chloe drained the rest of her cup.

“This is so cool, Max, thank you,” Rachel told her. “Like, it even fits perfect.”

“We’re basically the same size,” Max clarified. “You’re welcome, though.” Rachel didn’t look inclined to remove the jacket when she sat back down, so Chloe couldn’t help but wonder how long it would take the girl to get warm. By the time she was turned back toward Max, the girl was
offering what at first look seemed to be a leather-bound binder. Then Chloe remembered who she was taking the gift from and realized what was actually in her hands: a photo album, and a pretty thick one if she did say so, herself. “Okay, so, like, not all of these are labeled because I didn’t take most of them, but, I labeled the ones at the back as accurately as I could,” Max told her. Chloe paused as she noticed that Max hadn’t moved that dark red sweatshirt from her lap, and had one hand on it. The other joined the first when Chloe finally took the album’s full weight in both hands. Rachel pushed herself in close to Chloe as Chloe popped the album open.

At the front, the very first photo, was labeled to show Chloe and Max at ‘Max’s 4th birthday.’ Chloe swallowed against a lump in her throat she hadn’t expected to see the two of them there, faces half covered in ice cream, unaware of the photo being taken. Judging by the fact that it was a polaroid and very old, Chloe had a suspicion and fixed narrowed eyes on Max.

“Dad took this one, didn’t he?” Max nodded quickly, her face a little concerned.

“That’s what mom and dad told me,” Max said. “I went through boxes and boxes of stuff that first night I was home. I just wanted to find everything that I thought you’d like and mom and dad would be okay to part with.”

“It’s sweet,” Rachel said, looking between the two of them. Chloe swallowed again, and turned the page. As they flipped through the pages, Chloe tried to find words. Before her eyes their childhood together played out, sometimes with as many as eight or nine photos per year, some of them polaroids from the camera sitting at Max’s side and others slightly more modern photos that were probably taken by Max’s parents and developed elsewhere. *This isn’t fair, I was just telling them not to be soppy.* Try as she might, she felt that if she tried to talk she was probably going to cry. They grew up *fast* judging by these photos but after a certain point Chloe remembered bits and pieces of the events being depicted as if they were year-long sequences. “Chloe, are you okay?” Rachel teased. Chloe glared at her, but was aware that watering eyes weakened the effect, so she just looked back down and kept turning as Rachel rubbed her back. Max shifted a bit to join her in watching them grow up.

Then, there, Max’s photos started. They were just a handful from before her father died and Max left, but they were labeled with *scary* specificity. Like, down to the minute. Chloe had no reason to doubt the girl’s accuracy, either. Everything checked out in her mind but she had *no* idea at all how Max did it. Chloe looked up at her and saw that Max was trying to keep her face impassive. Chloe didn’t bother trying as she turned to the fourth to last page. It started with a photo of Rachel and Chloe in the truck. Judging by Rachel’s jacket and Chloe’s hair it was taken only minutes after Max first knocked the town’s big villainous drug dealer out and sent Frank scuttling for his RV. The rest of the album only featured Max in two more photos, because she had a thing against ‘*selfies*’ that Chloe was now determined to break. They were random moments at play practice, or around Steph’s kitchen table or in Steph’s living room, even a couple in the junkyard from the night of Max’s birthday party. One that stood out to Chloe was a little risky. Chloe was raising a can of beer to her lips, looking at Max in surprise. The label was obscured by her hand, mercifully, but laying there with her face red, her head in Chloe’s lap, was Rachel. Photo Rachel was looking
up at Chloe as if utterly devoted to and captivated by her. Chloe tried not to think about how this was the night she first began to fear Rachel was going to leave her.

On the last page Max had left a spot empty. Chloe looked up to thank her, but Max’s arm settled across one shoulder and Rachel’s another. The two girls pressed close to either side of her and Chloe tried her best not to look like she was on the verge of tears when Max raised her father’s old camera up and snapped that final photo: a picture of the three of them which Chloe would come to look at in its place, almost daily during Christmas break. It highlighted the moment beautifully: in her new leather jacket that she was so excited about, Rachel was leaned in, smiling teasingly at the camera. Max with, featured in the album for the first time with her new pixie cut, was bright red in the face and Chloe, smiling despite watering eyes, had an arm around either of them.

While the photo developed, though, in the moment, Chloe grabbed Max rather openly and pulled her in tight. For a moment she wanted to bury her face against the top of Max’s head, but the height difference was pronounced enough all she could really do was lean down and press her cheek against the girl’s. Her thanks was probably gibberish as she struggled to maintain composure. *Fuck the holidays,* Chloe thought to herself when she released Max. *They always do this shit to you.*

“Allright, that’s officially enough mead for Chloe,” Rachel declared when Chloe finally recovered her wits about her. Chloe laughed despite herself and Max settled back into her spot opposite of the two of them, stretching her legs out in front of her. Chloe placed one hand on Max’s left ankle and jostled it a bit.

“Okay, you, now that you’ve made me cry, we need to talk about something.” This seemed no better or worse a time to bring the subject up than any other that night but she felt silly at the sound left behind in her voice by the tears. Max seemed to stiffen slightly in concern. Rachel’s smile faded a little, but only to be replaced by an encouraging look. Rachel’s left hand rested on Chloe’s knee and she took the encouragement. *Okay, Chloe, time to be good with words like Rachel always says you are.* She cleared her throat, “Um, well,” *Great start, now add in some stuttering and passing out while you’re at it, so you can really sound like a lovestruck teenager.* She glanced to Rachel for some more literal help only to find that the girl met her eyes with that same smile on her face. *She’s going to enjoy this,* Chloe told herself, feeling both hard done by Rachel and the urge to laugh at her antics. *Bitch.*

“Okay, let me try that again,” Chloe said. This time she tried to keep her voice even. The photographer’s blue eyes were beginning to get more and more concerned. Chloe wanted to hurry herself along for Max’s sake but she realized as she opened her mouth that not once had she and Rachel actually discussed the *words to say.* “Oh, fuck, uh. Do you- um. Rachel and I were talking, like, we talked a lot over break. At first we wanted to talk to you about this separately but then it seemed like a stupid idea so we were going to talk to you together and then it didn’t seem like you were in the best place when you got back so we- uh.” *You’re rambling, Chloe Price.* “Shit, let me try that *again.* ” *This would be easier if I could just push her against the bed and kiss her until she got the message.* *Rachel speaks that language. I like that language.*
“Go on,” Rachel said. Despite her amusement, she did not sound teasing in this moment. Max’s confused look shot between their faces for a second then refocused on Chloe’s. Rachel squeezed her knee and Chloe irritably removed her beanie with her left hand, suddenly feeling warm. You’re not blushing, fucker, so just pull it together. Max began to nervously work her right hand up and down along her right leg, something that Chloe knew she did when wearing jeans because the texture either calmed her or stimulated her. She wasn’t sure which.

“You know about uh,” Chloe sighed and decided to go ‘technical’ with it, because that felt less awkward. “Polyamory, right?” Chloe watched Max’s face go from confused to almost suspicious. Her eyes narrowed and she turned her head, trying to read Chloe. Shit, she thinks I’m fucking with her, Chloe realized. Panic threatened to sit in. “Um, well…” at this, as if Chloe had just clarified something instead of mumbling half-assedly, Max’s eyes widened slightly.

“Oh,” Max said. She gets it? “Oh.” Pink tinged her cheeks, though nowhere nearly as bad as before. Oh thank fuck, Chloe thought. Max didn’t seem upset, just surprised. Chloe sighed in relief and when she did that Max glared. “No fair feeling better when I feel awkward,” Max declared.

“It’s just- I didn’t know how to say it, alright?” Chloe defended herself. “Okay, and I like,” absentmindedly she reached out for her discarded beanie, as if it was going to grow legs and walk off.

“I do,” Max told her. “Know about it. I knew someone who was. I used to have dinner with her, her husband, her boyfriend and her husband’s boyfriend.”

“First,” Rachel replied, sounding impressed, “Some dinner. Second, your friend was married?”

“Yeah,” Max said, then grew quiet, looking, Chloe thought, curiously at Rachel.

“So,” Chloe interjected, “We didn’t know how to bring it up….”

“But we’re both kind of crazy about you, which you’re not stupid, so you already know.” Rachel finished. “And it took us a while to figure out what to do about that… and I guess maybe you know what we decided since we brought it up, but I really kind of want to make Chloe say it, so can you please pretend to be ignorant?” Chloe turned and glared, pointedly at Rachel. Rachel notably did not look away from Max’s face. The red was starting to fade from the photographer’s cheeks. That being said, her earlier embarrassment suggested she knew damn well what Chloe was saying, so Chloe did not for a moment buy what Max said next.
“So what did you guys decide?” Max asked, her voice lowering, eyebrows raising as she leaned toward Chloe. *Fucker,* Chloe wanted to yell. *Motherfucker! Don’t play with me like this. Rachel’s been a very, very bad influence on you!* “Don’t you want to tell me, Chloe?”

“We decided,” she started, feeling sure of herself. She trailed off, swallowed once and continued. “We decided if you’re ever… you know, okay with it… we are.” *Feels weak, feels like welching,* Chloe told herself. “Ugh, you’re gonna make me say it.”

“For about five different reasons,” Max told her. “The least of which is because you should be the one who gets all red and stuttery sometimes. This way you know what you do to others.” Flustered, Chloe reached out at the same time Max did, for the heavy ceramic bottle of mead between them. Forgetting Rachel’s declaration, she wanted another drink. Her hand closed over Max’s on it and she seized on the opportunity.

“We’re into you,” she said, feeling more confident. “You knew that, though, and just because Rachel and I are together doesn’t mean that you and I or you and Rachel can’t be together a-and if you need it spelled out anymore, I’m going to think your parents replaced you with a defective Max clone and have to send you back to Seattle to get the real thing back.” Max laughed and released her grip on the bottle. Chloe took it and poured the three of them each a glass while giving the room time to settle around the statement. *This is not how I imagined it at all,* she told herself.

“As much as it might feel awkward saying it, we’re into you,” Rachel said. “And you’re into us, so why the hell does it make any sense for us not to like, acknowledge that and do with it whatever we want?” Max turned away from Chloe as she poured to look at Rachel. Chloe watched her face, confronted with Rachel’s boldness in contrast to Chloe’s stumbling, bumbling mess of a confession. “I mean we get it if you want time to think. I think Chloe and I were just kind of getting to the end of our rope with this not telling you that we both *really* want to be with you, thing.”

“I do,” Max said, slowly. “Need some time to think. If you can, you know, hold on ‘til after break. It’s not that long now.”

“Au contraire,” Chloe replied, shoving a cup into Max’s hand. “It’s going to be shitty to lose you for so long after you’ve barely been back a month. I’m gonna miss the hell out of you, even if you are an evil, scheming punk who would take advantage of a close friend’s awkwardness just for a cheap laugh.” Max grinned unapologetically, wiggling her eyebrows in Chloe’s direction before taking a long, deep drink of the sweet amber-gold honey mead. The smile that remained after on the photographer’s face was passive, small, as if it was effortless to maintain. *As if she’s actually happy.* Chloe glanced sideways at Rachel. *I guess that makes three of us.* Rachel’s left hand came to rest on Chloe’s left hip, mirroring Chloe.
“I haven’t really adjusted as easily as I wanted,” Max mused, staring into her cup. Chloe wondered if she was getting to the ‘loose’ stage of buzzed, but then concentration crossed her face and wrecked that notion. Max was picking her words carefully.

“We were worried about that,” Chloe murmured. “We just didn’t want to push things by asking too many questions. It’s just that we felt like we were being dishonest about not coming out with it.” Rachel nodded and Max shrugged as if to say she understood. Chloe took another drink. Last one of these for me. “I am gonna have to ask for a hug before I go, though because this album thing is really fucking awesome.” Max laughed into her glass. The moment was gone and with it some kind of pressure that Chloe had had very little awareness of. She felt lighter.

“I think I’ll know what to do after I’ve had a think,” Max told her, nodding. “And I also have a plan for getting better about handling what Nathan did to me.” The mood darkened a little bit, but there wasn’t a ton that could be thrown against the relief flooding into Chloe’s chest from her extremities. “I’ll start by finding evidence of him doing something shitty enough that the police in this town have to arrest his ass.”

“Shouldn’t be hard,” Chloe responded. “He already did something he should be seeing bars for.”

“It’s gonna have to be more than that and there’s going to have to be proof, in this town,” Max said. “Nathan Prescott always gets away with his shit.” The girl’s bitter tone was a little disconcerting, but it was certainly deserved. “If he were a normal person I would have reported him the next day and figured everything else out after but this is a Prescott and the Prescotts have pull in more and weirder places than you think.” She seemed to be addressing Chloe specifically with this one.

“And how would you know that?” Rachel asked her, calmly, as if afraid to upset Max.

“Because I didn’t spend the last month on my ass doing nothing, even if it looked like it because I sleep so damn much.” Max sighed. “I’ve been digging. Managed not to get in any trouble so far, but that’s because, face it, I’m the best at finding out what people don’t want known.”

“Nosy as fuck,” Chloe agreed. This earned a smile from the photographer and an exaggerated, prideful preening. Maybe it was Max’s new short hair, but the gesture reminded Chloe too much of Victoria Chase. “What’s the sleeping late about?” Chloe asked her, softly.

“Unhealthy avoidance mechanism,” Max answered. “Hypersomnia. But, I have other unhealthy obsessions, like digging dirt up on the Prescotts and their cronies and I’m going to keep doing that.”
“You’re not alone in this, you know,” the thespian told Max, reaching out to tilt the girl’s head up so they matched eyes. “I want you to tell me you know.”

“I know,” Max whispered after several seconds. “I do. I’ll never forget what you did for me.”

“Do you remember?” Rachel asked her, quietly.

“Most of it,” Max admitted.

“Do you remember what I did in the dorm room?” Rachel asked, this time a little more emphatically. Chloe felt the air warming up around her and fidgeted a little in her spot.

“I know enough to think that there wasn’t an electrical problem, or if there was it wasn’t just some coincidence.” Max swallowed under Rachel’s gaze. “Thank you.”

“Okay,” Rachel told her. “Don’t have to thank me for that, though,” she said. “Just know that I’d never hurt you and I’d do what I did again in a heartbeat.”

“We want Nathan to get what’s coming to him,” Chloe said. “I don’t care if it’s the last thing I do, he’s going to.” Max exhaled a shaky sigh. “Not to be glib about something horrible happening to you,” Chloe said, glancing at Rachel, “but the three of us sort of brought down a corrupt district attorney, so fuck Nathan. So you’ll be bringing us along on future digs, right, Max?” Max rose to her knees slowly and reached past the corked bottle to rest a hand on either of their shoulders.

“I promise you,” Max agreed, her face suddenly serious. No thoughts of romantic relationships or teasing one another waited in Max’s eyes when she looked at them each in turn. This was serious face Max, and Chloe felt no pity for Nathan Prescott as she imagined the revenge that the three of them could bring down on his head. We have to. Not just for Max, but for whoever comes next if we do nothing. “He’s going to get his before this is all over. I don’t care how long it takes.” When Rachel nodded in agreement, continuing to rub Chloe’s back soothingly, Max’s face brightened. “Now, it’s time for the portion of the night where we annoy the fuck out of Chloe,” Max exclaimed, turning to Rachel. “Christmas music.”

Fuckers!
“The weather outside is frightful, but the fire is so delightful-” Chloe placed both palms in her hands as Rachel sang, rocking the both of them back and forth. Max dug out her laptop, presumably to actually play the music. Chloe wondered if she could get away with one more cup and still be good to drive before curfew. Better not risk it. Time to face Christmas music in the sober light of day.
Interlude II: Down a River Named Emotion

December 24th, 2010 - 5:34 PM

The Frankentruck’s passenger door shut harder than intended: a gust of wind slammed it when Rachel let go. Happy her fingers weren’t in the way, she let the moment of some surprise pass. Leaning forward, she watched Chloe through the window with some regret. Even with the cab of the truck to block her from the wind and the rain turning rapidly to snow it was going to be cold. She’s got a hell of a heart, Rachel thought, watching Chloe turn and stretch her legs across the seat, free her beanie from her head and place it over her eyes. It was easy to imagine a stetson being pulled down to block out the sun. She smiled at the girl, knowing she couldn’t be seen. Regretfully, she left the girl to the cab and told herself she could make this as fast as she wanted. She was not about to leave Chloe out to freeze.

For a moment, Rachel ran a finger down the side of the truck. It was cool to the touch as it should be. It was also solid, whole, still fighting, still running for Chloe. Rachel wasn’t sure when she picked up Chloe’s habit of personifying the truck. Maybe it had been the day she interrupted Nathan Prescott in his photo shoot. Either way, Rachel gave the vehicle, dingy and old as it was, a thankful pat. She owed Chloe a proper thanks later, probably over a warm—if greasy and horrible for them—meal. Rachel turned and examined the building in front of her.

The two story building stretched along the length of the parking lot and then around the width of it. It was still, somehow, rather squat looking. The sign at the front of the lot declared a room to run about seventy dollars a night. Rachel could guess, though, judging by dingy curtains hanging over windows, filthy brick facades and the fact that the majority of the cars in the lot looked to be in
worse shape than the Frankentruck that the rooms were overcharging. The solid enough looking
door to room fourteen was right in front of her, not a car to be found around it. It was somewhat
frustrating to consider that her bio mom was basically living out of this shitty motel. It wasn’t like
Rachel had any money of her own and she could not really try to convince her mother to help the
woman. Does she have any family? Why don’t I know that by now? How hard is it going to be to
get hired when your address is a motel?

Rachel paused beside the nose of the truck, wondering for not the first time why she did not feel
more for the moment. I want answers, I want to know her. Chloe would be giddy at finally getting
answers. Max would be nervous enough she might ask Chloe to come with her—okay, maybe that
one’s not true, but she’s Max. Chloe would ask one of us to come with her. I’m worried that things
might end up turning to shit but I’m not even considering the option of just turning and leaving.
Shouldn’t I feel more? This could all blow up in her face and as unpleasant as that might be, it
didn’t stop or slow her. Rachel knew that she could walk up to the door and be turned away and
simply return to the truck and go back to Arcadia Bay. She would be sad. She would feel irritated.
She would be calm again before they made it out of Edgeton, if she got that worked up at all.

Each knock felt a little quieter than she expected given the force she put behind them. The voice
that answered, calling out for her to wait just a moment, still felt unfamiliar. Rachel couldn’t see it
happening but she had a feeling that the slightly longer than expected pause was due to her bio
mom staring through the peephole at her. From film and television she was able to recognize the
sound of first a chain lock being undone, the chain falling to clatter against the door and then a
deadlock. Well, she thought, that would keep someone out for about ten seconds. The blonde
woman pulled the door open rather slowly, as if giving herself time to consider the situation.

Sera stood framed in the doorway in a cheap looking, if brand new tee and slacks that struck
Rachel as more fitting on her actual mother than on the woman she met briefly in May. She has
enough money for a new outfit, probably to go job searching. At least she’s probably not stuck
without food. I wonder what she’s applying to? I have no idea if she had a job at one point, if she
went to college, anything. A quick glance at her face showed that Sera had done much the same as
her: made a perfunctory, if unnecessary attempt at applying makeup. For a second, Rachel was
back in Chloe’s bedroom, knelt in front of the bed, teaching the girl (‘I mean, I was going to try to
learn this crap when I was thirteen but then I didn’t care,’) about things like eyeliner, eyeshadow,
the like. ‘Simple shit,’ as Chloe had asked in halting, stuttering words. Chloe was satisfied with
what she knew and only made limited use of it: the eyeliner she now wore on almost the daily
made her eyes kind of stand against her fair skin. Rachel, though, found that she did not bother with
even that outside of special occasions. It was a useless, silly hoop to jump through, in her opinion
and since meeting Chloe, hoop jumping no longer sounded fun.

What if we both did this for the same reason? Rachel asked herself as the moment stretched out a
little longer than comfortable. What if we both wanted to meet expectations we thought the other
would have halfway? What if I’m overthinking absolutely fucking nothing? Her tendency to
analyze things had begun worsening lately. Perhaps it was a reaction to her discomfort about her
difficulty with emotions. That’s probably all it is.
“I hate hearing my mother’s words in my mouth, but you’re probably going to catch your fuckin’ death out there,” Sera said by way of greeting. A snowflake passed across Rachel’s vision. Sera’s face relaxed visibly. “Hello, Rachel. There’s not a ton of room, but you’re welcome to come in and get warm, chill out.” Rachel watched Sera kind of grimace, as if to say, ‘sorry for the pun.’ Sera glanced briefly over Rachel’s shoulder. While Rachel understood what she was looking at, Rachel was watching her, searching for her first answer of the meeting. The blonde’s face was open. In that way she was reminiscent of Max. Rachel thought her eyes would be windows. Sera was hesitant, regretful and a little confused. She was also bone weary. Rachel might have trouble feeling as strongly as she wanted to but she damn sure knew what someone looked like when they were this kind of tired. The similarities to Max continued. There are things Chloe and Max can pull out of me that I feel that hard or there’s rage. The rest of it doesn’t come through this strong, it doesn’t show up in the mirror unless I put it there. Rachel sighed, earning an uptick in Sera’s confusion. Whatever’s wrong with me, it’s not genetic.

Rachel smiled at Sera and stepped in when the woman turned to the side. Pausing once inside, Rachel shifted shoulders beneath her jacket and turned back toward Sera who was again looking out at the truck. And she gives a damn about complete strangers, Rachel thought it seemed genuine enough, to top it off. Sera’s gray eyes shifted between the truck and Rachel for a moment, the door still half open and cold air pushing into the motel room. Rachel didn’t quite turn her attention to the room, instead deciding to address the issue in her bio-mom’s concerns.

“It’s fuckin’ cold out there,” Sera finally said. “Your friend can come in, you know. I don’t mind.” Through the doorway and in the lot, Chloe had shifted in her seat, hands working over an air guitar with earbuds trailing from her ears. She would be fine, Rachel knew, for a short time. Enough for Rachel to dig a little deeper into what she needed to know. Besides, it wasn’t like this whole not coming with her thing was Rachel’s idea.

“She said she wants to give me a chance to talk to you alone this time,” Rachel explained. “Later, or maybe next time if you’re cool with it, she’ll come in.” Sera shut the door behind her and cut the cold air, the image of Chloe through the windshield and the falling snow off. Rachel’s last view of Chloe was the girl leaning forward, in some sort of air guitar solo, lost in her own world.

“I’m fine with it, but I hope that old rust bucket has a hell of a heater,” Sera finally said, from the door to settle on the edge of the bed. Rachel took a second to ease her jacket off. Speaking of a heater, the motel’s was actually fairly effective. Old, thin carpet and all, it seemed to be warm enough. “A very good heater.” The woman rested one leg beneath her as she settled. Rachel again wondered how that didn’t hurt a person’s knee.

“There’s still some disagreement on that,” Rachel told her as she made for a comfortable enough looking chair not far from the bed. It occurred to her that she would have to be insane to tell Sera about the fact that sometimes Rachel’s body was more effective than any heater she had ever seen. And if I told her about the night of the play, she’d accuse me of being on drugs. Rachel settled her new jacket over her knees, subconsciously running a hand over the beak of the large raven on the back. Sera suddenly chuckled. “What?”
“I had a jacket a lot like that one when I was your age,” Sera told her. “I think my best friend stole it before she moved away, actually. She used to say she would.” Rachel thought she sounded wistful, though hardly upset. Then again, if you were close enough to someone, you might not mind that they would want something to remember you by. Across the room a news anchor’s voice came through the speakers on a television that looked about as old as she was. As a pause spread between them, the story on the screen changed. Rachel turned away from it almost instantly as her father’s face appeared on the screen. The ticker rolled by, declaring, ‘Disgraced D.A. James Amber’s trial set to wrap up in January.’ “Shit,” Sera spat, “I’m sorry.” The woman grasped at a remote on sitting on the edge of the bed beside her and dropped the volume.

“It’s alright,” Rachel put in. It wasn’t that hard to understand the woman’s concern and, to be fair, her stomach was still churning a little at the thought of the looming trial date. In that moment, Rachel made a decision that she didn’t know she was really still contemplating. “It really is.” Sera still leaned forward. Hunching forward did nothing to obscure the tired look on her face, in fact, she looked worse, she looked older.

“You know,” Sera started. Things are about to get serious. “You’re owed so many answers about your past, about me.” The woman tilted her head down, staring at the threadbare blue-green carpet. “Anyone, in your position would.” Grief rose up like a hum in the depths of her stomach. “I just don’t know how to talk about it yet, so even though I don’t deserve it, I need to ask you a favor.”

“What?” Rachel asked, tentatively. It wasn’t that she was concerned she was about to be taken advantage of by the woman. Sera had spent too much time reaching out to her for that, months of letters and brief messages. It was more that she was worried that Sera was about to say she had to go back away for a while, that she wasn’t in control after all. Rachel did not want to delay this any longer. She wanted to know Sera. Her hand returned to running softly along the jacket. In a way, it was like Max was in the room with her.

“I want to get to know you first,” the blonde woman insisted. “That’s all I ever wanted. I never wanted to make things worse for you. I just wanted to know you.” Rachel relaxed. Sera wanted what she wanted and Rachel admonished herself for forgetting that.

“Fine by me,” Rachel responded, more frankly. “But it’s got to be a two way street. You ask, I answer. I ask, you answer.” When Sera’s face changed, it was a grin, like someone who had heard their own words from someone else’s mouth and found it either gratifying or amusing. It was also the kind of grin that Chloe wore often. Everything about how Sera shifted to sit straighter, how she failed to disguise her relief with her amusement and didn’t seem to give a fuck was reminiscent of Chloe. It wasn’t a perfect fit, but it was kind of comforting to think of her like that, like someone Rachel could understand.
“I respect a bit of wheeling and dealing, girl,” Sera responded. “Sounds fine to me. Also, do you want a coke? I’ve got a twelve pack in the fridge and at my age I probably shouldn’t have so much sugar or caffeine.” Rachel thanked her quietly and got to her feet. At the far end of the dresser the old television sat on was a refrigerator only about as high as that. Rachel knelt in front of it. “But that hasn’t really stopped me yet, bring me one, too.” Rachel snorted into the fridge and came up with a pair of cans. *Christ, she really does remind me of Chloe, sometimes.* It only took a moment to deliver one can to her bio mom and settle herself back into her chair. *Oh God, is it true what they say? You fall in love with your parents?* For many, many reasons, she hoped that was a fallacy. She definitely shivered at that. Simultaneously, the sound of popping tabs filled the room and Rachel took a long drink, before continuing.

“Let’s start there,” Rachel said. As soon as Sera swallowed, she raised an eyebrow. “How old are you? What’s your birthday?”

“Actually,” Sera said, sounding slightly more at ease despite the next words from her mouth, “Your father and I were born on the same day, same town, same hospital. I think I’m a whole two hours older.” For a moment she made as if to take another drink. “I mean, it made birthdays a lot easier.”

“My mother and I have a deal,” Rachel said when Sera grew quiet. Perhaps it was childish of her but she couldn’t help but pause and watch to see if referring to her mother in that way drew any negative reaction. “She doesn’t talk about James Amber and I don’t leave every time she and I are trying to have a conversation.” Sera unwound a leg from beneath her. Sera did not seem to react to ‘mother’ negatively but she looked *sad* again at this last. “Can we please have the same deal? At least tonight.”

“Absolutely,” Sera said, finally, “but since we’re adhering to deals, it’s your turn.” It took Rachel a second to understand what she was saying but when she did she nodded and took a drink. “I want to know what it was like for you growing up. As long as it doesn’t get too close to the topic that we won’t be discussing, I mean.” Rachel grinned at the humoring tone in her voice. It wasn’t really passive aggressive, at least.

Rachel started as early as she could remember, growing up just outside of San Diego, California. Quietly, Rachel recounted moving from San Diego to Arcadia Bay when she was nine, choosing her words carefully to not mention her father she tried to imply that work was what brought her parents to the little town. Rachel told her that she grew up pretty wealthy, especially for Arcadia Bay. She was insulated from the world, she didn’t understand what people really went through when they didn’t *have* a lot of money, didn’t have a safe home. Then, Rachel said, after she came to a certain age, it was decided that she wasn’t to be homeschooled anymore. She was going to attend Blackwell Academy.

“The ‘Ambers’ aren’t the richest family in town,” she told Sera, as the woman settled back, her
back against the headboard. “At least until June we were probably top five. Since then most of the money’s sunk into legal defenses, probably.” Rachel shrugged. “I don’t care about the money. I’m just glad about the care package that found its way to the police chief’s doorstep.” She felt the cruel grin split her face. For a moment Rachel imagined that it looked a lot like Max’s, standing over Damon Merrick’s prone form, threatening Frank’s life if he dared to touch Chloe or Rachel. Even back then, Rachel thought, running two fingers along the outline of the raven on the back of her jacket. Jesus Christ. Nearly half an hour had passed by that point.

“Was that your doing?” Sera asked, a tone of dawning comprehension in her voice. Rachel made sure that Sera was looking into her eyes before she answered with one open, blunt nod. At this point, if for some reason Sera decided to tell anyone this fact, it wouldn’t change a damn thing. Her father was either going to go down or not.

“I’ll probably deny if anyone else finds out, but yeah,” she told her biomom. “Max had an idea about how to prove what we suspected. Chloe and I searched the study in my house. We found a lot of hiding places of ‘his.’ We took photos of all of it in context, in the place we found it, with this old flip phone he was using to talk to Merrick, shoved it all into a box of files and put it right on the chief’s doorstep.” Proud, Rachel lifted her head, high. “It only took one anonymous call from a payphone here in Edgeton and it was all over for James.”

“I’m so sorry I put you in that situation,” Sera all but whispered.

“I put myself there,” Rachel told her. “I didn’t feel safe at home, I didn’t want to see him get away with what he did. For those reasons, I chose to do that. I went to the people I trusted and asked them to help me. I made that phone call. I did that.” Sera sighed. Rachel changed the subject. She continued. “At Blackwell, I didn’t make any friends at first. Everyone was so different than me. So many people just being petty and mean for no reason. Maybe it was worse because I was homeschooled. I didn’t know how to talk to people. It took me a while but I figured it out. I learned to do something my mother tried to teach me. I put on masks. I did what I had to do to make ‘friends.’ None of them were close to me. None of them knew me. It worked though. I started theater, I even picked up piano. Hated piano. Tried soccer, hated soccer. I’m actually half decent at basketball, but I don’t like it.” Sera seemed to tune back in.

“I realized people wanted me to be what they admired or what they wanted to be, and that was how you made friends. By the time Chloe came to Blackwell, I didn’t really know who I actually was. I think in the end it’s because I don’t really feel things as strongly as everyone else. Mom doesn’t either.” Sera looked as if she wanted to say something to this. Rachel waited, eager for something, some input, anything that made her understand herself. The woman shut her mouth and gestured for Rachel to continue, perhaps sensing she was coming to her point. She felt dimly disappointed. “It’s starting to change, you know? There’s a couple people who can like, make me feel normal and feel normally.”
“Your friend Chloe’s one of them?” Sera asked, tilting her head toward the parking lot.

“My girlfriend, Chloe, is one of them,” Rachel clarified. Not an ounce of overbearing reaction passed across Sera’s face but she nodded as if taking a lesson. Rachel felt deeply relieved. “I mean, I saw her a couple years ago when she first came to Blackwell. She looked like she came from poverty to me, but I got a little more smart on that kind of thing. It’s not quite that extreme. It’s just that everyone else around me was always trying to look at the top of everything, wear the best of everything. Chloe wasn’t. She was always picked on and treated like shit by the others because she was just a little different and because she felt so intensely. When she was hurt, it was obvious in every action, every look on her face, every word she said. It’s still that way, actually. Though she likes to pretend it’s not. She got angry and then I realized one day that she was like me, closed off. She stopped coming to school. Then… one day a few months ago I saw her out at a show, being harassed by a couple of Damon Merrick’s boys.” This made Sera sit back up right. Rachel did not let go of the empty hand.

“That night, I actually met Chloe. Less than a day later, I caught feelings. Then an old friend of hers showed up and she and I got close after she came to Blackwell. But in between, well,” Rachel gestured to Sera as if to say she could guess the most of it. “This other girl? She knocked Merrick out twice. Really, she and Chloe are why you and I ever met.”

“I do owe those girls something,” Sera said, turning her head toward the curtained window. Rachel was reminded again that Chloe was out in that cold. Even with the heater running, it would be unpleasant. *I think it’s time to wrap this up.* “This other girl, Max… she’s important?”

“You know, I didn’t think I’d tell you this,” Rachel said, quietly, “but, yeah. She’s the only person other than Chloe who makes me feel like a person.” Sera sighed, heavily. “And I think Chloe and I are both a lot in love with her? We’re probably keeping it quiet from our families for a while, but we’ve both ‘asked her out,’ or whatever you want to call it.”

“That’s not as rare as you think it is, but I’ve never quite understood how people can manage it, especially when they’re all hormones and insecurities.” Sera did not make any promise to silence but she also did not indicate any excessive judgment. Rachel stopped stroking the jacket. Her fingers opened and closed. She was starting to get a little uncomfortable with sitting in there alone. “But if they’re special to you, I guess you find a way.”

“They are special.” Rachel told her, glancing to the door. “And I don’t think I can leave Chloe out in that anymore.” Sera nodded, arms crossing across her chest. She looked pleased.

“Go get her,” Sera told Rachel. “Get her in out of the cold and we’ll finish up here and let the two of you get home before it gets too dark.” She tossed the jacket on, knowing that it wouldn’t do much against the cold. It was like Max’s arm over her shoulder though and that, she had to confess,
she needed. Rachel missed the photographer anew.

“I’ll be back in a second.”

“I’ll be here,” Sera said, as if making a solemn promise.

January 31st, 2011 - 2:48 PM

Rachel smoothed the dress over her knees pointlessly, an expression of discomfort. Beyond one of the uncomfortable dinners with her mother, Rachel could not remember the last time she really dressed up. This, though, was a whole other issue. The long, black dress, one of a mourner, felt uncomfortable on her. It did, however, send the message she wanted to any onlooker who had enough knowledge to understand it. As grim as she felt, Rachel tried to keep her face calm. She knew that that facade had no effect on the people to either side of her. Not today. Her masks were weak and brittle. Chloe was to her left, more casually dressed as was her way. On her right, Max was in a plain tee and dark pants. Her outfit was a kind of middle ground between that of the other two and that might have been enough to make Rachel laugh at any other moment. Looking forward and to the right, she could see the back of her mother’s head, toward the front of the benches behind the bar. There were a good fair few people who had come to see this day of the trial but Rachel could find her mother in that crowd, almost instinctively.

Rachel and her girls were not behind her father and his lawyer, a worn out looking man who moved too slowly for his thirty years. No, they had come under the guise of being just curious citizens come to watch. Fittingly, as it turned out, they had ended up sat on the left side of the room, behind the prosecution. All of this, Rose Amber had only realized as the jury was excused to deliberate and Rachel had seen her looking around, uncomfortably. The hurt on her face was palpable when they met eyes over the crowd. In that moment Rachel knew she had been seeing her mother’s true face, her devastation, her undoing. It brought her no pleasure, but Rachel was looking forward to some satisfaction, some relief to come. Rachel knew Sera was out there, outside of the room somewhere and afterward, as per Rachel’s instructions, would be waiting nearby to meet her. The last time they spoke, Rachel had promised she would see Sera sooner than she thought that that day she would want to talk to her.

Just minutes ago, they were allowed to speak in a respectful tone to one another. Now they had all been asked for quiet and attention. That meant, Rachel suspected, was sign that the jury was returning. The hand smoothing over her dress was suddenly seized. She traced her eyes up Chloe’s arm, to her face. Popping under the attention of her eyeliner, with the help of the bright green hair beneath her hat, Chloe’s eyes drew Rachel’s attention for a long time. She grasped the girl’s hand and then—caring not a bit for pretense in the moment—her right hand, which she was still supposed to treat gingerly, pressed down on Max’s left knee. After a moment the girl got the message and rested her own hand on top of it. Rachel turned to look at the photographer once, shortened hair swept to one side, face warm and caring, and then stared forward toward the backs of the
prosecution. Max has already said she’s interested, said she’s alright with us, cares for us, even if she isn’t ready to hurry into it. So today, fuck it. I just want this. Max’s hand cupped her own for a second and then gripped it, softly, as if afraid she would re-break Rachel’s fingers. This is the person who sometimes thinks she’s a monster, Rachel thought, with muted wonder. She shifted on the hard bench, feeling unwell and anxious all at once.

In either face whose gazes were turned on her, she saw care enough that it moved her, trying to quiet that anxiety but not quite reaching it, an itch just beyond the length of one’s fingers. Before she could whisper anything to either of them, before she could express her adoration, before she could promise them a better day would come tomorrow, where they could just be together and relax, a smaller door to one side of the courtroom opened. Rachel swallowed and any potential words of thanks, of respect, of anything died in her throat. Her breath caught below the lump. It was nothing like when some sight of or action of Chloe or Max’s took her breath from her. No love, no lust, no passion or great jolt of amusement or happiness followed it. Instead it was like missing an expected step on the way down stairs. One after another, the jury poured into their box. Her eyes found the foreperson, a small woman with ratty brown hair. Her face was impassive, calm, and Rachel tried to find a juror whose face was more open. She needed to know they had reached a verdict, that this would be all over. Oregon was one of two states in the union that could convict a person without a unanimous ruling. They only needed a supermajority of ten. Without that much, this trial would have to happen all over again.

Rachel could not have that.

There came absolutely no sign of their answer in any juror’s face. Rachel reflected as she looked away from them that being mostly cut off from her mother had cost her a lot but also spared her the pain of most of this trial. Max and Chloe had done their part in shielding her, too. She couldn’t forget that. Thank you, she thought, glancing again to her left or right. Chloe was watching the jury, determinedly. Max, however, was looking once more at her. Tabletop, homework, the play, Max and Chloe, all of it kept me busy, but this downtime for the holidays is driving me nuts. I need this to be over. An ounce of mercy meant this would all be over.

“Foreperson,” the judge, a severe looking man in his fifties, called. The ratty-haired woman rose to her feet. “Has the jury reached a decision?” On the other side of the room, her father’s shoulders stiffened. Her mother’s head rose.

“We have, your honor.” Beside Rachel, both girls continued to watch her, concern written openly on their faces. She squeezed either hand. At the judge’s instruction, the clerk approached the woman and received a paper. Chloe released her and that arm rose to rest around her shoulders. When she did that, Rachel realized she felt stiff all over. Her top lip was trapped between her teeth. If she wasn’t careful, she would draw blood. Have to hold it together, no matter what happens. The judge turned the paper over in his hands, reading it slowly, too slowly. Feeling strangely distant, Rachel forced herself to stay straight up. Perhaps in response, Chloe leaned in closer. It was probably not precisely an acceptable action in the courtyard. They’re waiting to support me or to comfort me. Which action goes with which outcome? The paper passed from the judge to the clerk
and then back to the foreperson. Were things happening quickly again or was she losing touch with everything around her. Max’s eyes burned into the side of her face but Rachel could not turn. She could not look at either of them. She felt Chloe turning slightly in her seat.

“Please read your findings,” the judge instructed, folding his hands in front of him. Sighing deeply, the woman lifted the paper and began to speak words which could end a portion of her grief or ruin her week more effectively than the Frankentruck catching a flat tire, for certain. The foreperson swallowed and restarted what she was saying. Chloe seemed to hover just above and beside her. Max’s leg pushed hard, bracingly against her own. Rachel tried not to feel like a balloon floating above the two of them.

“On three counts of obstruction of justice, we the jury find the defendant… guilty.” Her eyes snapped to her mother and father. Ahead of the bar, James Amber still had his head high, chin proudly jutting forward. Her mother’s face was buried in her handkerchief. She could not read anything else from the moment. Some minor charges involving the mishandling of evidence or forms of minor conspiracy were read out, and a bribery charge followed suit. Rachel did not know that part of the story. Each time she heard the word guilty, she unintentionally tightened her hold on Max’s hand. Rachel would think later about how Max did not protest though it must have been nearly unbearable. Then, after several seconds came the moment people were waiting with baited breath for. “On one count of conspiracy to procure murder for hire, we the jury find the defendant, guilty.” The words dropped off the foreperson’s tongue as if they weighed a ton and could shatter the earth at her feet. Rachel understood, she was potentially condemning a man to spend the majority of his remaining life in prison. Muttering broke out around the sleek, mostly wooden courtroom and almost instantly the judge’s gavel slammed down to call for order. James Amber collapsed forward and Rachel had enough time to see her mother throw herself into the arms of the woman beside her, ostensibly a friend from work before she herself found she could not keep her head up any longer. If her mother looked up to try to match eyes with her, Rachel did not know.

Rachel leaned forward and her own eyes fell on the floor. Wetness began to pool around her eyes. She knew what was coming, far too late. Blinking, she tried to clear the tears away without moving her hands. Her breathing did not change overmuch. When she opened her eyes the tearing did not stop, but the tears dripped down her cheeks. Rachel wondered why she did not cry like normal people: her face sat calm and unchanging. All at once, light was blocked out around her as Chloe leaned more completely over her, both arms encircling her, meeting on her other side. Rachel’s eyes shifted up and all she saw was Chloe’s shirt. Max was forced to release her hand but the photographer’s shifted to rub her back. This was comforting, kind, but, with frustration she felt like her emotions were more distant than usual.

Her eyes did not dry. The realization that she might be more broken and inhuman than she thought tore anger from her core, but nothing else felt so real. Max’s voice, whispering from close to her ear promised that they could rise and leave now. It was over. Rachel shook her head. Rachel tried to rise, forcing Chloe to release her and shift. The girls on either side refused not to remain in some small contact with her. Max continued to rub her back as Rachel lifted her eyes and saw her mother’s devastated face turned back toward her. Chloe patted her left hand. That’s her real face, Rachel thought. Have I ever seen it before? A dark hand came into view inches from the right side
of her face. In its fingers were clenched a few pale kleenexes. Rachel reached up with her right hand and took them, turning back to whisper thanks to the kind person offering them.

Rachel looked back. The science teacher, Ms. Grant was dressed smartly, her face twisted into compassion that was bright enough it hurt to look at. Somehow, that friendly face, that caring face which did not belong to one of the girls she loved was so jarring that something in Rachel shook loose. Holding the tissues tightly, Rachel turned away. A small noise rose in her throat and escaped her mouth without her consent. The tears came back with a vengeance and robbed her of her ability to think or to breathe. Ms. Grant’s hand rested for just a second on her shoulder and then left. Rachel could not block up the freshly broken dam. Trying to quiet herself, trying not to wail again, she matched eyes with her mother. Movement on either side of her told her that Chloe and Max were reacting to this change but Rachel had eyes only for her mother. Mountains of regret stared at her across the crowd in the courtroom. A few sets of eyes turned slowly toward her. She’s like me, Rachel told herself, for not the first time. She may not feel the same way, but she feels. Maybe watching that is what made me like I am, but I don’t care. Maybe I shouldn’t wear the masks. Maybe I should try to understand them. Maybe I need help. How many times in the last week alone had she told Chloe she wanted Max to find a therapist? How many of those had she been talking in reality of herself.

Rachel barely noticed the judge’s announcement that sentencing would happen at a later date. She just stood up, unable to remain there. It took Chloe and Max a second to match her. The eyes that turned toward her earlier, did so again but Rachel moved with a hand over her mouth to the door. She no longer cared if they kicked her out. She had no cause to return. Chloe moved out in front of her. Max stayed close behind. If the rest of the day could be like that, Rachel thought, she might be able to keep her calm until they got somewhere private. One of two, dark wood doors opened under Chloe’s hand as they passed a bailiff, his face contorted in pity. Once the door shut behind them, she grabbed at either of them. Her earlier assertion that she had to be strong no matter the outcome, she decided, was bullshit. Fuck being strong.

February 14th, 2011 - 8:23 PM

Rachel

I’m gonna hit the shower now. Be over there soon. You two be good ;-) 

Me

We’d be better if you were here.

Chloe let the phone drop onto the bed beside her. This hotel room was a world away from the little motel that Sera Gearhardt was living out of. Technically it was only a few hours away as it was only Portland, but the quality was different. She wondered for not the first time how her mother and step-douche had managed to afford any of this. Chloe ran her hand through her still damp hair.
Not even her shower had entirely washed the film left behind by that shitty, shitty day away from her. The newlywed Madsens were in their room, just down the hall from the one she was sharing with Max (something allowed only because no one had any idea that she was involved with Chloe or Rachel) and Chloe was doing her best to imagine the insides of that room as a dark void and nothing more. She did not want to know anything that might be going on inside of it. Not at all.

The shower in their bathroom shut off. While Max finished cleaning up after the insanely, inhumanely long day, Chloe collapsed backwards onto her bed. Stretching her arms and legs around her, she earned a couple of satisfying pops. Naturally, seeking that slight release from tension, Chloe cricked her neck. Oh yeah, she thought, that’s the fucking ticket. Maybe due to its age or maybe something else, but the bed was far more comfortable than the one in her room under Chloe’s back as she relaxed and let her feet dangle off the end. Her eyes slid shut. If she focused, she could hear through the wall to the bathroom. Little clicks, containers opening and closing, the sink running for a moment, the cheap little hair dryer starting- who’s she kidding, she only barely has any more hair than me. In this way, Chloe passed the time unaware until the room grew quiet and only the bathroom door opening sounded.

After a moment or two of hearing nothing else, she opened her eyes and rolled over, shirt turning uncomfortably beneath her. Forced to sit up in response, her eyes trailed up from the floor to Max’s face. What in the name of fuck? The photographer was paused just short of the beds, only a step or two out of the bathroom doorway, arms crossed over her chest. Even setting aside the just-too-dark lipstick and eyeshadow, Max was dressed unusually. Her standard converse were still in place, but she had replaced her other, more formal attire from the reception with something more at home at a party. She couldn’t remember Max wearing any of these clothes before but she had the sneaking suspicion that the reason the half-shoulder top looked familiar was because Chloe had once seen it in Rachel’s closet. The tanktop beneath it could have been anything, though Chloe didn’t think she owned too much in the way of those, either. All in all, it gave her the impression of someone who was planning on doing something other than lounging around a hotel room. For one paranoid moment she wondered if maybe there was something else planned for the evening that she had forgotten, somewhere she’d have to go and pretend to be excited for her mother. Nothing struck her. Chloe couldn’t come up with anything to explain this and Max seemed to be waiting for something. What the deuces, woman?

“Well,” Chloe said, her voice lowering as she locked eyes with the photographer, noting the amused expression on her face. “If you were looking to seduce me, I think you took it a step or two too far. Once we come back to the room to crash out tonight, you’ve got me all to yourself anyway, don’t you?” Max’s arms tightened over her chest but her face remained unchanged, as if unwilling to give into Chloe’s taunting. What the deuces, woman? “Then again, if you are harboring any wanton thoughts, this would be the time to tell me.” Chloe thought about putting on the best ‘flirty’ smile she could manage but even that wasn’t very good. Instead, she just fixed a taunting grin on her face, knowing that usually Max would either try to wipe it off there or give in to it. This earned some response, even if it told Chloe very little about exactly what was going on here. Okay, maybe I’m tired and off my game and missing something? With Rachel across the hall and two doors down (not to mention in her shower,) Chloe didn’t have anywhere else to turn for answers, so she stood her ground.
Eventually, Max uncrossed her arms and approached. Chloe’s grin was no longer a construct. *Well, okay then,* Chloe thought as Max drew close to her, three feet, two feet, one. The girl leaned down, in, toward Chloe. Chloe leaned in, surprised at how forward Max was being about this. They were but an inch or two apart, every detail of Max’s face startlingly clear and sharp and very Max. Who was she to argue with someone who was so very Max? At some point Max had taken her hand and, just before their lips met, Max moved, standing to full height and pulling Chloe insistently to her feet. She struggled to get her legs beneath herself so she didn’t just topple goofily to the floor. *Okay, so maybe she’s taking the lead on this.* No sooner had Chloe stood and made as if to initiate the kiss than Max’s face broke into a smile and the photographer let go of her hand, turning her back on Chloe as she walked toward the head of the bed. In just one confused, confusing second, Max pulled the comforter down with one solid jerk toward the foot of the bed.

“Pushy, pushy,” Chloe told her, though she certainly felt bothered at the implications. “If you wanted to get me into bed *that* badly, all you ever had to do was ask.”

“Chloe,” Max said as she grabbed a pillow from the bed and hurled it to the floor, face reddening. “shut up.”

“Hu-what? What are you even doing?” The photographer moved from Chloe’s bed to the one that was *supposed* to be her own, even if Chloe thought that rule was far from hard and fast as far as she was concerned. Max repeated the same process as with the last one, only this time she stuffed two of the pillows beneath the sheet, about where they would be to rest between someone’s knees while they slept, and left the remainder where it was.

“I’m making the room looked slept in,” Max finally answered. “Now if you don’t stop distracting me, I’m going to give you a taste of your own medicine.” The girl didn’t entirely meet her eyes when she spoke.

“Is that a promise?” Chloe asked, nonplussed. She would *love* to pursue the question of why their room *needed* to looked slept in, but she had an idea already. If Max thought that it was safe to try to get away with crashing in Rachel’s room that night, Chloe felt like she hadn’t quite gotten the measure of David’s recent bout of hawkish behavior. The only response that this got out of Max, if anything, was that she seemed to move a bit more stiffly, mechanically as she reached over to the table between the beds, seized the remote and flipped the television on. A moment later she lowered the volume and, with one more look around the room-anywhere but at Chloe-the brunette nodded and tossed herself down onto the other bed, head resting on the only pillow still at the top. Well, *I’m not going to be giving up that easily,* Chloe thought, squinting at the girl as she began to flip through channels. *I want answers pixie-hippie.* “What was any of that about?” Chloe asked, carefully lowering herself to sit up, right beside Max.
“I’ve answered that already, you’re smarter than this,” Max said, pretending to be engrossed in whatever was on HGTV. Chloe didn’t bother to look at the screen again, instead looking down at Max until such time as the girl matched her eyes again. Her cheeks were still red. She knew damn well what Chloe was doing and was trying not to show how flustered she was. “We can’t exactly sneak back in here in the morning without David or your mother hearing. So we’ll need to go to Rachel’s and just pretend we got up before them tomorrow morning.”

“What do you mean back?” Chloe asked her. Smugly, Max glanced once at her and then looked away, a small smile curving her now cherry red lips. Chloe scooted slightly on the bed and leaned over Max, bringing her face slowly closer and closer to Max’s. The photographer was doing her best not only to drive Chloe nuts, to get her upper hand on Chloe, but to leave her confused. It was time to get back to teasing back. When Max began to hum absentmindedly, flipping through television channels, Chloe paused, a few inches from Max’s face, practically laying down herself. It only took Max a few more seconds to lose the cocky smirk. Chloe could smell victory on the horizon: the photographer was going to spill all of her secrets and then Chloe could go back to enjoying her downtime with Max and, eventually, Rachel. When Max’s eyes connected with her own, it took Chloe a bit by surprise. There were a number of emotions in them and, for once, all of them were pleasant, even if some suggested a very good kind of discomfort. It was Chloe’s turn to feel smug. One herculean effort later, Chloe had resisted the urge to kiss the girl and instead, without moving her own face back, reached out to poke Max on the cheek. Confused, the girl turned her head just slightly but Chloe didn’t care, smiling wider as she poked again and again, lightly, trailing up over the photographer’s nose, once brushing her fingertip across Max’s lips.

“What the hell are you doing?” she finally asked, laughing.

“Counting freckles,” Chloe replied, innocently, poking yet another point. “I think you have a few more than you used-” the photographer’s nimble fingers curled into the neck of her tee. Chloe’s voice dropped and trailed off, her lips moving uselessly and then closing. She swallowed. In Max’s eyes the dancing amusement, happiness and yes, desire, all cleared way for determination. During some split second when Chloe hadn’t been paying attention, Max had made some decision. No sooner had the idea of asking what Max was doing passed through her mind than the girl pulled her close by the shirt and their lips met. It was not what she expected a first kiss between them to be. Mostly because it was the first and they had not spoken too terribly much about the physical side of things, she had almost expected Max to be slower about it. She certainly hadn’t expected shyness, but this was something else. Max was fierce in the kiss. She did not let go of her grip for a couple of seconds and even then, it was for that same hand to trail up and around to the back of Chloe’s neck, cupping it. The idea of breaking the kiss felt sinful and cruel and disgusting.

Eagerly, Chloe returned the affection. Like a strong wave wiping a sandcastle from the beach, the kiss stole much thought from her. She remained aware of warmth, of the sensations of tongues, lips, noses which bumped against each other when they broke for air, of laughter and foreheads pressed together. She remained aware of a physical connection with Max that she hadn’t expected to need so badly. It could have been mere seconds or minutes later but Max’s hand slipped from the back of Chloe’s neck down to her shoulder and the photographer leaned back, red lips darker still and her bottom lip slightly swollen. Chloe enjoyed the sight and made no attempt to hide that.
Still, even far from having caught her breath, something changed on the girl’s face and it was her that looked up at Chloe with victory in her eyes. There was something about Max looking at her like that, after their kiss, that bothered her more completely than anything else the girl had done. Before Chloe could react too much, Max leaned up and placed a softer, more chaste kiss on her lips, on her cheek and then finally, her chin. She’s trying to drive me out of my fucking skull, Chloe thought. This, it seemed, was finally enough for Max, who leaned back. Though the tension had far from drained from their faces or bodies, there was a sort of relief in the air. Chloe sat up more fully, ready for some time to breathe. Chloe adjusted herself to place her back against the headboard and took a moment to steady herself. Something that would never be relevant to her in that moment, no matter how long she lived, continued to play on the television. She looked at it without seeing it, lost in images and sensations in her own mind and memory. Fingers laced into her own and Chloe grasped at Max’s hand. The girl’s legs were crossed casually, and her free hand had come to rest behind her head.

Max was attempting to look the image of relaxation after a great victory. Even though it was hard to pull off when she was dressed for a party (which she still hasn’t explained, Chloe realized) Chloe had to admit the attitude looked good on her. To be honest, she couldn’t remember ever being more glad to be bested. Okay, now I definitely have to tell Rachel. The idea to bring out her phone and text for Rachel to hurry the fuck up occurred to her, but she was having too much fun watching Max’s subtle gloating, not to mention she looked adorable with the signs of their kiss left behind. Chloe was about to try to tease her a little when there came a heavy handed knock on the door to their room. Oh shit, Chloe released Max’s hand and sat bolt upright. Even Max’s image of cool was gone. Her hair’s a mess, Chloe thought to herself. Dimly, she remembered that that was the fault of her wandering right hand. Anyone could look once at us and see what the hell’s going on. The idea that David or her mother were waiting out there made her stomach flip. Not only was Max unsure about being public about getting involved with her and Rachel, Chloe was fairly sure her mother’s approval of this sharing a room idea was predicated on the belief that Max was her best friend, not another partner.

“Who is it?” Max called.

“It’s Rachel!” She was speaking exceptionally loudly even for calling through the door. Chloe relaxed and she saw Max’s face go from concerned to amused as the girl pushed herself up. “The eagle has landed, the eagle has landed. I repeat, the pizza has arrived.” This got Chloe’s attention again and she jumped to her feet. “Now get out here before I eat it all.” Rachel still spoke loudly, as if trying- as if trying to be heard down the hall by mom or David. Chloe chuckled at the eager grin taking over Max’s features and made for the door.

“Fuck yes, pizza,” Chloe cried. “Don’t have to tell me twice.”

“Wait,” Max told her. Chloe paused and followed Max’s finger when she pointed toward Chloe’s boots. “Throw those on.”
“Yes ma’am,” Chloe replied, her voice sultry. It either didn’t register on Max’s mind or she was beyond caring about attempts at teasing her. *Maybe someone else is as hungry as I am?* It took very little work to slide her feet into her boots and make for the door. Reaching for the knob, she had a hybrid greeting and prayer of thanks forming on her lips for when she opened it and saw her savior, Rachel Amber, bearer of pizzas waiting for them. The hand reaching out was seized quite at the last second and Chloe turned on instinct. Her head bumped hard against the door when Max pushed her back against it. For a moment her surprise met Max’s smirk and then she calmed down as the girl placed one more kiss on her forehead and whispered in her ear, ‘that’s better.’ It was as if maybe there was an appetite other than that for pizza at work in the photographer and she just needed to top off the tank. Those damn butterflies returned to Chloe’s stomach for the first time in a while and Chloe couldn’t bring herself to argue with them. Chloe reached up and ran her fingers through Max’s hair. It was no longer damp but it took very little effort to arrange to look more like it usually did. The brunette pouted slightly but did not argue.

“Open up, I’m hungry,” Rachel called more quietly from the other side. Chloe waited for Max to back up, to move hands away from either side of her, but Max only waited, staring challengingly at her. Eventually, Chloe bodily had to nudge her back a step, earning an exaggerated fist pump. *Okay, I’ve let her get one too many over on me tonight.* Chloe turned on the spot, vowing some form of revenge and opened the door.

“Yeah, yeah,” Chloe told Rachel the moment she met eyes with the girl. “We’re coming.” Instead of respond to Chloe’s flippant tone or try to hurry them along, Rachel seemed to trace over her face with eyes which widened, followed by an exaggerated smile. *What? Oh fuck, it’s written all over my face, isn’t it?* Rachel pressed one finger to Chloe’s lips and then moved it to her own, as if to say to wait and they would talk about it in a second. The hall was clear of anyone else, which was more than fine, it was ideal. From the carpet to the walls the hall had a real Gryffindor theme about it, gold and red stretching as far as the eye could see. Even the wood of the doors were somewhat reddish in nature, Chloe noticed as Rachel pushed hers open and let them in a moment later. For a moment all was quiet and peaceful and Chloe allowed herself to note that yes, the rooms were identical save for whatever art was reproduced and hung on the walls. Then, as the door clicked shut behind her, Rachel opened her mouth.

“Ooooh, someone made a move on someone,” she teased, her wide, excited smile suppressed, if only barely.

“What are you talking about?” Chloe responded, trying to play it cool.

“She doesn’t know,” Max told Rachel from just over Chloe’s shoulder.

“About the face or about our plan?”
“Both.”

“What’s wrong with my face?” Chloe demanded, arms crossing.

“Don’t pout, even if that’s hard to do when you look like someone’s been using your bottom lip as a chew toy,” Rachel’s description was blunt enough to make Chloe choke on her laughter, but when the broader girl seized her by the arm and jerked her lightly through the open bathroom door, Chloe got an answer as to precisely how Rachel knew what she and Max had been up to. Remnants of Max’s lipstick clung to her lips, to her chin and finally to her forehead, standing out clear against her pale skin.

“Don’t blame me,” Max said. “Chloe’s the one who wanted to be in my face. I just gave her a reason.” Chloe enjoyed the sight in the mirror for a second before turning and pretending indigance.

“You marked me and weren’t even going to tell me? That’s devilish!”

“Now you know that it’s open season and if you start pushing, I push back,” Max challenged.

“And this,” Rachel declared from Chloe’s other side, “might be where our first awkward, ‘I’m kinda jealous’ moment pops up.”

“If you still think you have reason to be jealous later tonight, let me know,” Max told Rachel, looking at her reflection in the mirror. The tone of her voice was that of someone making a promise they intended to keep. Chloe shivered between them.

“I think you should help me get this off,” Chloe told Max, though she couldn’t tear her eyes away from the sudden look on Rachel’s face. Chloe wasn’t sure if she hoped she was around to see whatever Max was threatening (promising?) or not. “It seems only fair.”

“Maybe after pizza, if you’re good,” Max teased.

“The pizza wasn’t a joke?” Chloe asked, whipping her head around to look at Rachel, face serious. The girl furrowed her brow.
“Uh, no,” she replied, curious. Chloe noticed that the feather was gone. Hanging from either ear was a pair of large, gold hoop earrings. She didn’t know if they were actually gold or not but they drew Chloe’s attention away from the promise of pizza to Rachel’s outfit. She was wearing a plain enough top in comparison to Max but looked like she was ready for a party, too, even if it was a slightly different one from the one that Max must have been envisioning. They’re in this together, Chloe thought, suddenly. Rather than push any harder for an answer she was being intentionally denied, she squeezed past Max, bumping her forward so she could push out of the bathroom.

“Hey,” Max called, indignantly. Rachel made a noise like a clucked tongue but Chloe couldn’t help herself, she crossed from the bathroom into the rest of the hotel room and there, on the foot of the spare bed, sat a pizza box that was far, far too large not to be some kind of a novelty size.

“Holy shit,” Chloe exclaimed. “That had to cost a fortune.”

“We were hungry,” Rachel said by way of explanation, “I thought it was worth it. Besides…”

“Extra sauce? Extra cheese? Double meat?” When Rachel rolled her eyes as if to say ‘well, duh,’ Chloe was not ashamed of the joyous noise that escaped her.

“Jesus,” Max said, sounding as if the wind was out of her sails. “She wasn’t this excited when I kissed her.” Don’t let her know she’s wrong about that.

“That was amazing,” Chloe told her, winking as she knelt beside the bed. “But this? This is heaven in a monstrously large cardboard box. Come to papa you greasy, delicious bastard!”

“Gee, thanks,” the photographer responded, but she did not sound truly hurt. She knew Chloe’s attitude, especially toward pizza. The three of them settled on one side of the other bed, tearing into the no doubt pricey meal. Chloe listened, for the most part, unsure if she wanted to do much talking if the others weren’t going to tell her exactly what they were up to. Besides, if you listen, they’ll talk and let something slip. Eventually this idea was proven a bit faulty as Rachel turned on some silly romcom in the background and conversation died down, allowing the two of them to enjoy that. That not really being Chloe’s thing, she nonetheless gave up her investigation and relaxed with her girls, feet dangling off the edge of the bed as she sat. The oversized pizza never really seemed to grow that much smaller. It was the kind of thing that she thought was usually meant to be brought out as part of a challenge: ‘Finish this in two hours or less and it’s free!’ The truth was, Chloe had to admit, even if they dug into it for breakfast in the morning, some of that greasy, delicious pizza was coming back to Arcadia Bay with them. The paper plates provided by the restaurant lay unused; they had hands for a reason, damn it. At one point, a couple of hours on, Max glanced up from her phone and everything changed.
“We ready?” Rachel asked Max suddenly, as if she had been waiting, engulfed by some tension which until then had been invisible to Chloe.

“Yep,” Max replied with a wink, her phone sliding into her pocket. “I’ve got the ID ready,” she said. “It’s the best I could get in Arcadia Bay, but the guy working the door is supposed to be pretty lax about it anyway. Besides, it’s good work. Worth every cent.”

“And just how did you afford to buy two fake IDs?” Chloe questioned. “Also, don’t we need to pose for them or something?”

“Chloe?” Rachel asked, “You’ve eaten too much pizza. It’s gone to your brain. In what universe does Max not already have enough pictures of the two of us to have IDs made? Besides, she said *ID*, singular. I’ve already got one.”

“Touche,” Chloe replied, then her voice grew far more serious, “but there’s no such thing as too much pizza and I’ll thank you not to besmirch pizza’s great name with your *vile and odious lies*.” Chloe enjoyed the rolled eyes she got in return. In all of this, Chloe realized that Max hadn’t answered just how she could afford getting someone to do a decent ID for her. It was clear by this point that they were going out to a bar or something. Chloe wasn’t entirely sure what she thought about it except that sneaking off anywhere with Max and Rachel sounded like a good alternative to the rest of the day.

“Hey,” Chloe hadn’t expected to find herself being pushed into a cab a few minutes later by Max while Rachel watched her, impatiently. Chloe turned back, placing a hand on the door to stop herself from going in. “Don’t go getting fresh with me while I’m climbing in,” she teased the girl. In response, Max flicked her once on the end of the nose. “Hey,” she repeated, and then gave in when she was nudged into the cab. The three of them found themselves squeezed into the back seat shortly thereafter.

“Platinum Globe,” Rachel told the man behind the wheel. *The fuck is the Platinum Globe?* Chloe thought. It seemed like bad form to ask aloud, though. At some point during the trip, the cabbie struck up a conversation with Rachel, who created a hell of a story on the spot about the three of them being in from Seattle for a friend’s bachelorette party. Chloe accepted the slick, rectangular license when Max shoved it surreptitiously into her hand but couldn’t quite tune out the elaborate tale Rachel was weaving about the three of them fleeing a bridezilla to have one fun night on the town before they flew back. Chloe watched the city go by, amused to see how much Max enjoyed it. She looked particularly forlorn as they passed a bookstore called The Lamp Post and Colonel. By the end of the trip the cabbie had made his fare and a decent tip on top of it and was warning them to be careful getting home, as he liked this club but didn’t care for the side of town it was on.

Chloe knew from the minute they walked through the doors that this place wasn’t for her. It wasn’t
that she couldn’t enjoy herself for a night but the club was playing music that wasn’t what she would normally listen to. It was electronic, some of it probably some bastardization of pop music and techno, the rest straight up pop. It was something most people could dance to and that was why it would be played in a club. The truth was, Chloe was not most people and didn’t know the first thing about dancing to music like this. She was not about to run away from the night ahead of her, though she privately thought all three of them were too tired to spend too long out.

Choosing to limit herself to only one drink right before they left the club, Chloe watched the night unfold. She did not do so dispassionately, either. None of her concerns about David and Joyce Madsen seemed to matter as the night wore on. What did matter was when Rachel tried to teach her how to dance or when the girl lead Max out onto the floor. Chloe found far more enjoyment watching Rachel leading Max, trying to show her how one danced to this crap. Max was more enthusiastic about the idea and, quite frankly, it was kind of cute to watch them interact, to watch the lines crossed slowly, one after another. A hand on a hip here, a challenging look there and then, finally, not too long after the song began, lips that met briefly. It was not just cute, it was kind of fulfilling in a way. Despite being out of her element, Chloe enjoyed her time on the dance floor with either of them over the next couple of hours but watching them was probably the most fun part of the night. There was no drama between the three of them anymore unless you counted the teasing, the playfulness. There was no overstating how much better things felt in that moment than the months surrounding A Midsummer Night’s Dream.

For the second time that night, Rachel and Max shared a very brief kiss and Chloe nodded to herself, genuinely happy they were having a moment. She stood from the table and patted it once. Two sets of eyes rose to look at her as she stepped away, but Chloe waved them off, gesturing to the bathroom. She was allowing herself to simply be happy with life when her shoulder connected with someone, rather hard. Expecting to find some drunk dudebro ready to cuss her out, Chloe turned to the side and lifted her head slightly.

A familiar looking woman with long, brown hair looked down at her with intense blue eyes. There was no apology on her lips, instead she dipped her head once as if that was apology enough and then took off away from Chloe. For a moment Chloe couldn’t turn away, her mouth hanging open as the memory of the woman’s face jumped out at her. She reached for her pocket, intent on digging her cell phone out and trying to get a photo of the woman passing her by. If she had not known better she would have thought that, just seconds ago, she had been shoulder checked by Vanessa Caulfield. This made no sense for several reasons: Vanessa was in Seattle as the Caulfields had been unable to attend the wedding. More than that, if that was Vanessa, why the hell had she not pulled Chloe from the club by the ear? Okay, Rachel’s right, the pizza’s going to your head. You’re seeing shit. The problem was, her phone was nowhere to be found. She gave up when she looked up and the woman was gone from sight. Weird shit.

By the time she rejoined the girls, Chloe was feeling just tired enough that she thought she ought to hunt down her drink for the night. That being said, it was fun to stop a few steps away from the table. Just moments prior, Chloe had allowed herself a look into a bathroom mirror only to realize she was still wearing the proof of Max’s affection on her face and even then, hours later, neither of the girls had had the decency to remind her to wash it off. They’re fucking with me, Chloe admitted
as she watched the two of them clink glasses together and end their drinks, laughing at some joke she had not heard. *But God damn are they adorable doing it.* Max’s eyes caught hers and the photographer rose and crossed a couple of steps toward her, dragging Chloe eagerly back to the table.

“It’s no fair just staring when we can’t stare back,” Max admonished her, just loudly enough to be heard over the electronic drums in the music the dance floor behind her was devoted to. Chloe settled into her seat only when Max had pecked her on the cheek firmly. Here, there was no one who knew them—Chloe’s hallucinatory Momma Caulfield aside—and they could be open about affection for one another. She was not so delusional as to not notice the eyes it drew, some of them judgemental, some hungry and others jealous. It was just that no one here could do anything about it or care too terribly much. While the club wasn’t her style, there was a certain freedom there that Chloe was going to miss when they walked out of the doors. Max’s hands on her hips as they danced to music that Chloe did not particularly care for was something that she would not be able to indulge in so publicly in Arcadia Bay, even if Max made her involvement with the two of them obvious. *Not that half the school doesn’t suspect it already if you ask Rachel.* Chloe wanted that nigh on hedonistic night of dancing, grasping hands, bodies pressed close together, searching lips and freedom from eyes that had no need to know to last longer after a long day of pretending to be happy for her mother in her great white wedding dress but Chloe was beginning to go under to waves of exhaustion. Mercifully, both Max and Rachel noticed (not to mention that after a couple of drinks, they looked fairly tired, too) and did not seem too bothered by the idea of evacuating the dancefloor. (*I’m infected by the sound.*)

All in all, their time in the club might have only been a couple of hours and during those couple of hours Chloe found herself feeling goofy as all hell at least five times, trying desperately to follow Rachel’s lead and dance to pop music, but she also found herself feeling more at home than she had in her own house in over a year. She didn’t have to hold her tongue, she didn’t have to pretend she didn’t want Rachel or Max to hold her tongue. She didn’t have to worry about David barking her name in frustration from downstairs. Frankly, when Chloe followed Rachel and Max back into Rachel’s hotel room, she was at peace. It was an incredibly unusual feeling as far as she was concerned.

That gargantuan pizza box was allowed to stay in its spot at the end of the spare bed where it would be ready and waiting to become the victim of morning hunger pangs. As for Chloe, she wouldn’t bring up her dreams that night, if for no other reason than because she was not sure precisely which of the three of them they belonged to, but they lingered in her mind and made her smile every time she thought of them. She had never before slept through a night so warm and peaceful. It was worth any number of lies she would have to tell the next day and perhaps even onward past that. Sure, the bed was a little small for three people, but if you couldn’t get close to the people you cared for, who could you?

Chloe was eager to find out what that was going to be like going forward. She closed her eyes again, the memory of a dream fading into her discordant subconscious until she was free to parse through it more completely. *Never did wash the lipstick off my face.*
Interlude III: Queen has been Overthrown

February 23rd, 2011 - Early Evening

On the, frankly, insufficient screen of her laptop, the leading characters of the film shared a brief kiss. Instinctively, Chloe’s eyes slid past Rachel, to Max. At that very moment, Max looked toward the ground. Paired with the rest of Max’s behavior that day, this made Chloe’s stomach drop. She turned from the screen and glanced once around the rest of her bedroom. For the most part, the floor was nice and clear. This was a side effect of her having packed up almost everything she owned that wasn’t related to schoolwork or sleeping. The walls would have been clear, too, if not for the occasional photo taped up along them. Max, historically, had taken a lot of photos throughout the school year. Chloe and Rachel had gotten their hands on a handful of those Max hadn’t felt the desire to keep. Originally this had been much to her dismay, as she considered those to be ‘generally bad’ but Max had gotten used to the idea that on occasion a photo she found bad struck Chloe or Rachel as a cherished memory. Chloe didn’t want to think about how many of those had found their way into a pile that Max would never look at again. She had too little faith in her own skill.

Today, though, Chloe’s worry was not so much on Max’s photography but on the apparent sudden shift in her feelings toward romantic connections with her and Rachel. Chloe’s eyes traveled over the other two. Where Chloe sat on the end of her bed, Rachel was perched in Chloe’s computer chair and Max seemed to rest on the very edge of a crate which a much, much younger Chloe had once stored toys in. Chloe couldn’t remember the name of the film they were watching but on Netflix it had rated a grand total of two stars. In her limited experience with Netflix, that was usually a good sign. Frankly, if a movie had anything resembling good character development or a plot an insane amount of people tended to rate it low. Chloe wasn’t sure what it said about society at large. All told, the afternoon would be almost cozy if it weren’t for the elephant in the room with them. Quite out of nowhere almost an hour prior, Max had gone out of her way to separate herself from the two of them as far as space in the room and when Chloe tried to comfort her, they all found out that she most certainly could not be touched. While it was not something Chloe begrudged her it had come entirely out of nowhere. That made it slightly concerning. Equally concerning, though, was that any implication of intimacy, even between Chloe and Rachel, seemed to make her uncomfortable. That hadn’t been the case even before she and Rachel had come to the conclusion that they could approach Max about their mutual interest in her.
Even if Max was feeling like a snugglebug there’s not exactly anywhere all three of us can sit and really see the screen well. Even where Chloe was sitting was not so great for making out certain details. Her room, whatever else it was, was large enough that one did not sit on the edge of the bed and see that little screen so clearly. For the most part, Max watched the film like either them-well, like she and Rachel would have if they were not shooting frequent glances at Max—but on occasion the situation changed. Chloe actually thought Rachel had caught on first to the way that sometimes Max would be facing toward the screen but her eyes would go kind of out of focus and her face would blank shortly after. Chloe had first been tipped off by the sliding of Rachel’s eyes from the screen to Max’s I Have Seen All face, after all. The second time Chloe noticed this, she had offered in a quiet voice, one made as soothing as she knew how to speak, to take Max back to the dormitories early. When that idea had been shot down, Chloe’s attempt at comfort, reaching out and patting Max on the shoulder had been absolutely rejected so quickly that Max had bumped into a wall. This was how they first learned Max was not in the mood to be touched. The girl’s promise to explain as soon as she knew how had been very little comfort but there was just not much Chloe thought she could do but wait with crossed fingers. It was hard to even offer comfort because if either she or Rachel spoke with even a vaguely caring tone Max went quiet and seemed to try to shrink into herself. She looks sick to her stomach, Chloe thought, eyes drawn away from the screen again.

Chloe and Rachel shared a conversation of silent glances at one another, the kind that consisted of intentions and emotions. The quiet of the sparse room was punctured only by the film that Chloe was coming to suspect not one of the three of them were paying any attention to. Rachel was clearly as worried as Chloe but there was something else the way she glanced at the photographer: a helpless air. She wants to do something or she wants me to do something but neither of us have a damn clue. Max doesn’t talk about the things that go on in her head. At least, she didn’t in a lot of detail and very rarely in the moment. Chloe was beginning to feel helpless herself when two knocks sounded at the door. At least in this way she knew it was her mother coming in and not David. He didn’t bother to knock: if the door was unlocked he simply came in. If it was locked, he would usually grumble at the door.

“Chloe,” her mother called through the door. “David says you should probably get the girls back to the school before curfew.” Curfew’s in an hour and a half, Chloe thought, glancing down at the phone in her lap. The urge to bring this up was silenced when she saw relief on Max’s face across the room. Oh, shit. So, Max had wanted to go back the whole time, yet wouldn’t take the offer when Chloe made it. Still, she’s not doing good. Sleep might help. Or maybe she’ll be able to tell us what’s going on tomorrow?

“Absolutely,” Chloe called toward the door, her voice steadier than she expected. “We’ll take off in just a minute.” She rose from the edge of the bed, planning to spit some line about them finishing the film next time, but she couldn’t quite find the words as the springs squeaked their discontent. Max was on her feet before Chloe reached the desk and shut her laptop. The girl stepped away from them both as she stood. There was no attempt made at looking like she was doing anything other than waiting.

“I probably should do some reading before bed and I need to come up with some kind of excuse to
give Mrs. Drewer about the photo essay.” Chloe grimaced and pretended for a second to be sifting through the contents of her desk as Rachel stood, too. Her stalling was probably obvious but this was the most information either she or the blonde beside her had gotten out of Max in hours. The idea that she was starting to slip in her work, especially in one of her favorite subjects was disturbing. What a difference a week makes. Chloe grabbed the keys she was pretending to have lost sight of from the desk and winked at them both as if to say, ‘let’s go.’

It was, honestly a hell of a turn around from just eight days ago. At times Chloe found herself grinning at the memory of the stolen night at that club. Rachel was the one among them who actually knew how to dance. Chloe had taken more than one opportunity to watch her teaching a very open Max, to watch the two of them talking from a distance, to watch doors opening and walls falling. Even with the din from dudebros and crappy tunes, the brief visit to the club had chased away so many concerns and woes (not to mention memories of the wedding that morning) that it would have been hard for Chloe to imagine that in just over a week they would be here. She exhaled slowly and as quietly as she could as they passed the bottom steps. David did not seem intent on sulking about by the doors, though she could hear him in the garage.

“Bye, Joyce,” Rachel called. Max’s half-hearted salutation followed but Chloe didn’t particularly feel like giving her mother time to respond. When she made for the truck, the garage door was up. Chloe wasn’t sure if it was her imagination or not, but as she settled into the driver’s seat she thought David was staring at them. Why else would the garage door be up in fucking February, she thought. Chloe considered, very briefly, responding in kind but her attention was drawn very quickly from her step-father to the girls who were still outside the truck. Max and Rachel were paused outside the now open passenger door as if unsure how to proceed. Max gestured with one hand for Rachel to get in first, and Chloe watched her do so, grinning to her when she settled close to Chloe. The grin was not licentious. It was a poor attempt at comfort. Rachel did not return the smile though she did lightly bump Chloe’s shoulder with her own. When the door shut behind Max, Chloe glanced toward her once to see the photographer balancing her bag in her lap and leaning right against the door of the truck.

“We’re not going to bite,” Rachel told her, having noticed this behavior. “Max, you can relax.”

“I’m not scared of you,” the brunette replied, her tone insisting that the very idea was absurd. She made eye contact with one of them for the first time since they got to the house. Chloe watched the two hold gazes for a second. “For you.” Chloe waited for her to continue, remaining quiet. She was going to leave it to Rachel to push farther on this if she wanted, Chloe did not want to. The idea of potentially isolating Max further was too much to risk. Chloe caught herself running her left hand through her hair in frustration and shook her head, starting the vehicle. Max said nothing more as the engine called out and then rumbled to life. Rachel patted Chloe’s right knee soothingly.

Despite the absurdity of it, Chloe caught herself worrying about Max’s state again and again throughout the trip to the dorms. There was nothing she could do without more information from Max and yet the idea of just letting it all lie was beyond her. Chloe was beginning to feel frustrated by the time they reached the school. Chloe slowed to a stop out front, as she rarely bothered to drop
them in the parking lot. As soon as truck was still, Max pushed the passenger door open. Chloe hadn’t even had time to put the truck in park. She watched the blonde beside her, clearly as taken aback by the suddenness at which the photographer jumped out of the truck. That was the first time that Chloe began to suspect that this was no small issue for them to work past. Her stomach seemed to sink deep inside her. The brunette hesitated, pulling her jacket tighter around her as her feet hit the sidewalk.

“Max,” Chloe started, leaning toward the still open passenger door “I-”

“Sorry,” Max spoke over her, grimacing. The photographer swallowed once against nothing and then turned and almost fled up the stairs from the sidewalk. Chloe sat stunned as she watched Max’s form grow smaller and smaller in the distance. Well, okay then, she thought, confused. Rachel further added to her momentary confusion by climbing halfway back into the truck and placing a kiss on her cheek before backing out and shutting the door.

“Chloe?” Rachel said. Chloe wasn’t sure if she had reacted at all to Rachel’s affection or just sat there lost in the bad feeling working its way through her churning gut. “Text me when you get home, okay?” the blonde asked her. Chloe nodded dumbly and then blinked to kind of clear her mind.

“You get some sleep tonight, okay?” Chloe asked in response. This time Rachel shot her a smile which did nothing to make Chloe forget that the thespian had been having sleep issues. When Chloe only glared, she eventually relented.

“I’ll try,” Rachel promised. Chloe sat with her emergency blinkers on for several seconds and watched Rachel amble out of sight. Once she could no longer see the girl, there was nothing for it but to start toward home. If, she thought as she merged into traffic, I can keep calm and not start freaking out about everything, I can probably get the next drawing done for Mikey’s going away present. Last weekend’s session had provided ample opportunity for a scene to draw, especially involving Mikey’s dwarf druid, Gor (or Gord, depending on who was addressing him.) Fuck it, maybe a mid-transformation sketch. I haven’t gotten to do that. Half dwarf, half bear? He did transform when we ended up against those Thralls. This was all distraction enough that Chloe pulled into the driveway of the Madsen household (the garage door is down, I notice ) and turned off her truck in a lot better of a mood. At least, it was better until she got halfway out of the vehicle and remembered she was supposed to text Rachel.

Me

I’m home, safe and sound. Everything okay?

Rachel
With me, yes. With Max, fuck no. I stopped by her room before I went back to my own. I could hear her crying through the door. At least, I think it was crying. She was also kind of yelling at nothing.

Me

What was she saying?

Rachel

Nothing she was just yelling.

Me

I guess she’s not doing as well as we thought

Rachel

Kinda freaked.

Me

Me too. There’s probably nothing we can do tonight. I think I’m going to go take a shower.

Rachel

I’m gonna see if she’ll let me in

Me

Okay, good luck, I’ll text when I’m done

Chloe sighed, leaning back in the seat. Feeling powerless to help people who needed it was becoming all too familiar a sentiment. She did not care for it.

February 25th, 2011 - 4:40 PM

Rachel crossed her arms tight across her chest. She didn’t want to be feeling this, but on top of the concern there was some aggravation. And the shrink said you’re not supposed to run from your emotions, Rachel. The aggravation was not at Max for feeling however she was feeling, it was
more for her absolute refusal to open the fucking door. Beside Rachel, Chloe looked a little haggard. It had not been the best day of classes for either of them. On top of an untimely test they both had to deal with at different points in the day, there was the matter of the fact that so many people kept asking the two of them about Max’s second absence of the week. No one had even seen her come out of the room since she and Rachel had gotten back to the dormitories a couple of days before. If she’s coming out at all, it’s while everyone’s dead asleep. I don’t think we can come up with any more excuses to hold everyone off, either.

She hadn’t told Chloe but it was possible the girl knew anyway that rumors were starting to go around, that Max’s seclusion was the result of some failed attempt to pull Rachel and Chloe apart. No one who was passing the rumor on could seem to agree whether she was trying to take Rachel from Chloe or the other way around. No one who was passing the rumor on would voice it within earshot of Rachel, either. She had found out the hard way from both Steph and Mikey. I get it, gossip’s worth its weight in gold, but this is serious. It was no secret that whatever was going on, Max had been heard having something of a breakdown on the night of the 23rd and since then had been silent except for, according to some, tears.

“Max,” Rachel tried, having gotten nothing from glaring at the wooden door except an inkling of a concern that she might make it burst into flames.

“Please, guys,” came Max’s answer from beyond the door. “Just go away, I’m trying to figure this out.” She knew that Max wouldn’t see her response, but the pleading tone in the girl’s voice paired with nearing two days of being incommunicado was enough to make Rachel think they couldn’t give in this time. She shot one glance at Chloe. It was all she needed to see similar determination in the girl’s pale blue eyes. Rachel lowered herself to the ground carefully and Chloe sat beside her. “You’re still out there, aren’t you?”

“Duh,” Chloe responded. “Are you going to let us in?”

“No,” Max insisted from behind the wooden door. “I wish you could get it, I wish you understood.” Down the hall Dana emerged from her room and gave a brief wave of greeting before she realized what must have been happening. Rachel returned the subsequent nod and watched the girl leave. She shrugged her jacket off and rested it in her lap, intent on sticking around. Okay, Rachel told herself, try some of that emotional honesty the doc is always telling you about.

“Max,” Rachel told her, “I am fucking scared for you.” She did not bother to keep her voice down. There was no need. At this point Max was being talked about fairly often and in far less flattering ways than what Rachel had just said. “Literally no one has actually seen you in two days. You don’t answer your phone and I know you don’t have any food in that little fridge.” What she didn’t mention was what she knew was in there, besides a few cokes. The idea that Max might have locked herself in the room and done little more than drink was concerning. “You’re scaring me and I don’t know if you’ve caught onto this or not, yet, but I’m kind of a badass so that’s hard to do.”
She did not get so much as a pity laugh from behind the door. “We need to know something about what’s going on because otherwise we have to assume the worst.”

“And right now,” Chloe added, pulling her hat down lower on her head, “that’s pretty fucking bad. Especially if you haven’t been eating.” Several seconds passed in silence and Chloe seemed to get irritated or upset, Rachel wasn’t sure which, but the girl’s entire posture changed and she began to fidget with her backpack.

“I feel scared and guilty, no ashamed,” Max finally admitted from the other side of the door. “Also confused. Really confused.” Her voice was hoarse but not enough to disguise the exhaustion lacing each word. It did nothing to calm Rachel’s fears.

“What,” Chloe asked, barely keeping the edge from her voice, “if it’s about the whole ‘3 person’ thing, you’ve got to ignore that shitty programming.”

“No,” Max clarified, quickly and forcefully. “Not that. Yes that, but not that.”

“This would all go easier if you let us in.”

“No.” The denial was fearful. For the first time, as Rachel turned her head toward Chloe, she realized that maybe whatever was going on with Max’s emotional state-whatever had always been going on-was too big for either she or Chloe to actually help with. She resisted the urge to suggest Max see a therapist. It’s helping me, I think. Then again, Rachel had been having some difficulty falling asleep at night.

“We can’t do anything without more information,” Rachel tried.

“I’ve been keeping things from you,” the photographer responded. “A lot of things.” No shit, Rachel thought. What’s new? “One of them is that I kind of-” her voice trailed off and Rachel looked down when she felt Chloe’s hand settle on top of her own. She smiled to the girl and waited for Max to start speaking again, muffled as it would be through the door to her dorm room. “One of them is that I don’t think I know who I am.” Okay, maybe whatever’s going on is a lot bigger than the two of us can help with.

“What do you mean, Max? Because I know who you are, and I’ll tell you, every detail,” Chloe was leaning forward, her voice dropping low, speaking only an inch or two away from the door. “But you’ll want to let me in for that one, because some of those details are very embarrassing. I grew
up with you, remember?” The door didn’t open. Whether it was an actual gambit of Chloe’s or something else Rachel wasn’t sure.

“Sometimes, I think I’m one person,” Max continued. “Sometimes I think I’m another.” Rachel was able to hear the photographer exhale shakily. “Last week, when I decided I was ready for— you know, us, I was sure that time about which it was. Now, now I’m not. Because if I am her, then how? I shouldn’t be! That’s not how this works. That’s not how it’s ever worked. And if I’m not? If I’m the other one… I shouldn’t be with you two. It’s wrong for like, a hundred fucking reasons.” She’s starting not to make a lot of sense, Rachel thought to herself, Unless… 

“Before I met Chloe I wore masks everywhere,” Rachel told her. She knew Max would understand the metaphor, she had used it before. “I was barely my own person. I just kept doing whatever it took to fit in, to make everyone like me because I didn’t really like myself or know how to. I didn’t really know who I was until Chloe came around and yeah, I wasn’t the girl she thought I was, either but…. She doesn’t compromise who she is and I needed to see that someone could do that. Sometimes I still don’t think I know who I am, though.” Am I getting through to her or am I way off base. “I think it happens to everyone.”

“This isn’t like that,” Max told her. Rachel deflated slightly. “I mean, almost but not really.” Max went right back to her last attempt at explaining. “If I’m the first person, that makes no sense. She should be gone. I want to be her, but it doesn’t make sense. If I’m the second, then I- then I’m a fucking monster and you should all stay away from me.”

“I don’t know what’s going on,” Chloe said, “but the girl I’ve been spending all this time with is no monster. She’s one of my two best friends and someone I fucking love. If I’m any kind of judge of character, she’s no fucking monster.”

“Or maybe, you two have been tricked,” Max replied. “Maybe I’ve been tricking you both from the start and then I started tricking myself.”

“Honey, you’re a genius but you’re not that tricky,” Rachel assured, piping up louder.

“There’s lots of things you two don’t know,” Max said. Rachel crossed her arms again, this time more for comfort than to express any frustration. Beside her, Chloe withdrew her hand, removed her beanie and worked it once or twice through her hair.

“Try me,” Chloe finally responded.
“The storm wasn’t just a nightmare,” Max said. “It was a memory.” That makes no sense, Rachel thought, feeling more and more troubled by the second. Is she on something? Should we be calling someone or what? “If you guys will just give me one more day, I promise to get my shit together tomorrow.” Rachel shook her head, even though the gesture would go unnoticed. There was no way in hell she was just walking away from Max without some assurances. Chloe, on the other hand, had a look on her face as if considering sleeping in that spot. This isn’t going to go well for anyone if someone doesn’t compromise right now.

“You’ll have to meet us halfway first,” Rachel said. “If you want us to go away and trust you to be okay, you’re going to have to meet us halfway.”

“Okay?” Max prompted. The photographer sounded desperately relieved as if some great weight had just been taken off her chest and she could breathe again. Chloe frowned at her. Rachel looked away from the artist and toward the door, as if it were Max herself speaking to them.

“We’re going to go away for a few minutes and give you time to… compose yourself,” she hated using a phrase borrowed from her mother. “Then we’re coming back with food and you’re going to open that fucking door, let us come in with the food and make sure you eat something, and then we’ll fuck off.” A very conflicted noise sounded from beyond the door. “How long has it been since you ate anything? Liquid potato doesn’t count.” Max did not confirm nor deny her suspicions about the drink. She didn’t say anything. “That’s what I thought,” Rachel told her.

“And when’s the last time you slept?” Chloe asked before Rachel could say anything further. She knew the question was directed at Max but it made Rachel feel immediately guilty about her pitiful four hours the night before. The one thing none of them needed was Rachel dropping because she wasn’t sleeping.

“I-I don’t actually know,” Max told her. I never thought I’d miss the days when she slept too much when she was upset. Rachel grimaced at the door and then pulled her jacket on, rising slowly to stand. Chloe followed, dusting her jeans off. “I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

“You will,” Chloe told her, “after food and rest and then we’ll talk more.”

“So we’re going to come back with food and something to help you sleep and you’re going to open the doors, eat something or I’m going to post up outside your door all night and Chloe’s going to let slip to her mother how worried she is about you.” The second threat felt petty but it might be enough to make Max realize how serious they were about this.

“You wouldn’t,” Max challenged, a bit of fire coming back into her voice.
“What is it your beloved Picard said?” Chloe asked, “‘You may test that assumption at your convenience.’”

“I’m more of a Sisko girl myself,” Max replied. After a pause during which Rachel wanted nothing more than to knock the door down and drag her out of the room, Max finally answered. “Okay. I’ll open up.”

“We’ll be back,” Rachel promised her. “We’ll always be back.”

“I know you will,” Max told her. The hollow tone in her voice did little to comfort Rachel as Chloe lightly nudged her toward the door at the end of the hall. *I should’ve just told her,* Rachel thought. *Should’ve just said it.*

“Oh alright,” Chloe continued, once she was sure they were out of earshot. “That was kind of intense.”

“Yeah,” Rachel wasn’t sure what else to say at first, but thankfully as they descended the stairs, Chloe was in go mode.

“We’ll do this right: swing by the diner for a couple burgers and some fries and maybe a shake, and then the drug store.” Rachel raised an eyebrow at the other girl, something Chloe only noticed when she looked back as Rachel had slowed behind her. “There’s got to be some kind of over-the-counter sleep aid. She isn’t making any sense, so it’s probably been a day and some change since she slept. She has got to get some rest.” Chloe stared at her, pointedly. Rachel dipped her head and continued following her. “How much did you get?”

“Like, four or five hours?” Rachel responded, obfuscating a bit as she really did not want to add to Chloe’s worries. “Look, if the stuff there’s that good, I’ll try some tonight.” Chloe shook her head in slow, shallow motions. She looked disappointed, which actually hurt a little. “I’m trying.”

“But you won’t tell me why you can’t sleep and see how that’s going for Max?” Chloe challenged.

“It’s like, a lot of things all at once. I just keep laying there and thinking. It doesn’t stop.” It sounded lame to say, ‘I can’t sleep because I can’t stop thinking’ but that was really all there was to it. The thoughts could be about almost anything but one thing was for sure, it all came down to things that were stressing her out. The past couple of days, Max had taken up a fair amount of
thought but even before then it could have been anything. “Did you understand even a bit of what she was saying?” Rachel asked, hoping for a change of subject and some clarity.

“I understand that something’s going on in her head that is way worse than I thought,” Chloe finally said, turning from the path they were on to make their way toward the stairs. A sound met Rachel’s ears, that of a camera shutter. Rachel slowed, turning to look behind herself. Max? There was nothing. The path was clear. When she turned back around to see if someone was ahead of them, maybe, who could be responsible for the sound, Chloe was still waking. Okay, you’re imagining shit. She sped up.

“Just, what could possibly make Max, of all people, think she’s a monster?” Chloe slowed this time and glanced back at her. It was a rare occasion that Chloe gave her the ‘I’m not sure if you’re slow or deluding yourself’ look. “What?”

“I’ve caught her having nightmares about Merrick,” Chloe told her. “That’s probably it. I mean, no one’s seen him since that day. Frank won’t talk about it, but I mean, we all know.” Rachel swallowed. That was definitely a possibility, but the way Max spoke it was as if there were several reasons. She seemed genuinely afraid of herself. If you thought you helped kill someone, wouldn’t you be? “In the end he was just saving our lives. That fucker would have just came back after us, or worse, us and Sera.” Rachel frowned at the tone in Chloe’s voice. She didn’t sound sure of what she was saying. Rachel reached out and took Chloe’s hand.

“Come on,” she told the girl. “We’ve got food to get. I could go for some, myself.” I hope Chloe’s wrong. I hope that’s not what’s going on, because I have no idea how to help that.

February 27th, 2011 - 5:27 PM

Chloe felt like today, finally, she might be able to get some answers from the girl beside her. True to her word, Max had pulled it together as best she could after Rachel and Chloe returned with food and even managed to cajole her into taking a shower before bed. (Max had not, as of yet, given sign that she had noticed that her hidden bottle of booze was nowhere to be found.) While this meant that she returned to the world of the living somewhat, she had not been in shape for tabletop that night and slept through most of the day after. Today, two days farther down the line, the photographer was curled up against Chloe’s side with little apparent surety that she was some kind of monster.

Chloe didn’t care that at any point David could come home, banging on the door and demanding to know why it was locked. All that mattered to her was that Max had come somewhat back to her senses and apparently wanted comfort that Chloe could offer. She could do very little else to actually help Max at this point and she was not going to begrudge her an arm around her for the
sake of not annoying David. Chloe rolled carefully over and in response Max simply shifted closer to her and asked in a soft whisper if her arm was hurting. Having suspected the girl of falling asleep minutes ago, this was somewhat surprising. Chloe told her no, despite the fact that it was a bit of a lie.

“When was the last time you and I just got to hang out, just us?” Chloe asked her, smiling when Max opened her eyes.

“Back when we wouldn’t have been doing this,” the brunette replied, lips curving briefly upward into a smile she had not shown in a few days before she scooted somewhat closer to Chloe. Well, that’s probably true, Chloe decided. As if she had read Chloe’s mind earlier about her desire for answers, Max’s face grew a little more serious. I guess she can never stay relaxed for long. I want that to not be a thing, someday. “I’m sorry you two had to see me like that. I never meant for it to be a public thing.” Chloe would hardly call the three of them public but she reached out with her free hand.

“We learned the hard way that not talking about these things makes them so much worse,” Chloe told the girl. A gesture she had grown accustomed to when she wasn’t sure what to say, was to simply wipe a lock of hair behind Rachel’s ear, a show of affection. With Max’s shorter post-Thanksgiving hairstyle, that wasn’t particularly possible, but it did not stop Chloe from resting her right hand on the girl’s cheek. She grinned when Max took hold of it and pressed her lips against it. If anyone was going to melt her cold, dead heart it was going to be Rachel and Max. She did not immediately answer. “We just don’t know how much we can do to help you, without understanding more.” Max did not shift positions, did not let go of her hand and the slightly content look on her face went nowhere.

“Have you ever heard of imposter syndrome?” Max asked. When Chloe shook her head the girl continued, voice low, soft, caring. “Some people, usually successful ones, get it. No matter what they do or how well they do it, they just feel like fakes. You actually see it in a lot of artists and actors. They think everything they have in life comes down to some twist of fate or some lucky moment, but nothing they did.”

“Is that what it’s like?” Chloe asked, seizing on the idea. This, this she could understand.

“Not really.” Max replied, and then laughed as Chloe’s face fell slightly. Chloe didn’t feel laughed at in a bad way, so she simply waited for Max to continue, patiently. “But I think it might be a little similar in some ways. It’s just,” Max sighed. “Sometimes I can actually produce, tangible, logical reasons as to why I must be this other person, this horrible person.”

“I wish I knew more, I wish I could help.”
“I know you do,” Max replied. “But I’m scared that if I tell you or Rachel even half of it…” This time Max scooted slightly away from her so that she could tilt her head up and look Chloe in the eyes. “Right now, I think I know who I am. I think I’m the first person, this decent person who maybe makes stupid choices and fucks up a lot but… “ Max shrugged. “Even right now, though, if I told you half of what I think that other person is and why I think it, I can’t even imagine how you’d react, how Rachel would.” The brunette’s fingers intertwined with her own and Chloe stayed shut up and listened. In this moment, though, Chloe got the feeling again that this was how it was meant to be. They were meant to be together, in whatever form the relationship ended up taking and however long it lasted. *Who the fuck knows?* “Sometimes it really is like being two different people. Or thinking you are.”

“So, sometimes the other person and the things you say she did come back?” Max shook her head.

“That’s the fucked up part,” Max told her. “If she’s gone then she’s *actually* gone. It’s just that sometimes I can’t decide if she is. It’s like there’s an echo of her and it feels like having a finger pointed at you and being told you’re sick. You’re *fucking* sick.” There was such loathing and disgust in her voice that Chloe couldn’t do anything other than move closer and embrace her fully. Max’s face pressed against her shoulder as her arms tightened around Chloe. She stayed calm, though, and Chloe released her eventually. “I can never be sure, or maybe I can but not for long. Right now, I am sure, but I know it’s going to pass. I know it’ll be different. Maybe tomorrow, maybe next week.”

“Would it help any if I said that I don’t think you’re any kind of monster, that you make Rachel and I really fucking happy?” Max nodded, then shook her head and shrugged.

“It means everything to me, but if I’m not me, it doesn’t mean shit.” *I wish I knew what to say, what to do.* Chloe stayed there, like that, and watched as Max’s face changed from that of someone considering what to say next to someone giving in to something. Her eyes eventually slid closed. This close, Chloe could again count the freckles on the girl’s face. This time she did so silently with her eyes. She did not bother interrupting: if Max was going to fall asleep, that was fine by her. Short of kicking down her door and lighting the fuse on the bomb buried beneath them both, David was not in a position to catch them like this. Chloe caught her hand running through Max’s hair softly at one point but did not stop it, as it likely contributed to the content smile on the photographer’s face or her steady, even breath.

*Later tonight I’m going to ask her to see someone. Maybe after she wakes up.*

Chloe wasn’t sure exactly what it was the drew her away from the world of the waking. There was warmth at her side, a comfortable enough bed beneath her and a low sort of sunlight pouring in through the windows. Maybe a combination of all of these had worked together to lure her to sleep.
Maybe it was simply the relative calm of the moment when there had not been a ton of calm in a few days. Either way, before she had any good measure of what was happening, Chloe was not lying on her bed beside Max. She was standing a couple of feet from her in a cramped kitchen that Chloe didn’t recognize.

Almost as soon as Chloe realized that she was somewhere, she knew it was a dream. This was not strictly how it usually went but Chloe couldn’t really stop to marvel about this difference. She was, instead, intent on understanding where she was. The kitchen floor was old, yellowed linoleum with black diamond shapes splayed across it. The cabinets hanging around them might have been painted a heinous seafoam green at one point, but the paint was chipped so significantly it was hard to be sure. In the center of the room, apparently the newest thing in it, was a cheap folding table with similarly temporary looking chairs.

Max was settled down at one of those, her back to Chloe, clearly up to something. A familiar looking gray hooded sweatshirt covered her frame and, even from the back, Chloe could see that her hair was long again, though not quite as long as Chloe recalled. This Max might be an entirely memory based one, or it could be Max herself. Chloe wasn’t sure. She knew, reasonably, that she needed to tell Max she was here, but curiosity got the better of her. Chloe turned back. There was a living room behind her, unfamiliar. She would have assumed this was Max’s home back in Seattle except that it looked too old, too small, too cheap.

The walls of the living room were almost as yellowed as the kitchen’s linoleum floor. An old television sat in one corner of the room not far from a threadbare grey couch, flanked on either side by a couple of tables. The carpet lining the living room floor looked like it hadn’t seen an update since the 1970s. Chloe could see the edge of a hallway on the far side of the living room, but judging by the unnatural darkness mere inches behind the entrance, Chloe suspected if she tried to go down the hall she would find nothing. Something clicked behind her, and Max began to mutter. Chloe exhaled slowly, and turned back. Max’s back was still to her, she had apparently not seen or heard Chloe. This made it seem unlikely that this might be Max herself, but Chloe had spied on this dream, in this tiny, old apartment long enough. She had two choices: she could either leave the dream, as she had learned she could do, or she could try to identify herself to Max. She had never particularly attempted to reach out to the mind of someone sleeping like this before and curiosity got the better of her.

“Who are you? Who are you? Why can’t I just figure it out? Piece by piece, but the pieces don’t fit.” At the impromptu kitchen table ahead of her, the odd clicking continued, Max spoke to herself quietly. A fridge to one side of the room drew Chloe’s attention. Maybe there was something in there that could help break the ice. She did not attempt to hide her presence as she crossed to the fridge. At this point, Max spoke again. This time her voice did not sound from the table to Chloe’s left, instead it sounded from the living room behind her.

“Bring me a beer, would you Chloe?” Chloe jumped, her hand still on the door to the refrigerator. “Don’t worry about it, Blair said to tap into hers. There’s plenty to go around.” In the living room, lit only by light from the previously dead television, a Max Caulfield, slightly older, looked
expectantly at her. Beside her on the couch, a woman Chloe didn’t recognize reclined. Thick, wild
dark hair hung around this woman as if in defiance of any attempts to tame it. She was reclining
slightly, hands behind her head, wearing a peaceful grin. She, too, was staring at Chloe. Only they
wasn’t looking at her, but through her to yet another Chloe Price, one Chloe had last seen at the
height of a nightmare, a nightmare involving a storm. (‘ The storm wasn’t just a nightmare.’)

“Chlobro, hurry it up, I wanna see Deckard give Roy what’s coming to him,” the woman, Blair
called. She’s about to be disappointed, Chloe thought, absentmindedly. If it’s the Deckard. When
she turned to look at this other Chloe Price, yet another source of movement caught her attention.
The first Max, the one sat at the dinner table, was staring at her in open-mouthed confusion.
Beginning to get very confused herself, Chloe watched the room around her as it began to change,
to shake, to deform.

“I’m comin,’ I’m comin,’” the other Chloe declared from inches ahead of her. Sporting a hairstyle
similar to her old one, save for the pink tips, this Chloe pulled the door open haphazardly, as if she
did not know her own strength. She was drunk. The refrigerator door opened wide and passed
clean through Chloe before she could step back to avoid being hit. The first Max continued to gape
at her. The sink turned itself on and then back off, before the faucet clattered into the sink itself
without a sound. Something, and Chloe was not sure what it was, disappeared from the counter on
the other side of the room. Then, as suddenly as they appeared, the other Chloe, the other Max and
the mysterious girl with the dark hair and wide grin vanished. As Chloe turned to stare at the living
room, the television was off and it was only lit by the dim light spilling in from the kitchen.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” the first Max told her, pulling her sweatshirt tighter around
herself as if she were cold. The light overhead flickered. Chloe stared at the old, water-stained
stucco ceiling. Max’s tone was not accusatory, it was a simple statement of fact. Chloe looked past
her, to the table. The source of the clicking and whatever puzzle had her distracted and muttering
jumped out quickly. It was in seven or eight pieces, mind you, but even still, it was hard to mistake
that sitting on the table in front of Max was a shattered human skull. “I’m trying to put it together,”
Max clarified, and then her face changed. “Or- or I was. That doesn’t make much sense does it?”

Chloe watched her blink. This is Max. The photographer’s physical appearance shifted as Chloe
observed the various emotions pass across her face. It happened quick and all at once, the
shortening hair, the paling face, a bit of weight dropped, enough to make Chloe realized Max
looked slightly underfed. “I’m not supposed to be here,” Max finished, looking around. The
photographer quickly pushed the shattered skull away, but it wasn’t in disgust, it was in frustration.
Pieces of it rolled across the table and vanished one by one.

“You’re dreaming,” Chloe told her, suddenly, intent on comforting her. “I didn’t mean it- I didn’t
mean to come here but I’m here.” How little has Max been eating? Chloe asked. Having seen this
transformation, Chloe could not help but draw the comparison between the three images of Max,
and this one, the one she was holding in her arms in the waking world ( oh, shit, right, we’re in my
room ) looked like she had skipped a few too many meals. “Are you okay?”

“You’re in my dream?” Max asked, as if she needed confirmation. She looked around the room
once and then the previous questioning was replaced with discomfort. The light flickered again and
the table began to spontaneously bow in the center. “You can’t be here, Chloe.” Chloe nodded
once.

“I can go,” Chloe promised her, trying to sound soothing. “I figured out how, I didn’t mean to come
at all.” She wanted Max to understand that by choice she would never have violated Max’s trust
and come here without permission. However, no sooner had she opened her mouth to explain then
she understood, instinctively, that what upset Max wasn’t Chloe being in her dream, but instead
being in this setting. This location. Max’s face contorted.

“I know,” Max told her. “You wouldn’t have done it if you knew.” This odd way of understanding,
of knowing, was two-way. “Okay, this is weird.” The room began again to shake around her and
this time, the edge of it blurred. Max noticed too, as her head lifted. This, Chloe thought, this I
understand. And maybe if I understand it, you will too. She locked eyes with Max, who, after a
moment, nodded. “I’m close to waking up.” Chloe mirrored the gesture. Max’s eyes seemed
shrunken compared to the version of herself she had been mere moments before. Details of the
dream began to break down around them.

The floor vanished at one point, then came back changed, a pale cement instead of the linoleum
from before. Curtains which might have existed a moment ago were simply gone, revealing only a
dark window in their place. Chloe got an idea of where the apartment was situated, a passing detail
pulled out of Max’s mind. This is fucking weird. Chloe had the unmistakable but inexplicable idea
that they were in some dream version of Los Angeles, California.

“I don’t know what’s about to happen,” Chloe told her. “But I’m going to go, now.” The girl in
front of her looked as if she was exposed in some way and it felt damning to be the one who had
exposed her. There was a panicked vulnerability in her eyes. The dream continued to destabilize.
Chloe felt an echo of relief. She had no reason to feel relieved. In fact, she just felt guilty, like she
had walked in on someone in the shower or something. The relief, then, had to be Max’s. I wonder
if it’s at possibly waking up or about me just fucking off?

Chloe closed her eyes. Her legs tensed slightly beneath her, she exhaled and then, she kicked off
from the ground. Instead of simply falling back to it or experiencing some low-gravity sensation of
slowly flying away from it, Chloe was captured by some apparent obstruction one moment and
then floated on her back as if in water, the next. When she opened her eyes she saw once more the
grey mist and then, with a small but sharp intake of breath, opened her eyes again, to the ceiling of
her bedroom. When Chloe was sure she was actually awake and not in some kind of dream of her
own, she turned her cocked head sideways.

Max’s deep blue eyes were already locked on her. She had not moved from Chloe’s side. Whatever
else was going on, Chloe was relieved to see that.
March 12th, 2011 - 11:39 AM

“Happy Yesterday-Was-Your-Birthday,” Max declared the very moment Chloe pulled open the Madsen household’s front door. That is quite the mouthful, Chloe thought at the photographer. Dressed for a day far warmer than it actually was, Max glanced past Chloe, looking for, she thought, her mother or stepfather.

“Step douche is on campus, Mom’s at the diner,” Chloe replied, taking her best guess. Max pushed in and shut the door behind her in response and then practically threw herself at Chloe. It took the artist a second to reach up and grab her in a hug. Tightly, the photographer’s arms wrapped around her back. Chloe laughed. Yesterday Max hadn’t been able to show much in the way of affection toward her until the tabletop session. Thus was the nature of her still being unsure about coming out publicly as in a relationship with she and Rachel. If, as it turned out, Max had decided last night was not quite enough time to be affectionate with Chloe on her birthday, who was Chloe to argue against some ‘Yesterday-Was-Your-Birthday’ cuddling? “How’d you sleep?” She did not let go of the photographer, though she made sure not to press too hard against the bag hanging from Max’s shoulders. Chloe wouldn’t want to fuck up the old camera she suspected was in the bag. In addition to being Max’s main tool of her craft, it still held some sentimental value for Chloe, herself.

“Better than I have for like, the last week,” Max admitted, muttering quietly. Chloe hated to suggest that maybe Max’s return to the Devil’s Lettuce had something to do with it, but she thought it was a reasonable assumption. Early on in the semester Max had smoked fairly regularly to help regulate her rather intense anxiety, it only made sense that it might help her now. That was weird, too, Chloe thought. She did not let go of the photographer until Max pushed once on her shoulder and then told her it was time to ‘get ready’.

“Get ready for what?” Chloe queried. The brunette only smiled at her for a second, the smile of someone who knew a secret that you were just going to have to deal with not knowing. “Oh no,” she said. “Don’t you dare start that mystery shit with me,” she insisted. Max chuckled and rested one hand on her face. It might have been easy to mistake for a gesture of amusement if Chloe hadn’t noticed precisely what her hand was covering up: a rather painful looking blemish. So she’s being self-conscious? Not being much of a fan of that idea, Chloe leaned in. For a moment, Max’s smug look vanished. It was replaced by a crooked smile-one which Chloe found she quite liked-and a sort of eagerness in her eyes. That, too, was preferable. Their lips met only very briefly.

“Okay, okay. Go get some shoes and the ID. We’re going to meet Rachel in Edgeton.” Chloe squinted at her. “What, that’s not enough information?” When Chloe shook her head insistently, Max only smirked, hands falling to her side, any concern about the blemish lost. “I’m sorry, Chloe, but it’s a birthday surprise. Get with the spirit, or prepare to be annoyed all the way out of town.” Chloe loosened one loud, dramatic sigh and then, making sure to play up her long-suffering bit, turned toward the stairs. Pausing at the base of them she nodded toward the kitchen.
“Grab yourself a coke or something,” Chloe advised the girl. “It’s gonna be a bit of a ride.”

Whenever Chloe relaxed enough to take her right hand from the wheel and place it on the seat between them, Max’s left rested on top of it. She hated to sound like a Hallmark card, but sometimes it really was the simple things. Beside her, Max had been quiet for something like the last ten minutes except to give Chloe directions. For once, Chloe felt no need to fill that silence. It was comfortable. Well, for the most part. The only thing that was uncomfortable at all was the growing suspicion that she knew where she was being taken. There were only about three things in Edgeton that held any interest to the three of them: Sera’s apartment, a restaurant Chloe had once taken Rachel to and, of course, the Three Shells tattoo parlor. Thing is, there’s no reason to go to Sera’s today, we already passed the restaurant and they both know I’ve chosen the lady who inks there to do my sleeve.

Technically she had ruined the surprise for herself, but there was still plenty in the way of nerves to go around as Chloe quietly turned when told. With each turn, each passing block, she was more and more convinced she knew where they were going but it felt a little rude to come out with that. Okay, so this is actually about to be a thing, she thought, her breath catching for a moment in her chest. The brunette’s face split with a knowing grin. Chloe wanted to pull over and do something that was equal parts enjoyable and likely to wipe the smile off her face but at this point the idea that she might actually get to schedule a time to start the sleeve was distracting her from even the idea of finding a way to make Max turn apple red.

“You alright there? Take a left up ahead.”

“I think I am,” she replied, exhaling as the building came into view. Sure enough, a familiar looking blue sedan that she recognized from the Amber driveway was resting in front of the building. Chloe turned left into the lot as Max instructed. While she pulled herself into a parking spot, the door to the Amber family car opened and Rachel stepped out. Chloe shot a glance past Max, through the window and to Rachel who, at that moment, pulled Chloe’s tattoo sketchbook from beneath her jacket. When the fuck did she even get that? “Oh this was a joint operation,” Chloe realized. The only one who had been in Chloe’s room other than herself since she’d finished the design almost a week ago was Max. The brunette’s grin did not waver as Chloe turned the engine off. Rachel beckoned them once and then sat back down in the driver’s seat of her mother’s car.

Chloe looked once at Max and then, as if responding to some signal Chloe didn’t notice, Max scrambled from the cab of the truck leaving her little choice but to follow. Max eased herself into the back seat of the small, blue sedan, forcing Chloe to walk around to the front passenger seat. Rachel smirked at her, a look of satisfaction on her face as Chloe dropped into the passenger seat and received a quick peck on the cheek in greeting. There wasn’t a lot of room in the front of the car but it was still enough for Chloe to return the greeting with a hug. Okay, now how about you try to resist the urge to wag your finger at them, Price?
“If you guys are doing what I think you’re doing, this is waaaaay overboard for a birthday.” So much for that.

“We went halvesies,” Rachel told her.

“‘Went’?” Chloe asked, turning to glance between them. Though she had been checking out the artist’s work for some time, now, she had never brought her the sketchbook to get any kind of a plan or an estimate done.

“Yeah,” Rachel admitted, and this time, the girl’s locked eyes, sharing a smug look. “We sort of came by on Thursday and told her we wanted to surprise our friend. Got an estimate, talked out the kind of time it might take, that kind of thing.” Chloe crossed her arms. Okay, they’ve done their homework, she thought. But that leaves one question.

“When did you even get this?” Chloe asked, gesturing to Rachel’s jacket. The blonde freed the notebook from beneath it and passed it to Chloe.

“That was me,” Max replied, amused. I’m dating sneaky rogue types.

“You two rolled pretty high on deception last night,” Chloe mused as she turned the notebook over between her fingers.

“Are you ready?” Max asked her, quietly. The photographer reached a nimble hand up to steady herself as she leaned forward between the front seats. Quietly, wanting to be sure she absolutely was, Chloe opened the sketchbook. “Take your time. We’ve got like twenty minutes.” Exhaling slowly, she flipped from page to page. A few discarded sketches took up the first pages. Max and Rachel watched the book as she flipped through despite having seen it any number of times while Chloe was working on it. Eventually they got to the preliminary drawings of various parts, then more and more detailed and colored versions passed from page to page until she turned finally to the final and inhaled just as slowly. “Chloe?”

“I think,” she finally answered. Her left hand rose to remove and discard her beanie. It rested on the floorboard between her feet. She traced up the image with two fingers as the girls looked on. You’re being silly, Chloe tried to tell herself, but this felt meaningful to her, not just the design of the tattoo but the moment they were sharing. “I’m happy to get the most badass artist for like, miles and miles to work on it and all, but I just want to look at it one more time.” Her fingers traced the path of the red ribbon that tied the whole thing together as it passed in front of the roots growing from the bouquet it was tied around. Cradled in those roots, a purple-black D20 shone in red numbers, the fabled and ever sought critical success facing upward. Steph and Mikey. As the
ribbon continued circling behind and up around the bouquet of wide-bulbed, brilliant red flowers, the roots became stems. Dad. Peeking out from behind those stems, a curve of the ribbon resting just above it, was the lens of a camera.

Reflected in the lens was the soft grid pattern of a pale stone wall. Painted on that wall in thick, black lines was the front half of a doe whose head was turned, looking outward with large, dark eyes. Max. The night Max first kissed her, she had been overwhelmed by the dreams of both of the girls in the car with her. One had featured the doe on the wall, struck down and dead with a great bird picking at it. She had been disturbed by the knowledge that, in the dream, this doe was Max. Instead, here it was alive, beautiful, vital. The ribbon continued winding upward toward the top of the flowers. Speaking of birds, Rachel. The head and beak of a raven stuck out of the stem and leaves of around the base of the flowers’ bulbs, not far above the camera lens. Finally, amid the tops of the flowers, the ribbon ended as it ran through the eyes of a Tragedy and Comedy mask pair. My promises.

Not amused at the feeling of emotions welling a little too close to the surface, Chloe took and released a deep breath. She realized that the warm hand on the back of her neck was Max’s. The one coming to rest atop her own left hand was, of course, Rachel’s. Emotional or not, she grinned up at them and shut the sketchbook smartly. However much the artist decided she could get done today, it was sure to be a little unpleasant but when it was done, her arm was going to be a testament to the girls she loved, the promises they made each other, the friends who came at a time when she felt like she was drowning and, finally, her reasons for staying in Arcadia Bay.

“You’re satisfied with it?” Rachel asked, finally. She misunderstood. It was never about being satisfied, it was about paying it the respect it deserved, paying them the respect they deserve.

“I am,” Chloe told her, unsure how to explain it in the moment. “Wish I could just power through it all today. David’s going to flip his fucking lid.”

“Hello, it’s Saturday,” Max told her. “He’s not gonna know until at least Monday.”

“Oh shit,” Chloe said, brightening up slightly more, if that was all possible. “Right, crashing at Steph’s. Forgot. I need to call her later, I was supposed to be there already.”

“She knows,” Rachel said, placatingly. “We told her last night.” Chloe looked past her to the Three Shells Tattoo Parlor. Through the glass door she could see people moving around behind a counter of some sort. There was another artist who worked there, and it was possible he had a customer too. The three of them would probably attract a raised eyebrow but the ID would hold up.
“You know this is kind of an epic birthday gift,” she confessed. “It makes me wish like hell I had money to do something this cool for either of you.” When Rachel shook her head, Chloe spoke up. “No, seriously. The truck? This? You two fucking spoil me.”

“It’s not about any of that,” Max told her. Chloe rolled her eyes at the coming spiel. “We just want you to have something you’ve wanted for so long.” Chloe swallowed and nodded, reaching out for her door handle and pulling it.

“Then let’s do it,” Chloe said. I’ll have them right beside me the whole time. They’re always right here beside me. People tended to overuse the term ‘on top of the world’ in Chloe’s opinion, but as she shut the Amber family car’s door behind her, she felt like a bird on the edge of launching from the top of Everest. I feel like I could actually dance to the shitty pop playing in that club.

June 14th, 2011 - 6:10 PM

Rachel leaned away from the brick wall behind her and forward slightly as the girl she had an arm around passed the blunt in her hand over to Chloe. Max’s eyes were closed and perhaps it was this that made Rachel feel alright watching her so intently. Even a few months down the line, Max was not a hundred percent. She still seemed to have issues with eating and sleeping, occasionally needed to be reminded that the first of these, especially, was not optional. The approaching summer break, which seemed to be a relief for many of their classmates, had only exacerbated things. Still, in this moment, she seemed, if mellow, in control and relaxed. The girl released a steady stream of smoke and then opened her eyes, to find Rachel practically in her face already.

This earned Rachel a confused, querying smile. She did not bother to answer the implied questions. Instead, when Chloe reached across Max to offer her a hit, she took the opportunity to squeeze the photographer in a tight, one-armed hug as she leaned sideways to take the blunt. Max responded by all but clinging to her. Sometimes she’s like this, Rachel thought as the rough, hot smoke poured down, into her chest. Max turned so that her knees rested across Rachel’s legs and wrapped both of her arms around her. Other times, she can’t be touched, calling herself monstrous, sick, wrong. As Rachel awkwardly handed Chloe the joint and returned the embrace, she remembered with some disdain the night that she and Chloe had taken the risk to try to confront Max about these feelings, to try to get more information, more specifics. The three hours of complete silence from Max that followed had been disturbing because they were not made of petty resistance. Shame, earthshaking shame had stolen the brunette’s voice. And I’m perfectly fine with us not pushing it again, yet, but something’s got to give.

At least, though they were all a little bit melancholy, Max was in a lot better shape this way, than that. Chloe’s arms wrapped around them, and it was far less awkward a maneuver than one might expect. The artist’s hand brought the joint safely wide so as not to burn anyone and they paused that way. It was moments like these that Rachel enjoyed the most, when she felt the most human, the most normal. They certainly raised all kinds of existential questions about their relationship (Is
it a relationship or is it three different ones? Does there have to be a distinction?) but they also confirmed one thing she had begun to suspect- there were going to be an absurd number of skype calls between the three of them next week. And probably for the rest of the summer.

“It’s gonna be okay, you know?” Rachel told her. “You’ll come down for my birthday and we’ll get up to no good together, just the three of us.” Max shook her head, but it didn’t seem to be in denial. When Rachel was staring into those dark blue pools once more, Max seemed to find the words she was looking for. Rachel ran her feet through the damp, dark grass that made up Steph’s back yard.

“Of course it is, but it doesn’t mean I’m not a little down about it.”

“I think we all are,” Chloe responded, slowly easing back from them both. “Summer break’s going to suck, and all, but it’ll go by fast.” She’s trying to convince herself. I’ll have to try to make it go by fast for us both.

“We’ll skype as often as we want, maybe every night, even.”

“I’m gonna need that,” Max admitted. “I’ve got a bad feeling. Actually,” The brunette suddenly laughed. “Right now I’m feeling good.” Rachel chuckled as Max separated from her.

“Yeah, call me Ozzy,” she shot back, “I’m flyin’ high again.” She glanced sideways at Chloe, who, upon catching the joke raised a hand that demanded a high five. Rachel delivered, happily, laughing at her own-admittedly not very funny-joke.

“Very nice,” Max agreed, beginning to look far less downtrodden than a second ago. Something about her eyes said that she was not quite over the clinging to you phase of the night, though. Then again, Rachel thought as the sliding door on the wall behind them slid open, the night’s still young.

“Hey,” Mikey called from the doorway. “Done with my phone call, you three comin’ in or are you too high to roll?” Chloe jumped suddenly to her feet as if offended.

“Be those fighting words, good sir?” Rachel watched the girl throw up two curled fists. “Fisticuffs, fisticuffs I say!” The lithe girl looked a little out of her element playfully shaking fists at Mikey and his lifted eyebrow, but that was probably only because the way she moved was a poor imitation of a boxer. Chloe’s not really a sports person, which sucks because she’d be a good runner. Also, she can take a mean right hook and stay on her feet, so... Rachel wondered if either of
them had ever told Max the story of the night they first hung out together, of the fight in the mill, of the epic shiner Chloe got after dropping a guy with a bottle to the side of the skull.

“Calm down there, Dre’na,” Mikey finally responded, in the gruff tone he reserved for his character’s voice. “Come gather around the fire, take a short rest, let the herb work its course.” Rachel got to her feet only a little reluctantly. The truth was she was kind of eager to see how the session ended, because it would be a kind of campaign ending, since Mikey would be leaving Arcadia Bay next week, after the school year ended. Chloe must have been having similar thoughts because she lunged out, tossed an arm around Mikey’s shoulder and punched him very lightly on the arm.

“Yeah, yeah, let’s do it,” Chloe replied, running one hand through her rapidly growing hair. “I wanna see if we can kick some necromancer ass tonight. We can totally clear the Necropolis Town Hall before dinner.” Rachel grimaced at Mikey’s back as they turned, mostly because she saw the flash of remorse on his face. Mikey had begun to try to take a “it is what it is” approach to the fact that he was leaving, but there seemed to be some new frustration to smack him in the face with it every few days. Apparently, just the day before he had learned a friend of his was coming back to Arcadia Bay to attend Blackwell next year, someone he apparently missed greatly. Bad luck, Rachel thought as she stepped into the kitchen behind Max. Then again, if Chloe had bailed from Arcadia Bay that night like we planned, we would have both missed Max.

It was kind of weird, Rachel mused sitting down between Max and Chloe at the table, to imagine a world where she never met Max Caulfield and Max Caulfield never met her. Kinda gross, to be honest. Steph was in full DM mode, a satisfied if teasing smile settling on her face, her hands folded in front of her behind her DM screen. She just needs a thin dark moustache to twirl, to complete the ‘I’m up to something’ look. To Max’s left, this time, Mikey was looking eager. Rachel took this all as a signal to dig out her dice, pencil and character sheet. Chloe looked happy enough to begin, but her hand resting on Rachel’s knee, as if asking for her hand made her grin. She clasped Chloe’s hand beneath the table while she could.

“So,” Chloe said, “Game until we drop or the Twiceborn King does?” Mikey’s response was a grim nod.

“I’ve put a lot of extra work into into cooking things up for the Palace, since I know that’s where you guys are heading.” We lost one character last session, this one’s likely to end in a Total Party Kill if it’s going to be harder in the palace. Steph didn’t seem to pick up on her mood or the eyebrow being raised by Max. Instead she sipped at a glass of root beer as if she hadn’t a care in the world. Or she’s taunting us, she thought. Either way, she was going to suggest they stop and rest as often as possible, unless it looked like they were being hunted.

“You’re enjoying this too much again,” Chloe informed Steph suddenly. “Gotta keep it PG in here.”
“Very well, then, very well,” Steph muttered, as if not taking Chloe’s bait. *She’s going* full on *DM.*

“We fade in on the Great Necropolis of the Twiceborn King. As an establishing shot, our camera passes over miles and miles of gravestones beneath a starless sky, the only light baring down on it that of an abnormally large moon. In the center of this great expanse nine buildings rise from the earth, all stone and dark, decaying wood. The second tallest of these, the Necropolis Palace, is the strongest, mostly stone based. Your party has been working toward it for some time. You are not there yet.” Steph’s dark eyes turned sharply on Max. “And one of you may never reach it, or not under your own power. We move in to the tallest building, a stone tower, the Necropolis’ Rising Hall. Somewhere at its base, drenched in gore and viscera, the central room awaits us. Scattered about the room are bones and flesh, the flesh in varying stages of decay. Only two corpses remain intact among the many littering the room. I believe last we laid off, one of those was being hurled against one wall and the other was being arranged so as to make it look as if it were sleeping.” Steph sighed.

“Steph sighed.

“The dark-robed High Lich crumples against the wall and then falls to the earth. Its hand, long missing the pinkie finger, points, damingly, accusingly at the one who took its unlife. Dre’na, let’s start with you, covered in the gore of this High Lich... what are you doing?” Rachel grinned as the ‘introduction’ came to an end. She enjoyed Steph’s recaps, the girl always set the stage well and let them get into character.

“I think,” Chloe said, “As soon as the body hits the ground I approach Jules and kneel beside him.”

“Yes,” Steph said. “His face is calm, his chest has stopped rising and falling and the pain of his wounds seems to be beyond him, now. He is *very, very* dead.”

“Not for long,” Rachel said, before affecting Che’s voice. “‘Don’t worry, I’ve readied for this for some time.’”

“Readied for what?” Mikey responded in his character’s gruff mumble.

“I think at this point,” Rachel interjected, “Che brings out the diamond they found on the top floor?” Steph nodded, grinning a little. She leaned back in her chair as if waiting for Rachel to go on, so she did. “‘I have a spell, a ritual, which should bring him back to us.’”

“Is that right?” Chloe asked, her voice low and scratchy. “Look at what necromancy has done? The capitol has fallen, all these souls are damned.”
In this way, the party debated briefly in character before, ultimately, they decided to bring Jules back from the abyss. The in-game narrative was fun and engaging and it was exactly what Rachel needed after the week behind her. The real fun for her, though, was not in the character development or the increasingly terrifying combat encounters, but in watching the way everyone around the table lit up as the night progressed. The time set aside for them to take their first break came and went without anyone noticing, or, at least, without anyone saying anything. The stresses of finals and the fact that two of them were about to leave Arcadia Bay, one ostensibly for the foreseeable future eventually faded to a dull roar in the background.

Rachel was able to enjoy the sound of laughter and, damn if some of it wasn’t actually her own. At one point, she whacked Chloe on the arm in response to her jokingly flirting with Steph instead of rolling a death save as a horde of Undead Thralls descended on the rest of the party. At another, Mikey was doing his best to go deep into character, to the point where he had to catch himself from answering an out-of-character question in Gor’s gruff, gravely tone. It was fun, simply put. The night was all of those things that drew Rachel to tabletop gaming, even if she couldn’t deny that her first encounter with it was only at Chloe’s unyielding insistence.

When, finally it came time that everyone was forced to break, it was at a rather inopportune time. They had skipped dinner in favor of the game, but there were still bodily functions to take into count and skipping a bathroom break after all those hours at the table could have proven disastrous. Even if we are in the middle of the final showdown, I don’t think anyone’s going to be able to hold it much longer. Rachel took her turn when the time came but mostly sat back in her chair musing over her limited remaining spells.

“So,” Mikey mumbled low enough that she could hear but Steph could now, “What do you think the chances that the big marble coffin in the back of the room isn’t holding the Twiceborn King?” Rachel grimaced, shrugging. The answer was not pretty, on that front.

“Last time we saw him we gave him a bit of a wollop before we had to run, so maybe he is in there healing or something,” Rachel muttered in response. Steph’s eyes brightened slightly behind her DM screen, enough that Rachel thought she could hear them just fine. “Of course, if he’s in there doing some sort of regeneration thing, he’ll probably get up if we finish off the last High Lich. And there’s still all those Thralls.”

“That’s the thing,” Mikey replied, no longer bothering with pretense of whispering. He pushed his glasses up the length of his nose and scratched at the side of his head. “The Thralls should only regenerate if he’s around, so that’s got to be what’s going on.” Rachel nodded. It was getting late and they had already fought their way through the entirety of the Necropolis’ Palace. This was definitely the sight of the final showdown. It was just starting to look bad for anyone surviving. “I guess the High Liches could have summoned them, but the last time we fought one the Thralls just died regularly.” At this point, Chloe returned from the kitchen with a large bowl of pretzels.
“Oh,” Rachel said by way of greeting. “My hero,” this drew a cheeky enough smile from Chloe, who sat the bowl down at the farthest point away from Rachel possible before approaching her. *She wants to play this game, huh?* Rachel stood up from her seat as Chloe stepped close to her, reaching out. The familiar feeling of a pair of Chloe’s fingers brushing a lock of hair behind her ear flustered Rachel, something it rarely did.

“And what kind of reward does your hero receive?” Chloe asked, voice low as she leaned forward. Playing along, Rachel followed suit. Their lips were mere inches apart. She could see how tired Chloe was beginning to get in her eyes, but also the affection dancing in them. Mikey cleared his throat exaggeratedly, as if to make a point as they drew closer and closer. Then, just before their lips met, Rachel whispered her response.

“I get her ass up next time her HP hits 0.” Chloe sighed and stepped back once, sinking into her seat. When she passed the bowl of mini-pretzels across the table, Rachel leaned over and pecked her on the cheek. “That too,” she clarified, before taking a handful and pushing the bowl toward Mikey. This seemed to make the artist brighten up a bit, and she shot Rachel a look promising that there was far more to come. This was something Rachel intended to hold her to.

“I get her ass up next time her HP hits 0.” Chloe sighed and stepped back once, sinking into her seat. When she passed the bowl of mini-pretzels across the table, Rachel leaned over and pecked her on the cheek. “That too,” she clarified, before taking a handful and pushing the bowl toward Mikey. This seemed to make the artist brighten up a bit, and she shot Rachel a look promising that there was far more to come. This was something Rachel intended to hold her to.

“Hey,” Max called from edge of the room. In one hand was a tripod, legs already unfolded and in the other a thick, black digital camera that Rachel believed belonged to Steph’s father. “Everyone about ready?” the brunette asked, dark blue eyes glancing from one person to the next with genuine excitement in them. *I can’t believe she’s leaving next week.* It seemed hard to comprehend not being able to walk out of her dorm room to Max’s and watch Netflix or simply study together. The idea that she might go a couple of months without backing Max against a wall and kissing her, teasing every little bit of heat to her face was *upsetting,* to say the least. *Right, the picture.*

It took the girl a few seconds to figure out the right settings, but eventually, with Steph, Max and Rachel up front and Mikey and Chloe in the back, visible above and behind their shoulders, a photo was taken that mirrored one Max had done during their third session together as a whole. Rachel was already intent on framing this one, though she was not sure where to put it as the idea of making the Amber household her home again was a bit disturbing. *Then again, if Chloe can do it, so can I.*

“Whew,” Chloe said, glancing down into the digital view screen. “Now if that’s not the most sexy I’ve ever seen in one photo, I don’t know what is.” Rachel rolled her eyes to Mikey, briefly. Chloe turned the camera to briefly show a photo she had just taken of herself, when the rest of them were busy settling back into their seats. “The group one turned out pretty nice too, though.”

“Get over here, photohog,” Max admonished. “We’ve got to finish this quest right.” There was a fair amount of shuffling and stalling by all parties to get the game running again. Everyone seemed to be in agreement that this was it, the final battle. However reluctant they might be to end the campaign (and Rachel was, at least, because in a way it was like the end of an era: their friend
The group was being permanently diminished by Mikey’s departure; the combat lasted only a few more minutes before the party as a whole was forced to confront an uncomfortable truth.

“Alright,” Rachel said, out of character as her turn came up. “Dre’na, HP check.”

“Ten,” Chloe responded, grimacing.

“Shit,” Mikey and Max declared in unison. Rachel knew how many hitpoints Jules had left, and it was not enough to finish out this fight.

“We have three Thralls who keep regenerating, a High Lich about a hit from Dre’na’s club away from death and the minute he dies the big boss is probably coming out of that coffin.” Rachel turned toward the others. “That about sum it up?”

“Yeah,” Mikey replied, his glasses perched precariously on the tip of his nose. “Look,” he said, lifting his head suddenly. “We find a way to bring this building down on him, bury him, and he’s a problem for someone else in a few weeks or months or years, either way, we can walk out of here having done some good for the kingdom. We might even have time to reorganize the kingdom’s troops.” Max nodded and Rachel turned her eyes on the boy, examining him. In this game he tended to play all or nothing. He would have, at the start of the campaign, hated the idea that they might end it temporarily sealing some evil away. In fact, he called the trope ‘the Ganondorf Fallacy.’

“Okay,” Chloe said, “I’m down, but how. If we take the time to bring the roof down, the High Lich will probably finish one or more of us off. I can’t be the only one running on E here.”

“You’re not,” Rachel shot back. “Jules is almost dead and I’ve got enough spell levels left for a one last big bang, which might work here, but that’s about it.”

“Our options,” Max chimed in, “are take the risk or keep fighting. The Twiceborn King will definitely wipe the party.”

“Not the worst end we could have,” Rachel replied, toying with a D8 between her fingers. “But you know what, Mikey wants to go out on a high note and I’m down for it.”

“Then what are you going to do?” Steph suddenly interjected, drawing everyone’s attention to her
and to the fact that they were technically still in combat, still in game. **Right, Rachel told herself. My turn.** “Che, your chronomancer has a pair of Thralls baring down on him and he does not have the kind of armor your barbarian does. Speaking of Dre’na, the High Lich has turned away from Gor and is making for her.” It was cool how, after all this time, she could kind of picture the characters, some strange amalgamation of how Chloe had been drawing them this whole time (in secret, no less) and how they formed in her head. It was also enough to endear them to her a little bit more. **Okay, blaze of glory.**

“There’s a reason I took levels in Wizard,” Rachel told the rest of the group. In Che’s voice she said, “Jules, if you’ve got that trap of yours up your sleeve, this is the time, Dre’na, Gor, disengage and get clear of them. Head for the door.” She shifted back out of character and looked Steph in the eyes. “From this spot, can I get clear sight of the marble coffin?” Steph nodded, though with a smile she raised an eyebrow.

“If you break it,” Mikey cautioned, “He’ll come running out of there like a bat out of hell.”

“Do the undead liches go to hell when they sleep?” Steph mused, looking like the idea was genuinely engaging.

“Oh no,” Rachel said. “If I can see the coffin, I can see the pillars on either side of that section of the room. I’m going to pick the closest one to the coffin on the right side and use it as my focal point to cast Shatter.” There was some quiet around the table. Rachel wasn’t sure what was going through the minds of the rest of the players, probably calculating the likelihood that they could reach the entrance if they disengaged from the fight right then and left Rachel to do her damage. The spell was cast and Rachel nodded as Steph began to describe the unfolding results.

“The palace has already suffered a fair amount of damage as a result of the battles you’ve fought to get here,” she started, humming.

“And the fact that part of the west outer wall turned out to be a **golem,**” Mikey added. Chloe seemed to nod in agreement. Rachel could see the wheels turning behind Steph’s eyes. She wasn’t sure there was an existing mechanic for what she was trying to do.

“Tell you what Che, roll me a flat D20,” Steph finally instructed. Rachel let the die fall, rolling loudly against the table, a pleasant and by this point nostalgic sound. “That’s an eighteen? Alright.” Folding her arms behind the screen she paused in apparent contemplation, enough so that she absentmindedly flicked a strand of hair behind her ear back and forth and then grunted. “Yeah, so I think the is **definitely** blown all to hell. Everyone else, you don’t see this coming, so a sound like an explosion goes off which, face it, that’s been known to happen around Che.”
“Fair enough,” Rachel conceded, grinning.

“Chunks of stone fly every which way and a bit of the ceiling falls in, bouncing mostly harmlessly off of the casket.” This time she did not grin. This time Rachel positively beamed, taking one fist into the other hand and cracking her knuckles.

“Dre’na,” she said, in character. “Smash. Pillars.” Things progressed fairly quickly from there. It quickly became evident that the two of them could not execute the plan alone, which earned reengagement on the part of the other members of their party. Jules provided an excellent distraction, trapping one of the High Liches and the thralls for two or three turns to let them continue their work with only minimal interference. Within ten minutes there were no more dice to roll. The party was not roleplaying anymore. The months’ long game they had put so much time, energy and passion into had come to an end. All that was left were the descriptions Steph had of the aftermath.

“For the next year, the remaining citizens of the capitol will stop on the ides of each month and there will be no commerce that is not necessary to the safety of the kingdom. For the next year the ides of each month bear the name Gord, in honor of the great dwarven druid who, in the form of an ape, sacrificed his life to seal the Twiceborn King in his tomb for a while longer, buying the kingdom some time to survive.” Rachel glanced at Mikey, who looked grimly satisfied for a moment and then smiled widely. “Though his body has been lost beneath the rubble and likely will be the first that the Twiceborn King puppets upon his inevitable rise, this dwarf has attained a heroic status among this kingdom.”

“And in the hearts of his comrades,” Rachel echoed in Che’s voice.

“Well, no better way to end it than that,” Steph declared, laying her DM screen down atop her dice. The gesture had an odd finality to it that seemed too serious for a simple roleplaying game. “I think, while this world may not be done, the party’s journeys are, for the moment.” Rachel leaned back in her chair, eyes closing. Strangely enough, the whole thing did not make the idea of losing Max for the summer (or, for that matter, Mikey potentially for good) any worse or closer to the surface. She felt, fine except for the vaguely hollow feeling she often got after finishing a good book.

*Without me really noticing, Mikey and Steph became actual fucking friends.* Stretching, Rachel stood up and patted Chloe on the shoulder as she stepped past the girl. Chloe’s hand pressed against hers once and then let her go. Mikey glanced up from his chair at Rachel as she gestured for him to get to his feet, a little confused. They exchanged a brief hug, which he returned only after a surprised moment of hesitation.

“Gonna suck to see you go,” Rachel told him, unsure if she’d ever had a particularly deep
conversation with the boy. *A fucking pity. He’s good people.* Behind her, Chloe jumped to her feet. Releasing Mikey, she turned to Chloe, whose face had lit up suddenly. “What is it?”

“Sketchbook,” Chloe told the group at large. This was all the explanation she gave before she turned and hurried to the front door. Rachel could imagine the image likely to form on a blank page of the book. Maybe a large ape, muscles bulging as it pushed the cracked bottom of a pillar enough that the top’s weight collapsed the room, and so the building.

“What sketchbook?” Mikey asked, but Chloe was gone before he could really get it out. “Has she started working on another tattoo idea, already?” Rachel shook her head. Of course, he still doesn’t know. While Chloe fetched her secret gift for Mikey, Rachel reached across the table for a high five from their exhausted looking dungeon master and then finally, without much of a warning, lowered herself into Max’s lap.

“Hey, you,” she greeted the photographer, aware she had gone very quiet as soon as the game ended. Rachel tried to read her emotional state on her face but found it rather difficult to do so.

“Hey back,” Max replied, her face slowly growing more and more content as their foreheads pressed together. *I think Chloe and I are going to steal as much of your time as we can the next few days,* Rachel thought to herself as she stared into the photographer’s eyes. She felt moisture on her cheeks and pulled back, looking for the tears in Max’s eyes. There weren’t any. “Hey, hey,” Max called, each time more softly than the last. The photographer’s right hand cupped her chin, and the left drew threw tear trails Rachel did not expect to find were her own. Oh, she thought, in a numb realization. “It’s all gonna be okay.” Rachel Amber allowed herself to be hugged and simply told the lump in her throat to go away, that it was unwelcome.

*It’s been a long ass week. It’s about to be a longer summer.*

**August 23rd, 2011 10:42 AM**

It had been a long summer, when it all came down to it. *And how much of it have I spent here?* Chloe asked herself as she reclined in the La-Z-Boy. On screen, the antics of various doctors and nurses from Sacred Heart Teaching Hospital continued to play out. Chloe was paying enough attention to get the jokes, but mostly she was just thinking. The end of the summer was so close. That meant a lot of things. For Chloe and Rachel, it meant Max. In just under two weeks, the Caulfield family would be pulling into the parking lot of Blackwell Academy, where Rachel and Chloe were going to be meeting them. *For the first time, though, they’re going to know.* There was no doubt in her mind that her mother knew by now just how close she, Rachel and Max actually were. That meant that the Caulfields knew, too. Max’s reports about how her parents spoke of them suggested the same. They were, apparently, dancing around the topic to allow Max a chance to tell
them. She seemed not to know how.

Max, Chloe thought, half-frowning as she turned from the screen to look around Steph’s living room. *Wish she was here, wish she had been able to come back again after Rachel’s birthday.* Unsettlingly, Max’s emotional and mental health had continued to deteriorate over the break. Despite attempts both Rachel and Chloe had made to squeeze more information out of her, they couldn’t seem to break the surface. Max’s attempts at evasion were more successful when she was out of physical reach. *Damn it.* At times, Max’s mood had been unpredictable. She would have, had this been anyone else in any other situation, thought Max was jealous, whether of her or of Rachel it was unclear. The truth was the girl was missing them as much as Chloe was her. That was obvious to anyone who knew her. Max, for all her talk of other friends (including one who Chloe was beginning to doubt was actually anywhere to be found in Seattle) often looked and sounded *incredibly* lonely.

*Lonely.*

Which brought Chloe to the girl across the room. Throughout the entirety of the prior school year the creeping realization had been stalking Chloe. The way Steph was always down to host a gathering, the way she would be eager to go anywhere, do anything, the way she had even willingly joined Chloe on a hike or two. Steph was *profoundly* lonely. Losing Mikey was definitely the final blow, but Chloe had seen the flash of it in her eyes many times before then. A week after classes ended, Chloe had first noticed the intense change in the witty, creative artist. From talkative to quiet, from eager to desperate, her personality had already begun to change.

It left a sour taste in Chloe’s mouth, with that in mind, to consider the situation in which her friend lived. While her father typically traveled for work more often than he was home, her mother tended to take very long *vacations.* The space between them was often as short as half of a week. In short, Steph ultimately lived alone. Up until a couple of years ago a family member might look in on her once a week but they had simply *stopped* as she aged and their parents never particularly sought anyone else out to do it. The end result was that during the summer, especially, Steph was left on her own: Not just living alone, but living *alone.*

“Earth to Chloe,” Steph called. “See something you like?” Chloe swallowed as she realized she was staring.

“Sorry,” Chloe answered. “Lost thinking about Max,” she lied. Steph gave her a sympathetic ‘hmm’ which only made Chloe feel worse. Just as she wouldn’t want the brunette to pity her, she was fairly certain it was true the other way around, too. *I’m kind of being a dick about it,* Chloe told herself. She stretched her long hands out in front of her, flexing them as she turned back to the screen. Frankly, Chloe thought, she was just glad that she and Rachel were around this summer and not both leaving as Max had to. *It’s also a good thing Steph’s a good friend, anyway.* The summer had involved a *lot* of doing nothing with her: vegging out in front of a television, wandering the
woods around Arcadia Bay or just generally hanging out in town. On occasion there would be beer or (more often) herb and sometimes they might have simply sat in a room together on their laptops, screwing around on the internet but more often than not there was just a television and food that was horrible for you.

Despite still technically being ‘grounded’ for having gotten a tattoo—which Chloe was relieved to have finished—either she and Rachel or she and Steph or maybe all three of them had hung out every day. Chloe had no apologies for her lack of respect for her step-father or her mother’s rules. She received no basic courtesy in the house that hadn’t been earned by implicit blackmail against David. They had done nothing to earn any respect from her. At least spending all day around her friend or her girlfriend, Chloe felt safe.

“In a weird way, this is kind of more home than my house,” Chloe confessed, quite suddenly. Steph raised a thin, dark eyebrow and shot a glance her way. It was one of moderate concern. Chloe wasn’t sure what to say to that concern. It had no romantic or even really familial connection behind it. It was just Steph, maybe her closest friend who was not also more than that. Of course, having stumbled into a few of her dreams probably helps. When Chloe didn’t speak, Steph shrugged.

“Well, I mean, you do have clothes up in the guest room and a copy of the key, so… as far as I’m concerned, it is.” Despite herself, Chloe let the smile break across her pale face and distracted herself from the urge to become a little embarrassed by running a hand through her hair, which was now back to its old pale-blue though bearing pink tips. Chloe wasn’t sure where that particular touch had come from, but it had occurred to her all at once while she, Rachel and Steph were strolling through the store the week before. “Seriously, Chloe. That room’s yours as far as I’m concerned.”

They continued watching mostly in silence. Chloe occasionally checked her phone for a message from Rachel but beyond that she simply enjoyed being there. She loved that there was no one in the house with her that made the muscles in her neck tighten, that made her head ache or her stomach twist. The only person in this house was Steph, someone she could trust enough to fall asleep around, to laugh around, to cry around or to become so drunk that she could barely see straight around.

Eventually, as the sun rose higher in the sky outside, Chloe looked down at her phone to see Rachel announcing through text that she was ‘here.’ Grinning, she glanced across the room to Steph, who was fiddling absentmindedly with the end of one pants leg while, on screen, two of the protagonists on the show were stacked, one on top of another, beneath an excessively large lab coat. While the World’s Most Giant Doctor fell apart unceremoniously, Chloe leaned forward in her seat.

“What’s up?” Steph asked. Chloe didn’t answer, she just waited for the ringing doorbell, which,
It wasn’t really effective to just call ‘come in’ from the living room, which was in the back of the house. *It doesn’t help that this house could eat mine for breakfast,* Chloe mused as she stood up and stretched. “Got it?” Steph asked.

“Got it,” Chloe promised. Besides, a few seconds alone with Rachel sounded fine by her. Chloe only hurried down the thick, comfortable carpet of the Gingrichs’ main hallway because she was spurred on by just such a thought. Rachel’s shape was visible through the frosted glass window set into the door and when she opened it the blonde stepped in without a moment of hesitation. Rachel had not bothered with her favored jacket, which Chloe couldn’t blame her. The 70s was no temperature for a heavy leather jacket. She was instead, dressed a little more formally than usual. This probably meant that she had probably spent the day somewhere public with her mother. *Or, wait, Tuesday. Her therapist.*

If she was at all bothered by her day, Rachel did not seem to show it. As she shut Steph’s front door behind her, the blonde looked *relieved* to see her. Chloe took a second to search Rachel’s eyes for any sign of wear and tear from the day but found waiting in them a particular fire. The kind that typically meant-

“Hey you,” Rachel greeted, finally, leaning into Chloe heavily enough that her only choice was to fall or take a step back. This was precisely what the blonde wanted, she knew, but she wasn’t about to take a tumble in front of her unless it was on the skateboard Chloe had recently dusted off. Chloe pressed her back up against the wall just inside the door and as Rachel pushed in closer, she reached up to wrap an arm around her shoulders. Their foreheads met and for a moment she reveled in the closeness and enjoyed the ringside seats to the care in Rachel’s eyes. The summer had been something on the transformative side for Rachel. It did very little in taking away her self-doubt but she had become far more open emotionally, having discovered (as she explained it to Chloe) that what she had been doing her whole life was simply not *processing* her emotions.

This had lead to something of a change in how she showed her affection but Chloe was not one to argue against it. In the end, all it meant was that the blonde was more assertive about her feelings, both the ugly and the very, very good. The hand on the small of Chloe’s back traced slowly along her spine to rest just on her shoulder. She shivered against the touch and accepted that was alright. She had her own ways of firing back in that whole struggle. Right then and there, though, she didn’t feel like firing back, she felt like closing her eyes and letting Rachel’s warmth spread to her, as it so deftly did.

“Missed you too,” Chloe told her, when she began to *feel* that warmth. It radiated from Rachel as a whole, not just where their bodies made contact. She did not bother to open her eyes as Rachel leaned the pair of them back against the wall slightly. The simple, lazy days of the summer had been full of moments like this. She knew they were going to get rarer as the school year kicked off. Chloe was going to cling to every last one of them until that happened. Something that spoke of laughter and tears rose up, tickling the back of her throat but she didn’t know how to put words to it.
“Missed you more,” Rachel finally responded. Chloe opened her eyes when she felt the girl’s nose brush against hers as she seemed to pull back.

“I missed you both the most,” declared an exaggeratedly woeful voice from the far end of the hall. Steph stood, head thrown partially back and a dramatic hand resting across her forehead, a long suffering gesture. The mood was effectively shattered but Chloe was still able to appreciate the humor as Rachel let her stand more completely up and step away from the wall. “I wanted to know if you guys were hungry, actually.”

“What do you think?” Rachel asked her. “Is it lunch time? Because that new Chinese place just opened up and I bet they’ll deliver here.” Just a few steps away from them, now, Steph pumped her fist.

“Oh that sounds fucking good right now. Moo goo gai pan.” While Steph practically crowed, Chloe lead Rachel through to the living room by her hand, even though the girl knew her way perfectly well by now. She wasn’t particularly about to pass up a chance to just be close to Rachel in whatever form it took. “Well?” Steph asked, waiting on Chloe’s response. She could hear the girl only a step or two behind them searching for the phone number on a browser on her phone. Chloe laughed.

“Yeah it sounds good, but if we’re doing Chinese let’s do it now before we call Max,” she insisted. Chloe collapsed onto one end of the excessively large couch and rather than take up some of the ample space, Rachel laid down with her head in Chloe’s lap and shut her eyes almost instantly. Chloe chuckled once the momentary surprise passed. This was part of Rachel’s promised openness. If she wanted to have a physical connection like this she simply asked for it in the ways they each enjoyed. Chloe reached her right hand out to rest it on Rachel’s arm.

“What, is she going to have some sort of digital allergic attack?” Steph asked, a slightly delayed reaction which indicated she had probably dug the phone number up. The joys of google, Chloe mused. Rachel’s eyes opened and her face contorted into a grimace.

“No,” the blonde said, looking up to Steph. “It’s just that she’s more or less always craving it right now.”

“Oh God,” Steph exclaimed. “Which one of you is the baby daddy?” Chloe let herself smile and then shook her head, feeling almost as out of sorts about it as Rachel.
“That’s the kind of food Max goes for when things are really not okay for her.” Chloe shrugged, moved her hand from Rachel’s arm and stroked the girl’s hair, receiving a content smirk in response. “I’m not sure why.”

“Hey,” Steph said as she sat down on the far end of the couch, allowing Rachel to stretch her feet across the girl’s lap. “We all have our comfort food.” Steph was good about not being awkward around their affection with each other. Despite having had an apparent crush on Rachel, Steph seemed to be perfectly fine with the two of them cuddling around her. Absentmindedly, Chloe wondered precisely what would happen if Steph still happened to possess those feelings but she had never particularly asked Rachel about it. Things were complicated enough. “I’m a big, juicy cheeseburger type, myself.”

“Not me,” Chloe replied. “When I’m in the shittiest of moods I’ve got a much better comfort food.” Tilting her head a bit, she conceded, “but a pint of rocky road really goes to your thighs.” Steph nodded as if to say that was fair. In Chloe’s lap, Rachel muttered something. Her eyes were closed again, though, so that she did not see Chloe’s raised eyebrow. Rachel did not deign to repeat herself more loudly, so Chloe did not bother pursuing. “So,” Chloe started, as Steph paused in what she was doing. “I know you’re not down to DM a game, but I was wondering if you might want to play.”

“That’s why you borrowed my Dungeon Master’s guide?”

“I’ve got my own coming in the mail,” Chloe replied, not quite answering her question. Steph’s face lit up slightly. It was enough to make Chloe happy she’d brought the idea up. “So, what about it?”

“I’m down,” Steph said. “We can do it here.” Chloe appreciated the last sentiment but she more enjoyed the gears visibly turning in Steph’s head or the way her right hand clutched almost instinctively at a pencil that wasn’t there. She wants to sketch character ideas already. Chloe stifled a laugh.

“What about you?” she asked Rachel. The girl neither opened her eyes nor answered. Chloe reached down and poked her once on the end of the nose, earning a smile and then a snicker. “That’s what I thought, are you in?”

“I’m in,” Rachel promised, though she strangely remained calm, eyes shut, as if on the verge of sleep.

“Then I think I can pull this off. We might want to start with like, a small adventure at first, just so
we can find out whether I’m trash at this or not.”

“You’re going to be fine,” Steph said, waving a hand dismissively. “You’re quick enough on your feet and know how to plan ahead. Just read and actually prepare and you’ll be fine.”

“We’ll probably need to have stand ins for a lot of monster miniatures, but other than that we’ll be fine,” Chloe continued, trying to get all of her thoughts about the process out there. “I think I have an idea for tokens which should work.” Steph looked as if she had been about to return to the Scrubs marathon already in progress for a moment, but now she was engaged elsewhere, shooting between the conversation with Chloe and some corner of her imagination that none of them could reach. Though I’ve probably gotten close. She did her best not to go into peoples’ dreams willingly, but sometimes it was hard to leave once you got in them. Whether that was because of getting distracted by the dream or some part of her simply not wanting to leave, she wasn’t sure. Steph’s mind could certainly be interesting, in the way it organized dreams. If there was any consistency or continuity in them it came in brief jolts, kind of like Chloe’s own. Often things were incredibly abstract. If she had permission, Chloe would probably stay through some of them.

There was only one person in the world, though, who gave her open permission to traipse around their dreams. That was the girl whose hair she continued to stroke, the blonde who seemed to be falling asleep in her lap. Chloe grinned down at her and then turned her attention back toward the two way split between a desire for Chinese and the coming campaign. If she did it right they could character create together the week school started and then maybe a week or two later begin. You’ve been planning this for weeks, chill out.

“We can convince Max easy,” Rachel finally said. “She’ll wanna play.” She might, Chloe thought, or she might just want to spend time with us. Or both. “I think I know a fourth player we could try to recruit.” This caught Chloe’s attention. She had been planning on just three but sometimes running the game with too few people was supposed to be a little risky. The other system Steph knew, the one she had run the game for Mikey in, had mostly been homebrew. The campaign they had all played together was straight up Dungeons & Dragons and Chloe didn’t think it would run too well with any less than three people. Three could probably pull it off, though. Four’s fine.

“For who’s that?” Steph asked the blonde, who rather than open her eyes, simply turned her head a little as if trying to get more comfortable as she prepared to fall asleep. Jesus, maybe it was more of a stressful day than I thought.

“She’s pretty cool, but was having a really bad time at the end of last year. Think she’s lonely.” Stella? Chloe wondered. Stella was always having a bad time, it seemed. Chloe had tried on a few occasions to make friends with the girl but there was some sort of wall between her and most of the school. That would be precisely the kind of person Rachel would want to reach out to. “Brooke.” Oh. Well then.
“Really?” Chloe asked, surprised. “I wouldn't have guessed she’d be into this.”

“Nah, she’s a gamer, man,” Steph said.

“It wouldn’t be too hard to convert her into a tabletop gamer,” Rachel replied. “Besides, we know she’s a total fucking nerd for fantasy stuff.”

“We do?” Chloe asked. Brooke had been supportive enough of the modernization of the setting for their rendition of the Tempest that Chloe had always suspected something about the original must have rubbed her the wrong way. *Come to think of it, she was starting to look pretty... frustrated at the end of the year. I thought it was just finals, though.* Since Chloe and Max had both sat out the Spring production, she was rather out of the loop on what Brooke was up to. *Jesus, why is everyone at Blackwell going through so much shit?* Maybe that was just high school, Chloe decided. Though, in Stella’s case, the brunette hadn’t really broken out of her shell despite having been at the school for two years. *Kind of like me before Rachel?*

“I loaned her my copy of Return of the King,” Rachel said, as if this made her point for her. “She left hers at home after Christmas Break and I guess she rereads the series every couple of years. *Oh yeah, now that’s a good sign.* Feeling a little jazzed at the idea of a fourth player, Chloe shot Steph a look over Rachel’s prone form and received a thumbs up. Try as she might she couldn’t recall a time when Max and Brooke had been anything but friendly with one another. If anything they were probably closer than Chloe and Brooke were.

“Seals it, Rachel, you’re in charge of making a convert of her.”

“Aye captain,” the blonde replied smartly, before nuzzling against her knee and growing still. “First, a powernap with my favorite pillow.” Chloe chuckled. “I’ll have my usual and see if this place makes it any better than the other.” For a moment both of the artists on the couch shot confused looks at one another and then Chloe remembered that before she had interrupted them with talk of DnD, there had been plans for Chinese.

“Alright,” Chloe promised her, returning to running her fingers through the girl’s long, thick hair soothingly. “Just get some rest.” *And in the meantime, I need to plot.* She resisted the urge to crack her knuckles by reflex only when she realized it would mean she would have to move her right hand and that just didn’t seem like an option. *Max, Rachel, Steph and Brooke. I wonder what kind of party they’ll put together?* It was a fair question: she would have to plan specifics *around* those characters if she wanted it to feel more like a story they were telling together, something she hoped she had learned from playing three campaigns (technically two and some change) under Steph. *This is gonna be good.*
Chapter Twenty-Three: Of the Mysteries

Disclaimer: Anything familiar to you, I don't own. This is a work of fanfiction for personal amusement, fulfillment and a bit of self-therapy. I make nothing from any of it.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Of the Mysteries

September 4th, 2011 11:45 AM

Rachel’s mind was a little overactive as the two of them left Max’s room, a day before school actually started. Her thoughts were traveling in various directions at the same time and it was hard to keep track of them, to examine and understand each one as it passed her. Perhaps foremost, no matter how much she tried to keep it buried, was a bit of concern about the health of the brunette beside her. Max had never particularly been what one would call large, but Chloe’s concerns the year prior, that Max might be bad about eating during the heights of her emotional problems, seemed confirmed.

Whatever this issue—which Chloe had taken to calling a ‘Monster in Shining Armor’ complex—was, it had taken its toll rather notably over the summer without Rachel or Chloe there to keep it in check. Max was now probably lighter than Rachel remembered ever seeing her. It was most visible in her face. The sight of her the day before had left Chloe—judging by the look on her face—elated and concerned in equal parts. Given the talk the Caulfield parents had with the both of them during the brief period of time Max was out of earshot, they were not the only ones concerned. Rachel had no problem being a little assertive about bothering Max to not skip meals, but the issue was in not understanding the underlying problem that seemed to cause these episodes.

For the moment the blonde decided it was okay to be happy to have Max back. She knew that though she was ostensibly taking Max to the diner for breakfast or lunch, there was an ulterior motive at work. The two of them were going to pitch the girl both Chloe’s game and the school’s imminent production of Hamlet. Come to think of it, what is Mr. Keaton going to do for his fall production when he’s students do every surviving Shakespeare? Just restart the cycle? It was something of a set up on that front but Rachel was entirely certain Max was capable of reading the signs and seeing it coming. She was a smart cookie, after all. Rachel was just about to turn and engage her in conversation, concerned about the relative silence when Max pulled to a stop.

The door to room 222, Max’s room the year prior, opened abruptly. At first, she thought that the person who stepped out of the room into the hallway was some student’s grandparent, a little old lady. It was understandable, Rachel thought. The main cause of this misconception wasn’t the girl’s old-fashioned hairstyle, one large bun in the back. It wasn’t even the notably conservative dress style, it was mostly the way she walked, kind of hunched forward as if trying to seem small.
The dirty blonde’s relatively small statue didn’t help, but the posture was uncannily familiar. Rachel had seen that behavior before, a couple of years ago in a classmate who had been bullied to the point of surrendering in the face of more of it, a classmate who had simply wanted left alone. A classmate who, a few months later, would stop showing up to classes. This new girl, who seemed to have distracted Max, walked like Chloe had tried to before she first gave up on Blackwell all together. Her height gave her a certain advantage Chloe Price simply had not had.

“Hey,” the photographer beside her greeted. The girl paused, as if surprised she was being spoken to and stood a little straighter, turning to face them both. Rachel looked her up and down twice to take stock. She was definitely a new student: Blackwell was not so large that she wouldn’t recognize a face. Especially one that, despite the girl’s obvious trepidation, so earnestly lit up at being spoken to. The reaction was enough to make her heart hurt and she wasn’t entirely sure why. Not true, Rachel told herself. I can make a couple guesses why, right now.

“Oh, hello,” the voice from the girl opposite of them was quiet, slightly hesitant. Her hand rose as if by habit to grip a small crucifix hanging around her neck, overtop the dress shirt beneath her dark blue cardigan. That did nothing to hide the slight delight on the girl’s face. Maybe she was getting lonely? Rachel asked herself before immediately admonishing her tendency to overanalyze. When some people tried to look friendly with strangers, Rachel could swear she felt how fake it was. This girl seemed genuinely relieved. I don’t think I’ve seen her around Arcadia Bay.

“Hi,” Max greeted again, her voice lowered slightly almost as if speaking to someone who was relatively scared. Does she see something I don’t? Rachel couldn’t help but wonder. “I’m Max.”

“Kate,” the girl answered quietly. If anything, judging by the attire and general demeanor Rachel might have expected a more formal version of the name, like Katherine. Admittedly that’s kind of got a cool ring to it. It was only when she finally took notice of a slightly longer silence than was strictly comfortable that Rachel realized she had missed a step in the dance of social niceties.

“Oh, crap,” Rachel started, trying not to look as embarrassed as she suddenly felt.

“Sorry, I was totally in space. I’m Rachel. Welcome to Blackwell.” Unlike Max, Rachel extended a blue-nailed hand which Kate took only after pausing long enough to make Rachel rethink her actions. As they shook briefly, Rachel took stock of her again. Despite the way she seemed a little hesitant to look either of them directly in the eyes which made it difficult to make a measure of an appearance, the girl in front of them was very pretty. I’ll probably never be a fan of hair up in buns and ponytails, but, ‘each their own’ and all that.

“It’s okay,” Kate assured her, growing more sure of herself with every word. It was something of an endearing transition. “I’m like that all the time. I’m just in here,” she gestured to room 222, as if unsure if they’d seen her exiting.
“I had that room last year,” Max told her. “It’s usually pretty warm.” Oh yeah, Rachel thought, and could that be because of one of the people you always had in there? She smiled at the musing. “I get cold pretty easy, so it was nice.”

“I do too,” Kate agreed, gesturing toward the cardigan. “And I left like, half of the blankets I wanted to take at home because of space in my bags.” Max laughed. Rachel recalled Ryan Caulfield’s playful whining as he carried a box of blankets up to his daughter’s room last fall.

“I’m sure you’re busy unpacking and all,” Max started, drawing out her thought. Quietly, Rachel thought it was so that she could read and see if the idea she was starting to get to struck a bad chord with Rachel. It did not, particularly. “But if not, we’re going into town to meet our girlfriend.” Oh, Max. Rachel groaned internally. She tried not to let her face change and glanced once, concernedly toward the girl. It might have been unfair to assume so, but for a moment she wondered how Kate was going to react. The conservative dress and the crucifix weren’t bad signs, certainly, but they were enough to make Rachel anxious as to what someone wearing them might think of three women dating each other. Is what we’re doing even ‘dating?’ After the moment of panic passed, Rachel realized that fairly often the term ‘girlfriend’ was used very generically in situations between female friends. That made it hard to read into Kate’s complete lack of response to the term. Besides, most people aren’t thinking about polyamory?

It was fairly common knowledge by that point around campus that Max, Rachel and Chloe had something going on between them. Each of them had been forced to field questions about the concept on more than one occasion and it still happened, if rarely. If Kate had misunderstood Max just then, well, she would find out quickly enough. It’s best to just assume the best about people, you know? Rachel relaxed. Kate was hesitating but it took only one look at her face to understand why: she was unfamiliar with them. Last September, Max had worn this look before their first few play practices or tabletop sessions, though she had fought hard to keep Chloe from noticing. It was simple fear about fitting in with new people. The dirty-blonde in front of her looked confused when Rachel suddenly grinned and leaned forward just slightly.

“Kate, come with us,” she insisted. “We’re literally just going into town for food. The Two Whales is basically the only good place for food in town unless you want chinese.” Just beside her, Max made a ‘hmm’ sound. Rachel shot a playfully derisive look toward the photographer whose genuine amusement made Rachel feel a bit better about her mental state. “Come on. The mother of the girl we’re going to go meet works there. She usually has them toss us some extra fries or something.” The uneasiness only barely waned from the girl’s face but she seemed to be considering it more openly. Besides, she thought, if Max likes her, I like her. I can also see how shitty it would be to be alone in a new town all of the sudden.

“Not that burgers for breakfast is a great idea,” Max led in, “but then again it’s what I get for sleeping until lunch time the day before school starts.” This earned an understanding nod from the girl in the long, blue skirt. Rachel didn’t take it as agreement to come with them but it was a good sign.
“I mean, do you even have any food in your room?” she asked Max, a sudden thought occurring to her.

“It wasn’t on the top of the list of my things to bring with me. I was more interested in getting the fridge, some blankets and at least most of my clothes.” Speaking of clothes, Rachel thought. She glanced Max over once. Though the jeans were hardly out of place for her, she had forgone her favored grey sweatshirt. Instead, looking as worn as the last and only time Rachel had ever seen it, was the dark red hoodie Chloe had given her. Then again, Max had managed to steal one of Rachel’s shirts too before summer break. Rachel found the idea endearing, because, after all, wasn’t that the kind of thing people were supposed to do? Max had otherwise done very little changing up of her style over the summer. Rachel could respect that: when you find your comfort zone, stick to it. What she could not respect was that Max hadn’t brought something in the way of food to go into that fridge.

“Okay, so we’re going back into town tomorrow after class to get you some food,” she insisted, before turning back to their new friend. “And you, are coming with us to try the best food Arcadia Bay has to offer.” It was phrased as a statement, but she simply waited with a raised eyebrow until Kate nodded in agreement, her lips curling upward again.

“I’ve just got to grab my bag,” the girl added. “One sec.”

“Okay,” Max said, and then promptly leaned herself up against the wall just outside of the room. Rachel watched her hands go for her phone with a sort of practiced ease. Muscle memory, and all that. Rachel watched her call up the user interface without even looking and then glance down in surprise as her hand met not with the sleek black screen on the front of her phone but a folded square of notebook paper. Max’s face paled, which was something that Rachel had not believed possible until she saw it. (The differences in their coloring might have been more easily explained by the extra efforts she had made to get something of a tan over the summer instead of the states of their health, admittedly.) Rachel stepped toward Max as she seized the sheet of folded paper and began to pocket it.

Unexpected, memories rose to the surface of her mind of a hundred times she had seen the girl with it, maybe spinning the square of notebook paper between her fingers or putting it between two books on the small bookshelf she kept in her room or pulling it out whenever she thought no one was looking. Rachel had never pushed her curiosity on the importance of this piece of paper, but now she was inclined to. Reaching out, Rachel caught the girl’s hand lightly before she could slip the paper in her pocket.

“And what are we hiding?” Intending to tease Max about what she was hiding from them, Rachel thought to maybe get a peek and solve one of Max’s many mysteries but she was stopped in her
tracks. The transformation on the photographer’s drawn face only lasted a brief moment. Surprised turned to panic which changed in turn to calculation. She could see the gears turning in her girlfriend’s head, trying to figure out how she was going to distract Rachel from her curiosity without letting on that this was actually something important, something that—for whatever reason—upset her. Rachel released her hand as soon as the looks processed through her mind. Yes, she wanted to know but there was no way in hell she was going to violate Max’s trust to do so. Max would do the same toward her. Max seemed to relax but the attempt she made to put a ‘playfully’ upset look fell flat. “Sorry,” Rachel told her, very seriously. “I won’t do that again.” That wiped the look off of the photographer’s face quickly. They were saved anymore awkwardness by the door to room 222 opening again.

Kate now had a dark brown bag over one shoulder and had swapped out her shoes to something less formal, perhaps in anticipation of walking or public transit. Max, certainly, had no way of knowing that Rachel now had her own ride and so was probably expecting the same. Rachel let the two of them talk as she lead the way out of the dorms. Generally it was a typical fall day. Fall was the only time of the year when she considered Arcadia Bay particularly picturesque. Behind her, the two bonded over the realization that they were each there to study—speaking of pictures—photography.

Max was telling the other girl about an online catalogue of cameras called ‘camera porn’ when Rachel began to lead them off the track Max might have been expecting. Better give her the address to that one. I don’t think googling it is going to turn up the kind of site she expects. She slowed them up long enough to stop and shift her jacket from the bag at her own side to actually settled across her shoulders. She wasn’t cold per say, (she had developed something of a tolerance to the cold) but she did enjoy the jacket and it was finally cool enough to be able to comfortably wear it.

It took Max longer than expected to realize they were not making for the bus stop across the street from the school and instead toward the parking lot. They were practically at the stairs when the brunette stopped in the middle of answering something Kate had asked her about some photo she was describing. Rachel kept walking and didn’t acknowledge the change except for the smile curling her lips which, thankfully, Max couldn’t see from behind her. Things were quiet as she lead them to her car.

“Mom gave me the old sedan for my birthday,” she explained finally. “She’s got my… father’s car. So this is mine, now.” Max made a noise that sounded like a click of the tongue as Rachel pressed a button on her key fob. The doors unlocked. Kate, for her part, didn’t hesitate and began moving to one of the back passenger doors. Max, Rachel found as she turned, was standing a step or two back looking skeptical as she rested one arm inside the pocket of the sweatshirt. “What?” Max’s skeptical eyes turned first on the car and then her. Unsure if the girl was kidding or not, Rachel only narrowed her eyes. Kate stopped with the back door open and looked between them, visibly confused. “Oh come on, you’ve ridden with Chloe in her beat up truck how many times?”

“Sometimes I’m dubious about that, too,” Max said, placing a finger on the point of her chin and
looking up as if in thought. Without breaking her narrowed stare, Rachel pointed to the car.

“In,” Rachel demanded, playing into what she now understood to be the pixie-cut bearing photographer’s playful teasing. She tried to put her earlier concerns about the girl in the back of her mind and just share a caring moment but, even in doing so she couldn’t ignore the sunken look of her eyes. Max crossed her arms, not childishly but defiantly, challengingly. “Oh, you’re gonna be a brat now?” Rachel asked. When she didn’t earn a response from Max she glanced to the quiet girl pausing, looking bemused with one hand on the door. “Guess it’s just us today. Don’t worry Max, we’ll tell Chloe you said hi.”

With that, she opened the door to the driver’s seat and sat down, taking her time buckling up. She could hear Max’s audible ‘no fun’ sigh through Kate’s open door as the new student settled into her own seat. After a moment the front passenger door opened and admitted first one leg and then the rest of her girlfriend. Rachel waited for the girl to settle into her seat and then reached across for her with the intent on some gesture of affection, maybe even a kiss. Then she remembered Kate was in the back and she pulled her hand back to the steering wheel. Max looked confused, pausing for a second halfway through buckling up and then she seemed to understand Rachel’s anxiety. God, I hope this goes well.

“You know,” Rachel started as the car came to life beneath her hands. She deepened her voice. “I find your lack of faith disturbing.” There was a beat where Max looked at her with genuine concern in her eyes and then, in the most exaggerated groan of frustration ever, the photographer realized what she had done. Max didn’t roll her eyes so much as her whole head and, facing toward the passenger window, buried it in her hands. Rachel cheered and put the car into reverse.

“Not a Star Wars fan?” Kate asked Max cautiously, as if this was a delicate subject. Oh, how right you are, Rachel thought at her, grinning toward the girl in the rear view mirror. She pulled out of the lot as Max turned as best as her seatbelt would allow her.

“Star Trek is clearly the superior sci-fi,” Max said, as if it was a foregone conclusion, a commonly accepted fact. This time it was Rachel’s turn to roll her eyes until they locked with Kate’s very similarly colored eyes in the mirror and then the girl seemed to understand the nature of the discussion that was forming. That small, almost grateful smile curled her lips. “What?” Max asked. “Come on,” Max’s voice shifted this time, her face scrunching up slightly as if in mockery of the line. “‘Search your feelings, you know it to be true.’”

“I don’t know,” Kate said, earnestly. “Doesn’t Star Trek have that skeevy captain who basically tries to have sex with every woman he meets? Kind of inappropriate, don’t you think?” Rachel stifled a groan of her own. Kate, knowing it or not, had gone straight for the throat. She could almost predict Max’s response. Jar Jar, she thought. Max and Chloe had had this very conversation before when Max had first moved back to Arcadia Bay last year. Rachel had had the feeling that the two had talked about it before.
“Oh come on, everyone always trots out Kirk. Luke tries to bang his sister, man. Besides, Star Wars can never live down the stain of Jar Jar Binks on its soul.” Kate had gone from cautiously happy with being reached out to by two complete strangers to openly amused at Max’s antics. Even so, as Rachel turned off the road leading from the school, she felt like she better put an end to it, just in case.

“Chill, Max, this isn’t your war with Chloe.” Max sighed dramatically, wiping nonexistent sweat from her brow.

“I’m sorry, Kate,” she replied, her voice laden with an exaggerated, long-suffering grief. “It’s been a long and gruelling battle for Rachel’s soul and I fear I may be losing.” Rachel shook her head but focused on the road. Glancing in the mirror Kate’s amusement has gone from slightly evident on her face to fully bloomed: she was stifling laughter at Max’s absurdity. Max, looking back briefly, double took and then pumped a fist in victory. “Victory is sweet,” she told Rachel, chuckling.

“What’s so funny?” Kate asked.

“My goal for the day was to make someone smile. Laughter is a bonus,” Max replied off the cuff and then turned back to face front. Rachel looked sideways at her and the urge to reach out to the gorgeous, caring girl beside her made her tighten her grip on the steering wheel. Max Caulfield was a shit stirrer when it served her and was willing to go to bat for complete strangers even if that meant doing so very literally, but in moments like these, Rachel couldn’t understand how she could possibly see herself as any kind of monster. Max had a heart the size of Noah’s Ark and nothing short of hurting her or someone she loved seemed to begrudge you room on that boat. Maybe she didn’t do as badly this summer as we thought? Conversation lulled but the atmosphere in the car was comfortable and happy, an impressive feat considering one of the passengers had only met the other two a few minutes before. Rachel was impressed with how quickly Kate warmed up to people. Some people are just that good at it.

Chloe was waiting, sat at probably their favored booth when the three of them entered the diner. Rachel was a little saddened that she hadn’t managed to convince Steph to join them for lunch, after all, but she was excited that, discounting helping the Caulfields move Max into her dorm room, the three of them were finally together again. Chloe’s face lit up a bit as she walked in and, if she was overly confused by Kate’s presence when the other two stepped in behind Rachel, she did not show it overmuch.

To her credit, Chloe said composed and sitting until they had reached the table. When Rachel glanced back, Kate was looking around the room with a familiar expression on her face. It was one of nostalgia. She was looking almost longingly at the diner. Odd, was all Rachel managed to think before she turned back to find Chloe right in her face, seizing her in a hug. Rachel returned it
tighter than she meant to, but Chloe didn’t complain. She never complained about a tight hug, they just seemed to make her feel comforted or reassured. Rachel hadn’t asked which. Almost as soon as Rachel finally let her go, Max stepped up dutifully, and sighed, opening her arms. Chloe grabbed the girl in one tight, hefting hug, lifting her completely (if barely) from her feet. Rachel looked back to Kate.

“We’ve missed her, if you can’t tell,” she deadpanned. Kate shook her head. Rachel sat herself down where Chloe had just been, facing the door and watched Max eventually return the hug, all joking aside.

“Wouldn’t have guessed it.” The dirty-blonde was just easing herself into the seat opposite of her when Chloe finally let Max drop to her feet. The two exchanged some greeting Rachel couldn’t hear, their faces close, their voices low and then split apart. When Max settled down beside Rachel, Chloe dropped into the booth by Kate and, quite suddenly, greeted her. Chloe suddenly sounded the picture of composure and ‘keeping it cool’ despite having nearly crushed two sets of ribs in her excitement.

“Yo,” Chloe greeted, not quite wiping the goofy smile that made Rachel want to tease her from her face. Rachel took the second to see the mercifully finished tattoo. It was still fresh enough that when Chloe wore a shirt that exposed it, mostly, Rachel’s eyes were drawn to the fairly beautifully done artwork. Chloe offered the hand attached to that very arm in greeting and Kate’s eyes momentarily locked onto the ink. There was some surprise but she didn’t particularly hesitate to shake Chloe’s hand. *I think I should feel a little silly for worrying about this girl. She’s chill.*

“Hi, I’m Kate,” she introduced herself, voice a little lower than expected. “It’s really nice to meet you.” The two shook.

“Chloe,” the blunette said by way of introduction. “Chloe Price.” Today Chloe was dressed in her punk-ass best. A pale tank top bearing a skull on the center of it hung off her. It was a little large on her which was probably why she wore the long-sleeved button up over top of it, hanging unbuttoned and loose. Large, dark combat boots and pants that were more tear than jean from the knees down and thick eyeliner completed the look. She had forgone her beanie, but that was not all that rare for Chloe nowadays. It seemed to be absent as often as present. Kate looked her up and down once and then her eyes squinted slightly, as if trying to understand something. Chloe, for her part, seemed entirely unaware of this look.

“Did you just move to the dorms or something?” Chloe asked, not quite turning herself away from Rachel and Max but still looking at Kate. It was an entirely aware decision, an attempt to be inclusive while engaging the new person. *They both have big hearts. Not sure if that’s why they like me, why I like them or both.*
“Yeah,” Kate said, perking up. Whatever she was trying to figure out before had been promptly forgotten. “I used to live here, when I was a kid. Moved away when I was like ten? Spent a lot of time here. I really wanted to go to Blackwell for photography and my parents said as long as I kept up my grades and didn’t get into trouble at school, they’d send me when I got older.” She made a wide gesture with her hands as if to say, ‘here I am.’ “It’s just always been really good for art, so that’s what I’m here for.”

“Art?” Chloe asked, hopefully.

“She’s a photographer,” Max all but purred. Chloe’s face fell.

“But I really like to draw, too,” Kate hurried to explain. This made the artist across from Max perk up all over again. Rachel wanted to laugh at the earnest excitement. Her girls were too damned cute for words sometimes. Rachel reached out and, beneath the table, took hold of Max’s hand. Briefly, Kate dug into the bag half on her lap and half between her and the wall and exposed the edge of what looked like a sketchbook.

“Could I see before we leave?” Chloe asked, excitedly. “I mean,” she said, apparently trying to regain composure, “If that’s okay.” This time Rachel did laugh, and Chloe’s subsequent facade of offense be damned. To Rachel’s right, Max looked oddly satisfied as the other two talked. Rachel decided not to read too far into it and glanced up at the sound of clicking heels across the room. Joyce had noticed them, judging by the glance she shared with Rachel, but was busy filling coffee and retrieving a slice of pie for someone at the counter.

Chloe seemed to follow her eyes and grow quiet. After a moment Joyce pulled herself from the counter and walked over to them. Joyce, Rachel saw, looked about the same as ever, if looking pointedly at the rest of the table and not her daughter. Joyce is complicated, Rachel told herself. It had long since become evident that Joyce knew or suspected the nature of the relationship Rachel, Chloe and Max shared. Whether she thought it was bad or simply was under the misconception that it was entirely lustful, Rachel didn’t know. What she was sure of that, as much as she didn’t hate Joyce, the same could be said for her. Joyce didn’t hate her or Max, in fact she often looked on them with rather open care in her eyes. It would have made sense with Max, since Joyce must have watched her grow up from the small child Rachel had seen in the photos in Chloe’s photo album to the near woman she was today. As for Rachel? It simply spoke to Joyce’s heart.

But it wasn’t that simple. She’s got some shit to answer for. As far as Rachel was concerned, the idea that Joyce had gone this far without even being able to really consider that her daughter was telling the truth about the absolute shitbag that was David Madsen was a sign that the blonde woman had fucked up in a very big way. Trusting your fiance over your ‘troubled’ teenage daughter was understandable (though, not quite reasonable, in Rachel’s mind) to a point. There was, however, a point where you moved from being reasonable to fucking up. Marrying him without resolving whatever was going on between them was that point. Just under a year ago,
Chloe had confessed, shakily, that David had almost hit her just outside of the cafeteria doors. Rachel knew Chloe had been holding that truth in for a while, but Joyce should have been able to recognize the other warning signs that this guy was a scumbag. On top of it all, I can’t shake the idea that Chloe’s right and he is following us around. The blonde crossed her arms once over her chest and glanced at them all, then her eyes landed on Kate and her face split into a wide smile.

“Katie Marsh?” the woman said, her eyes widening slightly.

“Hi, Mrs. Price.” Chloe’s face was the very picture of ‘rug pulled out from under me’.

“It’s Mrs. Madsen now,” Joyce clarified. She stopped beside Chloe and rested one hand on the girl’s shoulder. Chloe looked tense and locked eyes with Rachel, as if that would provide her comfort. Rachel wasn’t one to deny comfort when she could, so she simply held the girl’s gaze and mouthed ‘it’s okay’. “I’m so, so glad you finally met Chloe. I was so sad when I had to stop babysitting you and you’d never met her.” Rachel watched Chloe raise an eyebrow at her mother. Rachel tried not to feel too surprised. Babysitting for someone in town was exactly the kind of thing she could have seen a younger Joyce doing. Despite her utter failure as far as seeing through her husband, Joyce was a nurturing spirit. To top it off, she was rather beloved by the majority of town. Hell, if someone ever threatened her, Rachel was fairly sure every fisherman over the age of 25 would rise up with pitchforks and torches to chase them out of town.

“I just met Max and Rachel here at school and Chloe and I were talking about our drawing,” Kate clarified, as if to offer promise that she was, indeed, getting to know Chloe as her old babysitter seemed to want. “Rachel and Max are the first people to really talk to me since I got here yesterday. Kind of made my day,” the girl admitted. It was a really vulnerable thing to say so casually. Rachel wasn’t sure she could do that. It was probably right there and then that Kate finally endeared herself to Rachel so completely. There were some people who, like Max, it took a couple weeks for her to be sure she could trust and open up to. Then there were people like this blonde in front of her with the large bun and the almost quiet, small way she held herself. Open books who Rachel couldn’t help but read and realize should be respected.

“Alright, what can I get you?” Joyce asked the table at large.

“A cheeseburger, loaded for bear,” Max answered immediately. Rachel couldn’t shake the imagery of a cheeseburger as a bomber advancing on the target. Joyce wrote something on the pad in front of her without hesitation. “Oh and a coke.” Once Joyce glanced at her, Rachel hurried to answer.

“Max converted me last year,” Rachel told the waiting woman by way of explanation. “Belgian waffles,” she said, as if confessing. “Some OJ? I mean, it’s not quite breakfast time but-” Joyce waved a dismissive hand as if she heard this a hundred times a day and who knew, maybe she did. Their waffles were kind of fucking godly.
“Bacon and two eggs over easy,” Chloe said to her mother. Her voice drawled as if she was uncomfortable saying it to her, but Joyce did not react. Rachel suddenly felt bad for suggesting the location to Chloe. There were almost certainly better places they could have met. “Ice water?” Joyce took that down and turned her eyes, finally, on Kate.

“I haven’t been here since I was really little,” the dirty-blonde admitted, her hazel eyes hooded by a furrowed brow. “Not sure what to order.” Joyce pulled one of the faded menus from the apron she was wearing and waved it, as if tempting.

“Or,” Joyce said, still holding it aloft. “You used to love my omelettes. The guy in the back doesn’t do as good a job as me, but he’s still pretty good.” Kate briefly tapped a finger to her lips in contemplation and then, laughing, ordered an omelette.

“Could we get a couple extra orders of toast?” Chloe asked her mother, quite suddenly. Joyce nodded briefly, marking down that addition to their order before popping off to deal with the rest of the at least vaguely orderly crowd. If there was any conversation the woman wanted to have with her daughter it wasn’t being had over their order, that was for sure. Rachel did not say anything about it. She eventually strutted off to place the order and deal with the fair amount of people in the diner who were finishing their lunches and preparing for whatever else the day had to offer them. Early birds, and all that noise. Across the pale, tiled room one man stroked his beard with one hand while theorizing to Joyce that the fish on his plate must have been one of his catches. It wasn’t funny, but she laughed anyway. Rachel wished that the jukebox was playing something.

“So,” Chloe said, clapping her hands once to draw the table’s attention. “Max, you joining us for the fall play?” Rachel turned eagerly back to the table and passed her eyes over the girls opposite of her and to her left to focus on Max. The photographer’s face fell immediately. It was something of a startling change and Rachel’s first response was to squeeze Max’s hand where she held it on the seat between the two. When Max met her or Chloe’s eyes, she looked regretful but there were certainly some other fairly strong negative feelings at work.

“I don’t think so this time,” Max started, only trailing off when her eyes landed on Chloe, who was doing her best at giving the photographer the quintessential puppy-dog eyes. Rachel watched the regret intensify in Max’s face, watched the way those deep blue orbs shifted from Chloe to the table, to the wall and finally out the window. Quietly, she wondered how to communicate to Chloe that it might be best to drop this. She’ll see, though, right? Something is going on and Chloe can see right through that. Rachel decided a moment later she might be wrong.

“Oh,” Chloe said, her tone dropping, voice turning sultry and teasing. “Do you really want to pass up a chance to spend a little time with Rachel and I?” Max turned back to the table and Rachel looked away from her to Chloe, trying to shoot her a ‘stop, stop, danger!’ look with her eyes. The
Punk was too busy trying to detect any sign that Max was getting embarrassed to even look at her. Chloe worked a hand through her own hair as she continued, a gesture Rachel wasn’t sure how to read into. Beside Chloe, Kate was visibly confused, brow furrowing and lips pursing.

“We’ll get to spend lots of time together,” Max replied, quietly. That quiet was disconcerting to Rachel. If it worried her, surely Chloe would find it offputting too? “I promise. Just… not there.” Instead of going quiet, Chloe feigned hurt as she leaned back in her seat.

“Are you over us already?” Chloe asked Max, putting a hand to her heart as if it was breaking. “Moving on to someone else? Someone new?” Rachel watched Chloe’s glance shoot suggestively sideways, toward the girl who often spoke while clutching at the crucifix around her neck and who was now watching the scene unfold with widening eyes. Her heartbeat picked up in her chest and concern both for Max and about Kate’s realization as to the nature of their relationship made Rachel momentarily incredibly anxious. She reached out beneath the table and kicked the blunette in her shin. Chloe yelped, making Rachel feel more guilty. It had not been meant to be that hard. Chloe’s upset glare made her stomach churn and it was only after following the tilt of Rachel’s head that the artist seemed to realize what was happening.

On one side of the table, Max was looking down at the faux-wood lining of the table and pointedly nowhere else. On the other side, Chloe was turning away from Max to Kate who was similarly not matching anyone’s looks, her face bright red, her eyes wide and her general posture oddly rigid given her earlier tendency toward trying to look small. The cat was firmly out of the bag on the first point, though, so Rachel released Max’s hand and leaned over toward her. Wrapping the photographer in her arms, she tried to either calm her down or find out what was bothering her. Ideally she could do both.

“Max?” Rachel whispered, lips only a few inches from her ear. Max seemed to relax into the hug. “I don’t know what’s happening but you don’t have to do the play with us, okay? Chloe missed that you were upset about something. It’s alright.” Max nodded and that was enough for Rachel to mostly release her but there was no scooting back apart and pretending that the affectionate, intimate gesture had not taken place. She did not try, instead keeping one arm close to Max who responded by leaning against her side. Kate let out a small ‘oh’.

“I’m sorry about Chloe,” Max said, suddenly sounding close to her old self. “When she wants something, she’ll fight dirty to get it.”

“Yeah, well,” Chloe said, “Don’t forget it.” Then, turning between each of the other three seated at the table, she added, “Sorry. I didn’t read the room too well today.”

“Chloe,” Max interjected. “Don’t worry about it.” The comfort offered was genuine but the damage already done. Max’s mood had tanked all at once and Chloe’s was going downhill to boot.
“I’d like to say Chloe’s on better behavior usually,” she started, turning to face Kate. “But I don’t make a habit of lying about my girlfriends.”

“So,” Kate drawled, raising her gaze again, this time specifically to Max. *Makes sense, she’s the first one to talk to her.* “When you say girlfriends, you mean-?”

“Yeah,” Max replied once it was clear Kate wasn’t going to finish the thought. The fact that Chloe had only just caught on to the potential tension in that moment would have worried Rachel under different circumstances. As it was, she had to file it away with a list of other issues that needed addressing. At the end of the last year, Max had been opposed to taking part in the Spring play, but that had been, ostensibly, because she was feeling overwhelmed with school. Whatever was going on now seemed to be tied to the myriad of emotional problems, the depths and sources of which Rachel and Chloe could only barely comprehend.

Kate did not say anything more but Chloe’s dawning comprehension of what Rachel had been worrying about for close to half an hour took a while to pass from her face. Silence descended on the table. It was a silence that for Rachel, Chloe and Max, should have been filled by discussion, by getting to the root of some matters. Sometimes, particularly moments like this, she had the urge to again try to confront Max about what went on in her head. Rachel just didn’t like the idea of making things worse and every time she or Chloe broached the subject that was precisely what happened. A single bad day could be driven to a very ugly period of sadness, self-loathing or worse with very little in the way of effort. It made doing the things Rachel had come to embrace as necessary (confrontation, communication and cooperation) very difficult.

“Steph said you were going to DM a game?” Max finally asked, sounding somewhat desperate for a change of subject. Or, for that matter, a subject of discussion at all. Chloe perked up a little bit and to be fair, so did Rachel. Kate, for her part, immediately relaxed, though she watched the lot of them with a sharper gaze. In that aware state, the girl’s eyes reminded Rachel of those she saw in the mirror. “I’m in. Totally down for that.”

“Friday nights still okay?” Chloe asked, leaning a bit forward in her seat and seeming to have forgotten all the awkwardness of the last couple of minutes. “Steph’s hosting, as usual.” When Max replied with a short nod, Rachel feared the awkward silence would return. It was staved off, surprisingly, by Kate herself.

“I had a friend a few years ago who really liked playing D&D. He tried to get me to play with him, but my parents wouldn’t let me. They say it lets in the devil.” Rachel grimaced. This was the kind of restrictive ideology she couldn’t really stand by, but it wasn’t her place to question it, even if she was of the opinion that everyone would have a bit more fun in life if they rebelled against that kind of bullshit. *Starting to sound like Chloe, again.* Chloe rubbing off on her in that aspect had to be one of the things Rachel was most thankful for in life. “One of the things I was looking forward to when I came back to Arcadia Bay was to get to see him again, honestly.” Max nodded amiably.
beside Rachel, who knew she was damn well able to sympathize with that. “But his father lost his job last year and they had to move away, to Portland.” The familiar tale drew Rachel’s narrowed eyes to meet with Chloe’s over the table. After a moment even Max clued into the coincidence that seemed just a mite too coincidental.

“You were friends with Mikey North?” Chloe finally asked. The name was enough to make Kate’s face light up, again. Most of the red had drained from it, though her cheeks continued to tinge red. In this way, they learned that, at the least, they all shared a friend in common. Rachel was inclined as the day went on to watch the way Max tried her best to relate to the new girl. Whatever it was that made the photographer reach out to Kate, it seemed that they were destined to be friends. Frankly, Rachel thought, Max could use a few more of those.
Chapter Twenty-Four: Dionysus Rising

Disclaimer: Anything familiar to you, I don't own. This is a work of fanfiction for personal amusement, fulfillment and a bit of self-therapy. I make nothing from any of it.

Chapter Twenty-Four: Dionysus Rising

September 4th, 2011 2:34 PM

Chloe shifted the truck into park and glanced at the car in the spot beside her. Rachel, Max and their new friend were distracted by something funny. It gave Chloe a moment to calm down and try to shake off the awkwardness she had been feeling for a while. Okay, Price, you fucked up earlier but try to let it slide. Across the lot a couple of families were still moving students in. She watched, in particular, as Dana and her mother talked outside of a fairly nice looking minivan. The cheerleader was dressed surprisingly up for move in day, but Chloe had learned a long time ago not to question when Dana chose to go the extra mile in any aspect of her. There usually wasn’t any greater meaning behind it, she just lived one or two steps further than most people.

As her feet hit the pavement the car beside her truck shut off and one by one its three occupants evacuated. Chloe looked once at the girl climbing out of the back seat, her purse hanging from her shoulder. They met eyes over the back of Chloe’s pickup bed and she gestured Chloe over to the three of them. Getting a look at the girl’s sketchbook had been an unanticipated delight. Her style was rather cartoony but it was bright and clearly the product of dedication and practice.

“Allright,” Chloe said as she joined the others, “let’s get somewhere before David shows up.” Max looked up with an odd glimmer in her eyes but rather than psychoanalyze everything, Chloe chose to interpret it as simple concern and in response nudged the photographer with her shoulder. Surprisingly, Max’s response was to wrap an arm around Chloe’s and start to lead her away. Though, to be fair, Rachel and Kate took the lead first. Chloe couldn’t quite hear what they were talking about but in that moment her earlier gaff was out of her mind and she just enjoyed the feeling of Max pressed close beside her as they walked through a still fairly crisp day. Note to self; find out what rooms they’re in. You can’t sneak into and out of dorm rooms when you don’t know who’s where, now can you?

She ignored the suspicion in Max’s face at her sudden, unexplained grin. Instead, not letting Max disengage from her arm, Chloe stepped up the pace, pulling the brunette past the blondes in front of
them. Max made a sudden, frankly adorable noise of surprise and hurried to keep up, converse
slapping against the sidewalk leading to the dorms rather loudly. Rachel was jostled to one side as
they passed, and her indignant look was met by Chloe with an extended tongue and little else. She
was about to turn to Max to make some joke about ditching them and finding somewhere to make
out when she felt the girl stop so suddenly as to nearly pull her to her knees.

“What the hell? What’s wrong?” Chloe asked her. Rachel and Kate stumbled to a stop just behind
her. On both Max’s and Rachel’s faces were matching looks of immediate and intense discomfort.
Chloe turned back toward the long and squat brick walls of the Prescott Dormitories and swallowed
involuntarily. Max’s grip on her arm only tightened. Standing only seven or eight feet ahead of
them, just at the bottom of the steps to the dormitories was a boy they had not seen in eight or nine
months. “Son of a bitch,” Chloe exclaimed, despite herself. Some noise came in immediate
response from deep in Max’s throat but Chloe didn’t have a name for it.

Nathan had actually somehow grown somewhere around an inch since he had stood on the stage as
Egeus last November. Even at their distance she could make out scars running across the angles of
the right side of his face. These were not the severe scars of a fire but the results of a skin graft.
They stood out in detail on his face and it only seemed to worsen as it grew red around the
sunglasses obscuring a fair amount of it. Whatever Nathan Prescott was doing standing outside of
the dormitories in his pretentious business casual suit, it seemed to have slipped his mind at the
sight of the lot of them. Chloe didn’t remember when it happened but in one second she was
staring, open-mouthed at him and in the next she was pushing Max physically and forcefully
behind her.

The body that pressed against her shoulder in this next moment was Rachel’s, stepping forward in
one quick, long stride and leaving Max and a no doubt confused Kate behind them. Rachel was not
scared or uncomfortable anymore. She was enraged. Chloe couldn’t blame her. The moment
stretched to seconds and Chloe was about to suggest they turn and immediately march in the
opposite direction before the moment she had been dreading happened. He reached up and,
shoulders rising and falling with breath that was coming too quickly, removed his sunglasses.

Chloe wasn’t sure what she was expecting but judging by hints Rachel had given it was not to look
into two ostensibly perfectly fine eyes blue eyes. Max said something under her breath that Chloe
would just assume came out to ‘what the fuck’. His face still red, Nathan seemed like he wanted to
lock eyes with someone and it sure as hell wasn’t her. Chloe glanced between Rachel and the
Prescott heir, her stomach tightening. That nameless, enigmatic, ambiguous feeling of hurt settled
into it. Somewhere a ways off, Chloe could swear she heard rapid, loud clicking of some sort. The
boy’s right fist clenched hard enough to shatter the expensive lenses in his hands and then, cursing,
he turned and walked through the door to the dormitory as if nothing had happened.

Whatever Baby Prescott wanted to say, it seemed like he was content to wait for another day, but
Chloe did not start walking again. It was better he had time to get into his room and not potentially
be waiting on them. A hand rose to rest on the back of her neck, softly cupping it. It was enough to
finally draw Chloe’s attention away from the door. Suddenly aware of her protesting lungs, Chloe
exhaled a breath she had not meant to hold. Beside her, Rachel’s attention had also been grabbed by Max and the two of them turned toward the photographers behind them.

“So,” Kate started from a step just behind Max. She had one arm reaching across the front of her, grasping at the strap of her purse. “What was that about?” The girl looked suddenly serious, if somewhat disturbed. Chloe thought that made sense. Even with Nathan inside, now, she thought the tension in the air could be cut with not so much a knife as a sufficiently strong gust of wind. Rachel’s hand brushed briefly against Max’s cheek and then reached past her to rest on Kate’s shoulder for a second. The girl did not flinch or even think anything of it, which only further cemented Chloe’s feeling that Kate was getting comfortable around the three of them.

“Kate, that was a very, very bad person who had something really bad happen to him.” Chloe nodded in support of this assessment before the thespian added, “And the three of us are a little pissed he’s back.” Pissed is an understatement. I want to take back that time I stood up for him to Drew. I want to punch him in his stupid, psycho richboy face. “No matter what, Kate, I want you to promise me something.” The girl did not speak so Rachel continued quickly. “Never, ever under any circumstances be alone with him and never leave an open drink around him.”

“I’ll make a note of that,” Kate promised. Rachel relaxed, pulled her hand back. Chloe watched the tension ease in Rachel’s face, her eyebrows rise slightly, her lips smooth out of a sneer. None of that did anything to erase the hunger in her eyes that Chloe thought had nothing to do with food, even if they hadn’t just had lunch. Max remained quiet, but Rachel seemed to be unconvinced by the calm look on her face. For a moment, the brunette looked down at Rachel’s offered hand and Chloe thought she must have been in space: she looked worried about taking it. Eventually, with Rachel leading Max and Chloe deciding to hang back with Kate, they hurried inside.

Once Kate was safely in her room only a little the wiser as to what kind of animal she had just had a close encounter with, Chloe turned to the two and demanded their room numbers so they could get out of the hallway and talk openly about what they just saw. She was confused as to how he seemed, beyond the scarring, relatively fine beneath the sunglasses. Max was, it turned out, housed in 219 directly across the hallway from Victoria. Rachel was only just a ways off in 218 but Max’s room was closer to Kate’s. Max took the lead but Rachel seemed unwilling to release her hand, so she followed close behind. Chloe wanted to think that she understood what they were feeling but the truth was that this was something they shared together, however unpleasant it was. Chloe had been nowhere to be found when Max was in trouble and that was something she still kicked herself for. And it all comes down to not just fucking talking to Rachel. Perhaps this thought was responsible for some of her frustrations about not being able to understand Max’s mental and emotional difficulties.

Max’s dorm room looked much the same as her last one: same cheap rug down the middle of the room, same thick quilt on the bed and a fresh, fluffy looking pillow in a dark pillowcase waiting, beckoning. Against the brick facade of one wall sat her small computer desk and a bookshelf. One of the windows on that wall was propped open. A black futon rested against the wall opposite of her bed beside a floor lamp. Generally things were still a little hectic, Max had clearly not finished
unpacking. Maybe they would get that done for her and take a little stress off her hands, but that was not where Chloe’s thoughts were at the moment. The photographer sat her bag down just beside her door and made for the bed, sinking down onto it with Rachel practically sitting in her lap. Chloe dropped into the computer chair at the desk and spun it around, scooting it closer to the edge of the bed. The long, loud breath Max exhaled seemed to be something of a starting gun.

“I can’t believe they saved his eye,” Chloe admitted, her confusion in her voice as she turned to Rachel. From what little Rachel had let on that seemed unlikely.

“Me either,” Rachel replied. Then, in a careful, metered voice she said, “I promise you, I saw what happened with that shard of the lamp and that eye… there’s no way they could have saved it.”

“They didn’t,” Max said, voice quiet. “They absolutely didn’t.” Chloe prompted her to continue and, finally being released from Rachel’s grasp, Max pulled awkwardly at the neck of her shirt and continued. “Most of my digging has been pretty shallow and legal.” The darker blue of Max’s eyes met Chloe’s own. “Most, but not all of it.” For a moment Max reached into her pocket. Rachel seemed to grow still beside her and Chloe didn’t quite understand the look of anxious anticipation on her face. Still, when Max pulled out a small, black thumb drive Chloe got interested.

The device sailed through the air and Chloe snatched it up without hesitation. It only took a second for Max’s laptop to come on, having apparently been left in sleep mode when the photographer walked out of her dorm that morning. A password prompt waited ahead of her, cursor blinking in the box as Chloe found a USB port and slid the drive in. When Chloe turned back she expected Max to be rising to input the password herself but once she saw Chloe was paying attention, the girl absentmindedly ran her hand through her hair and recounted her password openly.

“E-L-O-R-E-N-Z. All caps,” Max instructed. She looked grimfaced. Chloe wasn’t sure what to make of that but if Max had indeed spent all summer digging into the Prescotts she was ready to see it. “I’ve got everything on that thumb drive already on my hard drive but I’ll be making copies as I go. I have to figure out where to keep that thumb drive but for now I think it’d be best if it rotates between the three of us so no one can find it and take it from me.” Chloe had some ideas about that, but this all sounded like Max had a bombshell or two to drop on them. Rachel seemed barely interested, she was more content just staying close to Max, face twisted into a kind of thoughtful concentration that Chloe wanted to ask several questions of. E. Lorenz, Chloe thought. That’s a name. Why is that name familiar?

The homescreen loaded up and Chloe’s stomach flipped a little at the sight of Max’s desktop background: the photo taken of their entire gaming group during the last session of Steph’s campaign. It took her a second to pull her eyes away from it and find the file that let her access Max’s apparent stash of documents on the Prescotts. The files propagated themselves in front of her: pictures, .pdfs, about five videos and several documents, some of them HTML as if Max had saved a webpage or two.
“They didn’t save his right eye. It’s gone, so whatever that was it was some kind of prosthetic,” Max declared. Chloe wasn’t sure she wanted to know how Max was so sure of that.

“They can sometimes connect the muscles of an eye to a prosthetic and teach a person to turn it as if it were their actual. If they did that, it’s not a shock that the Prescotts would spring for one that looked as real as possible,” Chloe responded, eager to keep the conversation going. “Expensive as all hell, but he’s been out long enough to heal up, have a prosthetic crafted and installed. Besides, they’re definitely loaded.” Max did not immediately continued so Chloe began to scan through the filenames. Most of them were gibberish but in the previews of photos she could see, it was clear that Max had been saving any photo of Sean Prescott that the internet had to offer. “You’ve been busy as fuck this summer, what all’s here?” It was better to ask than just stumble blindly. Max had shown her this thumb drive for a reason.

“News articles, literally every public arrest record for the Prescott clan and everything I can find out online about their ‘business empire.’ And I don’t understand a quarter of it.” Max sounded tired, despite the early hour. If she had been engaged in this all summer, Chloe wouldn’t blame her for feeling exhausted even describing it. “That’s all the shit I think I can get legally.”

“And the stuff you can get illegally?” Rachel spoke up suddenly, her reverie set aside.

“It’s going to require time, being really careful and skill, depending on what it is,” Max replied, but her voice grew stronger suddenly, as if she was ready to get down to business. “Some of those skills I have in spades.”

“What do you mean by that?” Chloe asked.

“I mean being a nosy bitch,” Max answered. “There are a few people I think are working with or for the Prescotts and I have questions about them. Probably where I’m going to start.”

“Who and why?” Rachel immediately queried, sounding as if she were in.

“Can’t say why yet, exactly,” Max started. Chloe cut across her.

“A good PI never reveals her confidential informants,” Chloe advised Rachel, knowingly.
“As for who,” Max led in, turning large, sorrowful eyes on Chloe. “I’m sorry, but can I get a ride back to your house after school tomorrow?” Chloe raised an eyebrow at Max but she knew it wasn’t her Max was implying to be in league with the Prescotts and unless they were going into the mom-and-pop diner business, it wasn’t likely to be her mother.

“Well I’m going too,” Rachel declared. Chloe gestured Max onward with one hand.

“I think David’s wrapped up with them.” Even Chloe scoffed at that idea. There wasn’t a lot she would put past David or anything, but he was just an aggressive nobody, save for his friends in the police department. Still, she cracked her knuckles and nodded.

“Deal, but first you’ll have to sign up for the play,” Chloe left the laptop and the cache of files behind her, hoping that springing it on Max like this might get either compliance or more of an explanation as to her unusual behavior the last time they brought it up. Instead she elicited a pained groan.

“No,” Max said, and then immediately repeated it when Chloe attempted to pout at her. “Look, it’s not like I don’t want to,” she continued, her voice rising slightly. Chloe sat back in her chair. “It’s just… he’ll probably be there.” Add that to the list of shit I should’ve thought of and didn’t, Chloe told herself immediately. It’s a long, long list. Feeling shamed, especially by the way Max’s shoulders sagged, Chloe closed her eyes. “I don’t want to be anywhere close to him.”

“I get it,” Rachel said. “I’ve had the same thought but I don’t want to… let him win.” The last three words passed quietly from her mouth, as if she too were embarrassed and ashamed. “I’m sorry, I didn’t think about it when we pushed you earlier. This is your choice and I more than get it.” If David is working for the Prescotts, I’m going to make his life a living hell from now until the end of time. The more Chloe thought about it as she shut her mouth and let the two of them talk about this thing she had not experienced, the more it made sense. When you have a sick twisted little hellspawn at school, who better to pay off to keep him out of trouble than the head of security, if not the principal. Wells is in on it, too. No fucking doubt. Wells had gone to bat too many times for Nathan Prescott. “It’s just… you know he’s going to probably be in your photography class, too.” Max shifted uncomfortably on the bed but nodded. Rachel reached halfway out in response and then stopped, as if unsure what Max wanted.

“I just don’t think I can do the play. Class will be bad enough.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t think about that,” Chloe told Max earnestly, when there seemed to be a pause in conversation. She moved closer as Max tried to shake her head against the apology. “It’s not okay, I should’ve thought about it, alright?” The brunette looked up and matched her eyes, finally nodding when Chloe took her hand. It was about this point that she realized that despite the cool air outside and the propped open window, the room was growing warm. Way too warm. They released
hands and as pushed back toward the desk her eyes met Rachel’s. The ragefire shone clear from behind her irises. *I have never wanted to be a Prescott less than I do right now.*

Before Chloe could turn back to the desk, recognition lit up Max’s face, or maybe simply realization that the reason her face was reddening and a thin sheen of sweat was upon it was that the girl on the bed beside her was getting… fired up. *Note to self, never let them hear that one. They are punhaters. Pun judice. I’d be punished.* That realization turned to surprise and quite all at once Max turned and threw her arms around Rachel’s shoulders, pulling herself in tight. Devoid of context the action would have been cute instead of a little heartbreaking. Chloe let the two hold each other and turned to quietly review the files on the screen in front of her. She was beginning to get bored and feel as if she would go cross-eyed before she even finished reading her first news report about a new Prescott acquisition. *How the fuck has Max dealt with this shit?*

In the photo section a series of pictures labeled KP-1 to KP-13 jumped out. She decided to open one at random. It was a screenshot of an email from someone named Kristine Prescott to an e-mail address that Chloe did not recognize. EWindF@hushline.com had delivered Kristine Prescott some news which she apparently did not care for.

*Re:Re:Your Brother Needs Help*

*To: EWindF@hushline.com*

*From: Kristine Prescott*

>Listen, I get that my family throws its power around and my father does a lot of fucked up shit. I do not appreciate you taking any of that out on my little brother, though. It’s not his fault that my father’s a dickhead. Spreading lies about his mental health is not funny, it’s not okay. I do not appreciate this. Whoever you are, it’s time to stop contacting me. If you keep this up and I find out you’re harassing my brother I will be a bigger dick than my father could ever dream of. If you think Nathan’s bad, you haven’t seen anything yet.*

*K.P.*

Chloe held back the urge to whistle in some respect for the loyalty, but she now, at least, had an idea of what was going on. She started from the beginning and watched as EWindF - presumably Max herself- tried to engage with Kristine Prescott and ease her into the idea that her brother was ‘dangerous and unhinged.’ Shortly after the message Chloe had just read, Max must have decided to take the kid gloves off, as she warned Kristine that her brother’s injuries weren’t a random malfunction but a result of a struggle between himself and a girl who he drugged and photographed. He was sick and needed her help and while, Max had argued, it was not her responsibility, she thought she had to try. The remaining couple of emails were curt but less aggressive on both sides. The accusation had apparently carried enough weight with Kristine Prescott for her to promise to ‘look into my brother’s health, regardless of the other accusations.’
Max was clearly trying all angles to change what the Prescotts were up to, but Chloe personally thought that the medication Nathan needed the most involved a kick in the testicles. When she glanced back, Max and Rachel were lying the wrong way across the bed, still cuddling in some sort of quiet contemplation that Chloe wasn’t sure she was in the mood to join. Her mind was running rather quickly. Chloe scrolled down the folder to the documents. The majority were .pdfs or .txts, but one, an .rtf stood out. Unlike all the others around it, it was not labeled with a series of numbers that were likely dates. It was a one-word title: Why? It was jarring enough that Chloe opened it and immediately suspected that neither she nor Rachel were ever supposed to see it.

Months ago on a rare quiet afternoon in early November, Chloe had caught a glimpse of Max writing something on her laptop. Whatever it was, Chloe had been unable to interpret it as anything but gibberish and when Max realized she was being watched the girl had closed it quickly. Chloe had been gifted with one quick glimpse of a folder full of documents titled in gibberish. On the screen before her now was a short document, the page half full with what looked like the same nonsense. While she had not seen Max writing in this gibberish ever again, the idea that she had possibly continued all this time was enough to reignite Chloe’s curiosity about it.

It was surprisingly easy to open a browser, log into her own email account and send herself a copy of the file. Chloe was smart enough to cover her tracks thoroughly. She felt a little guilty when she had finished and turned back to find Max and Rachel both completely unaware of her invasion of privacy. Unfortunately, she was just about at the end of her rope with Max’s behavior growing more and more disturbing by the second. If there was something here that she was keeping from them and if it even possibly related to the Prescotts or anything else going on with Max, she had to know what it was.
Xbz toi’u C evsu uagg ubah?

Tbgja djas ciuj kajkgas’ lqaohs. Qotbag hofas ncqa oil xcil oil awai qoci. Ubaz xjvgl rageawa ha cn C ujgl ubah orjvu ogg jn cu. Xjvgl ubaz awaq njqdcwa ha njq oiz jn cu?
Chapter Twenty-Five: Argus Panoptes

September 5th, 2011 3:22 PM

“Nah, I really don’t think I wanna play another spellcaster type right now,” Max mused. Across the table from Chloe, Brooke’s face fell a little and she seemed to contemplate what to do. Rachel did her best to stifle amusement at the eagerness with which the brunette looked up suddenly and declared that she had an idea. *Was she even this eager over the phone last night?*

“Maybe I can play a spellcaster then,” Brooke offered, adjusting her glasses ineffectually. There was nothing wrong with the way they sat on her nose, she just seemed to do so as a matter of course, as if she needed to have something in her hands. Rachel would have thought it was nerves if Brooke wasn’t practically jumping out of her seat at the thought of the coming session. “I was never super big on playing a paladin.” Steph’s favorite picnic table in front of the school shifted slightly as the girl in question turned to face Steph. “What about you?” This was met with a far too earnest shrug and thoughtful expression.

“I’m thinking Rogue,” Rachel chimed in. “I’ve just always wanted to run a Rogue and never got to.” This was the explanation she offered publicly, but the honest truth was that she had spotted a bookmark sticking out of Chloe’s copy of the dungeon master’s guide that suggested she was spending some time with a section on traps. If Chloe was thinking about designing an actual dungeon then they would need a Rogue to handle those traps, to scout ahead and generally be a sneaky bastard. Rachel could play a sneaky bastard: she had plenty of people to model that kind of behavior off of in her life. Her eyes trailed across the table to Steph.

She knew the girl was having some difficulty adjusting to life without her best friend around. The sheer amount of time she and Chloe had spent with Steph (especially Chloe) had done some good, but there was only so much time in the day and in the end it didn’t do a ton to quiet the hurt of missing a friend. Rachel was relieved to see, though, the deepening friendship between Chloe and Steph. To be honest, until that had begun to unfold she had been concerned about Chloe’s ability to hold deep friendships with anyone she wasn’t inclined to kiss. *At least, I don’t think she’s thinking about Steph that way.* Given Steph’s prior feelings for both her and Max, it would have been a kind of cruel irony.
“Well,” Chloe said, suddenly chiming in as if she had not been pretending to stare at her nails in disinterest, as if she had not been listening intently to their planning and bartering with each other about characters or their theorizing as to what Chloe had in store for them. If the girl was attempting to mimic Steph’s ‘DM face’ she was doing a good job. It was enough to make Rachel a little more eager for the game. “Think about your characters a bit before Friday, and I’ll be working to adjust the plan for the campaign as it goes. It’s going to be a bit reactive anyway.” This time Chloe looked up at them all, pulled her beanie down over her head in a ‘let’s get down to business’ manner and added, “I really don’t want it to be an on-the-rails’ type thing.”

“I’m impressed you’re feeling so ambitious,” Steph said, quite suddenly. She had been rather on the quiet side for the last few minutes. Rachel tried to get a read on her. While it was true she occasionally seemed a bit downtrodden at Mikey’s absence she typically did not let it show outside of the confines of her exceedingly lonely home. It was one thing to have a big house essentially to one’s self, but it was another entirely to spend so much time in isolation.

“Well, if I end up flat out sucking at it, we can always make Friday a ‘tv and cheap beer’ night,” Chloe offered. “I just wanna give it a try. I think I have things set up with just enough openness to keep it fresh and just enough control to either keep the campaign short if people aren’t thrilled or let it go on if everyone’s down.” Rachel wasn’t a fan of the doubt tinging the girl’s voice but one glance at her phone showed that time for their little meeting was running down. They would need to get a move on very soon. “Anyway,” the punk added, “It’s about time for the three us to take off.”

“Mhmm,” Steph muttered. Almost immediately Brooke and Steph shot ‘knowing’ glances at each other. On that same side of the table, Max saw this and took on a shade of red. “Of course you do. I think I’ll play along.”

“Yes,” Rachel declared, lowering her voice. “We need our private time, after all.” Fixing a smirk on Steph or Brooke won her no sign of embarrassment, but beside them Max was beginning to retreat away from matching anyone’s eyes. I’m going to pay for this later, Rachel thought, but it’s going to probably be a ‘seriousface’ kind of day after this. Beneath the table, her right foot stretched and pressed against Max’s ankle. The very moment it began to rise along the inside of her calf, the brunette sucked in a sharp breath and stood so fast that the bag with her camera in it toppled from her lap and to the grass. Her face did not lose any of its color. A much wider smile settled on Rachel’s, though. Chloe’s suddenly shifty side-eye netted the blunette no explanation more detailed than that grin.

“What’s wrong, Max?” Steph suddenly asked, her face the very picture of innocence and concern. “Does something have you bothered?”

“Either way,” Chloe said, suddenly, as if cutting across the situation and robbing Steph and Rachel both of the various forms of fun derived from Max’s surprise. The photographer stood a step or two
away from the table, at this point positively glaring at Rachel. *She’ll forgive me later,* Rachel thought, assuredly. “I’m glad you’re getting into it,” this time their DM-to-be was speaking directly to Brooke.

“Didn’t think I would be as into it as I am, but I’m down.”

By the time Rachel pulled up behind Chloe’s truck at the end of the Madsen house’s driveway, Max had all but forgiven her for her earlier transgression. There *had* been a bit more to it than that, but Rachel didn’t like to kiss and tell. Plus, to be honest, Max had been sated a bit by her willingness to pass the aux cord. Though the two of them hadn’t left the parking lot for a couple of minutes after Chloe pulled out of it, when Rachel shut the engine to her car (*huh, I actually have a car, now)* off, the punk was still behind the wheel of her truck, wrapped up in some conversation on her phone. Leaving Max to unhook her MP3 player and that sort of thing, Rachel shut the driver’s door as quietly as she could and attempted to approach Chloe’s door without giving herself away.

“I don’t know, I’ve been trying to figure it out ever since I found it,” Chloe was telling someone. Rachel slowed a little as her voice became clearer. She could see the girl’s eyes narrowing in the mirror, though not due to having spotted her, more in concentration. “So it needs some kind of key?” Whoever she was talking to was not set on speakerphone so Rachel had little to no opportunity to actually hear what was being said. That at least piqued her curiosity enough to keep listening. “Uh, okay, so we tried people already, right? Places? Seattle, Arcadia Bay, um…. Pirate Fort? Don’t laugh at me, Mikey. I’m freaked out about this shit.” *Okay, so what in the hell is she talking to Mikey about?* Chloe’s voice suddenly lost its edge and she said, quietly, “try Portland.” Almost as soon as she spoke, Chloe’s eyes shifted to glance at the mirror.

*I’ve been found out,* Rachel decided, and dropped all pretense of sneaking. No sooner had she made that decision than a hand came down on her shoulder and made her jump. *Fucking Paranormal Activity jumpscares,* she grumbled, turning back to Max. The photographer smiled at her with all the grace of someone who had won a great victory. *So much for not holding grudges, Max.* Rachel watched the girl almost swagger past her toward the front of the truck, where Chloe had excused herself from her conversation with Mikey and was climbing out of the truck. Filing that away for later, Rachel watched Max stop short of her.

The two exchanged something that she could have heard had she wanted to, but it seemed to be an attempt at comfort from Max to Chloe. *She’s awfully confident in her theory.* It wasn’t as if the idea that David was working with the Prescotts sounded *out there.* David Madsen, whatever else he was, was an awful little shit. Max was loathe to explain her suspicions, but Rachel could make a few inferences herself: first and foremost, David never spoke up against Nathan, regardless of what he did and what David had seen. Moreover, there was the question of the Madsen wedding. Chloe had confided to her once that there was no way that they could afford a wedding like they had gotten after their short time together.
Rachel followed them into the house, hoping that Joyce was not taking a rare day off from the diner. It was probably better that they got things done today and buried this question of David’s complicity in protecting Nathan once and for all. Well, whether he’s working with the Prescotts or not, he definitely protects Nathan. Something has to change that. Feeling grim, she picked up her pace once they hit the inner hall and shut the door. She wanted to be close to the girls and hear what, if anything, she could do. The nosing around and learning things about other people was certainly their forte, but if she could be of use, why not?

“So, we can start by looking around the closets and shit,” Chloe said after a second of silence. She was one or two steps short the stairs before Max stopped her with a reaching hand.

“Where does he spend most of his time alone?” Max asked her. This seemed like a fair enough question. If he was getting up to something, he wasn’t likely to keep the evidence of it around where Chloe could stumble over it, not the way he genuinely seemed to distrust her. Wordlessly, Chloe gestured toward one wall. It took Rachel a second to realize she was trying to suggest they check the garage but not Max. She had transformed into a woman on a mission from the moment they shut the front door behind them. It was often impressive to watch the shorter brunette exercise her willpower. Then again, Rachel thought as she hurried to follow, it’s also like she knows she’s going to find something.

The garage was much as Rachel remembered it from the one or two occasions she had had reason to go in there. On one of those occasions it was because that had been the only place she could back Chloe up against a wall and- not right now, girl. Max stood in the middle of the floor, turning a full three hundred and sixty degrees slowly, eyes passing across the room with a kind of precision. When Rachel glanced back, Chloe was watching her with a dubious eye. Rachel couldn’t blame her. Though, on her end, she stopped a couple of steps behind Max and, without trying to look too absurd, did much the same as she had. Rachel couldn’t remember ever actually looking around the garage before. Last time, I was kind of distracted.

The area they were in was dominated by tool boxes, benches and various chests of drawers. A set of cabinets overtop one workbench looked a little newer than the rest, even with its ‘I Get Hard When I Shoot People’ stickers. Speaking of, a large cabinet sat in one corner of the room that someone had converted into a gun case showing off all of David’s home defense weapons. On the aforementioned workbench sat a laptop which Max strode over to, opened and immediately saw come to life. She nodded almost grimly and then knelt down to start digging through the cabinets.

Chloe, for her part, stepped up beside Max and began to look through the upper cabinets, though Rachel wondered if she had any idea what she was looking for. Does Max have any idea what she’s looking for? Paycheck stubs maybe? A hidden cell phone like James had? Rachel stepped to the farthest end of that bench and glanced up. As if she had followed where Rachel was looking, Max spoke from where she knelt on the ground.
“Are those manilla folders?” the brunette asked, pointing almost straight up from where she was kneeling. Rachel glanced down at her in confusion and then looked back. The cabinet she was about to pull open had something on top of it but it was a little surprising that Max had seen whatever it was. She barely could from where she stood.

“Uh, might be,” Rachel answered. It felt a little too perfect. *Maybe Max actually does know what we’re going to find and wants Chloe there to see it?* It took Rachel more than a second or two on the tips of her toes to get a hand on whatever was sticking just over the edge of the top of the dark brown cabinet, but when she pulled them down Max’s prediction was proven accurate. A manilla file folder was firmly gripped in Rachel’s hand as she eased back down onto her feet. Turning it over once revealed that there were several pages inside it and it was almost completely devoid of dust. Whatever was inside, David apparently had frequent use for it. *I mean,* Rachel turned suspect eyes on Max. *Max wouldn’t plant some kind of evidence on David, would she?*

Max was never vicious for the sake of being vicious. When it came even to Nathan Prescott she seemed more intent on avoiding him or getting someone else to handle him than finding some sort of revenge. Still, Rachel couldn’t shake off the mental image of the short, hooded girl standing over Damon Merrick’s prone form, promising Frank Bowers that he was next if he so much as thought about touching Chloe again. She wasn’t sure she would ever forget the twisted smile on the girl’s face, the way that it had inspired Rachel to crawl backwards away from her despite potentially owing her life to this then-stranger. Max might not be capable of violence for violence’s sake but what would she do to someone who hurt either of them?

*She would do this and worse, and David did hurt Chloe.* It hurt to feel distrustful of the photographer who was moving toward the file, muttering about trying the laptop later. The problem was that Max held too many secrets. Rachel had seen it in Chloe’s eyes before, too, the wonder that whatever Max was keeping from them might truly be so world-changing as to shake their faith in her. *No, fuck that! This is Max. I need to be better than this.* Rachel reached out to open the folder for Max, when Chloe spoke for the first time since they had stepped into the house from the other end of the bench.

“Mother fuck!” Both she and Max stopped in their tracks and turned. Chloe had the top cabinet on that end of the bench wide open, revealing a small, older tv monitor. That was strange enough, but it was actually plugged in and on. Part of Rachel knew what she was going to see before she and Max even repositioned themselves to get a better look. Beside her, Max muttered something in shock, something which sounded suspiciously like, ‘this is early.’ Whatever that might mean, no concerns or suspicions about Max lying about David being capable of anything, even working with the Prescotts, hung around as Rachel took in the sight of the various camera feeds displayed on the screen. There were about six in all. She opened the cabinet beside the television and saw wires feeding through to some sort of hard drive.

*‘Mother fuck’ is right,* Rachel thought as Chloe leaned forward against the bench, as if not sure about supporting herself on her legs. On the screen a feed of the Madsens’ bedroom, the living room and the kitchen sat on the top row. As if that wasn’t bad enough, there was a view of the
downstairs hall from the ceiling, one of the garage which showed the three of them from the back and finally, as if it was supposed to be an afterthought, a camera capturing Chloe’s bedroom from through her closet door. It was angled just enough to catch half of the bed and Chloe’s computer desk. Rachel slowly placed a hand on either of Chloe’s shoulders and turned her around. She was not entirely able to suppress the urge to recoil from the disgust and rage twisting familiar pale features from their soft and caring norm. Was this how Chloe felt when Rachel got angry?

“I’m sorry, Chloe,” Max started, genuinely sounding shocked. “I know this is fucked up.” The photographer looked disturbed, herself. Why is he spying on bedrooms? The kind of things that could have been done with those video feeds, especially Chloe’s, immediately struck her and pulled a shiver from her. The punk pulled away from Rachel and made as if to turn off the television, before pulling back as if she didn’t want to touch it, as if it would burn her.

“Okay. I’m willing to entertain the possibility that David’s working with them, because they’re all sick, sick, sick fuckers.” That seemed to be all Chloe could say, but it was also all Max needed to continue. While the bluenette shivered, Max seized the file Rachel had pulled down for her. Rachel’s doubt in Max evaporated as she paused, turning to the other two. Chloe was watching the folder like a hawk. If Max doesn’t open it in a couple of seconds she’s going to take it from her.

“I’m pretty sure I know what’s in here and it’s not going to make any of us happy,” Max declared, gesturing with the folder.

“What do you mean?” Chloe asked, though the question was rhetorical. “I want to know what else this shithead has. Maybe he kept a file of his favorite stills for his own, sick fucking spank bank?” Max shook her head, frowning deeply.

“David’s totally followed all of us at one point or another, right?” Max asked them. They had all recounted separate moments when they’d caught David lurking near them or strangely in a place he had no reason to be at the same time they were. Rachel had never expressed how sometimes she suspected he was following her around with a camera. “Best case scenario? This is him playing detective and these are his files.” I hope the best case scenario is what we’ve got here, Rachel thought as Chloe suddenly snatched the file from Max’s hand and pulled it open. The girl’s breath hitched and she pulled that hand back. Rachel caught the flash of red from a fresh cut and winced. Max did not say anything about it, instead choosing to close her fist and hide it immediately behind her back. Rachel did not immediately join the two of them, instead hanging back to catch a good look at Max’s hand. Whatever had happened in that moment, it was bleeding enough to trail down her closed fist and to the floor. Clean that up before you leave, she reminded herself. “He’s got two or three pages on all
of us… and Steph.”

Rachel eased behind them. Chloe’s papers had a physical photo of her paperclipped to them and anyone reading the things David had written about his step daughter would think she was not only a juvenile delinquent capable of anything but the ringleader of a local drug ring. The only thing amusing was David’s compilation of all of Chloe’s online aliases: it was funny to imagine David actually writing some of these names down. As the three of them hurriedly shifted through the pages, (Max never touching the paper so as not to get it bloody, Rachel figured) a story began to unfold itself before their eyes. In this narrative, David was the woke hero and these three girls were hiding behind their gender and age to get away with all kinds of crimes. The majority of their purported behaviors were either faulty assumptions or based on complete falsities.

One thing became clear to Rachel that day: whatever they did, whenever they did it, David Madsen was able to find some way to spin their behavior to make them out to be shitty human beings. According to his notes, David was aware of the amount of time she and Max spent together in each others’ rooms and suspected those nights were the two of them doing business of some sort. Why didn’t he ever bust us for it? Put into context with the rest of it, he seemed to think they were producing or distributing something harder than weed for Chloe and Frank. Frank’s on his radar, Rachel realized, her stomach growing heavy in her body. Evidence pointed to some informant in the student body, but none of them could pull out an idea on who that might be.

“Did you see this shit?” Chloe hissed, pointing to a line in Steph’s files. “He thinks our tabletop nights are literally when we go out dealing. Steph and Mikey apparently help us. This guy is totally fucking delusional. I mean, I once collected money for a dealer, but that was ages ago.”

“You did what?” Max asked, her head lifting.

“Not proud of it, never did it again, not the point,” Chloe shot back. “David is off his fucking head insane. This isn’t just being a sexist sack of shit, he’s clinically fucked up.” Rachel wasn’t sure she could disagree with that amateur diagnosis after today. The whole thing from the files to the cameras smacked of a paranoid psychosis but she was beginning to think that all of his behavior was his own and had little to nothing to do with the Prescotts. Then again, if there was anyone who might want an eye kept on the three of us, it’d be Nathan right? And he could get daddy Prescott to do anything. Max and Chloe’s concerns were starting to rub off on her.

“Look, I don’t think there’s anything to be gained from reading all this shit,” Max said, waving a dismissive hand. Chloe’s wandering gaze locked onto that hand and the punk released the paper, grabbing at Max’s wrist with one quick, precise movement. Max did not react with pain, merely surprise and Rachel watched Chloe examine a long, thin papercut she had accidentally left behind.

“Damn it,” Chloe muttered. After a moment of matching Max’s eyes and seeing what she had done
in them, Chloe tried to pull the girl into the house. “Come on, let’s get that cleaned up and hit with peroxide or something. Fuck knows what’s on that folder.” When Max turned toward the laptop with hungry eyes, Rachel gave her a light shove.

“It’ll be there when you get back. Chloe’s right.” It took the girl a couple of seconds more to be pulled off the scent she was tracking but, eventually Max let Chloe lead her into the house. Rachel hung behind them and watched the scene. Neither one spoke to the other but the way Max’s eyes remained almost fixed on Chloe’s face told Rachel everything she needed to know. Max was only a step or two from freaking out about how significantly Chloe had been affected by their discoveries so far. Whatever Max thought she was going to find on David’s laptop, Rachel wasn’t sure it could possibly be more damning than the contents of the hard drive hidden in the cabinet.

“For the most part, this is what I expected.” Max was rinsing the blood from her hand--or more precisely, letting Chloe rinse the blood from her hand-- in the bathroom sink when she uttered this proclamation. Chloe’s eyes sharpened a bit, concern draining from them. “Not the cameras,” Max continued. “I didn’t see that coming.” Rachel rather thought Max’s shock was fairly convincing that. “But the rest of it is right in line with his personality: convinced he’s right, convinced his moral compass is absolute, convinced the world is conspiring behind his back.” That also sounds about right.

“Well, I can get into his laptop. Saw him entering his password last week.” Chloe followed this announcement up by turning away from them and opening the cabinet above the sink. The cut across Max’s hand was long enough that a simple bandaid probably wasn’t going to do much for it. It also wasn’t super deep, but if they were going to be fucking around a garage for a few more, Rachel was glad when Chloe pulled out a bit of gauze. She didn’t have much to say about Max’s sudden perking up at first. When the photographer’s hand was wrapped, then Chloe looked into her eyes. “If you think this is going to do anything good, then I’ll get us in.”

“I mean, we’ve found plenty so far. What might he be keeping on a computer he thinks is safe?” Rachel nodded at the sound reasoning and let not Max, but Chloe lead them from the room like a general marching off to war or someone about to step up to speak their truth into a microphone through cracked lips. Max was having some difficulty not reaching across herself to grab the strap of her bag as she usually did, judging by the way she continually did so and then winced immediately. Rachel, for her part, reached out the second time Max did this and took hold of the bag, lifting it off of her shoulder.

“What?” Max asked as they hit the bottom stair, turning blue eyes on her questioningly, if anxiously.

“Gimme, I’ll carry that. You do that Max thing you do so well.” There was no further hesitation and shortly after Rachel came to understand why Max would feel compelled to grab hold of the strap despite pain in her hand: the bag was heavy. Whatever was in it was more than just a laptop
and a camera. Rachel’s interests were more piqued than she wanted to admit, but they had a mission of sorts and she had a feeling that on top of it, Chloe was not yet done with this whole camera thing. If she was, then Rachel wasn’t. *No way in hell is he getting his peep show on.*

Once they were firmly in the dusty, oil-smelling box that was the Madsen family garage, Rachel stayed out of the way. She was useful when it came to making decisions, to getting in peoples’ faces, but this kind of thing was probably best left to Max and Chloe. The laptop came to life and Chloe read out a string of numbers which Max entered in rapid, practiced keystrokes. Out of curiosity, she stepped forward to get a look at the screen. The background was a photo Joyce, with Chloe lurking somewhere on the edge of the image. Still curious, Rachel leaned in between the girls to get a better look at Chloe’s image in the photo. Before she could ascertain how long ago it had been taken by judging the girl’s appearance, Max turned her head and placed her lips on Rachel’s cheek so quickly and unexpectedly that she pulled back in surprise.

Max’s self-assured chuckle was enough to cut through the tension of the moment and make Rachel’s cheeks flame briefly. *Mother fucker,* she thought. Most impressively, though, Chloe laughed. *That’s a good sign,* she told herself. *That’s the best news all day.* To say she was worried about Chloe’s reaction to the video feeds was an understatement, however realistic the response was. The computer’s browser popped up and just as quickly his history list. It was, Rachel thought, leaning back in, at least not full of porn.

“What are the odds he’s dumb enough to use his computer password for his e-mail?” Max asked herself aloud. A moment later, an inbox propagated itself on the screen in front of them. “Or that he’s dumb enough not to log out before he leaves.” Instead of joining Max in her search now that his emails were fair game, Chloe seemed to take a step back from the computer and then another and another. Rachel followed until they were standing quietly against the closed garage door on the opposite side of the room. She stayed close and silent by her girlfriend's side.

Chloe’s momentary good mood seemed to have drained from her face very quickly and though Rachel kept a few inches of distance between them she rather thought she was doing more good right beside Chloe than she would have been hovering over Max’s shoulder and interrupting her work. The brunette across the room was muttering to herself. Eventually, Rachel reached over and began to rub Chloe’s back, trying to distract her from whatever horrible scenario she was imagining in relation to David’s cameras. Seeing the combination of disgust and fear on Chloe’s face was reminiscent of watching Max’s eyes lock on Nathan Prescott for the first time since he had drugged and kidnapped her. Something was going to have to be done about David Prescott before it was too late.

*No one else knows what to do. I’ll have to be the one to do it.*

“Do you think these cameras are actually him being a sick fuck?” Rachel finally asked, deciding to put the question in Chloe’s vernacular. She didn’t personally think so, but if Chloe had reason to
believe otherwise that was going to alter the form and severity of her response. “Or is it just him being a fascist and completely embracing the surveillance state?”

“It’s probably his paranoia and shit but,” Chloe stopped and seemed to lean back into Rachel’s rubbing hand. “I’m not okay with it no matter what,” she declared. “Max, can you clear the videos on that fucking hard drive or do I need to take it away from him?”

“I can,” Max said, turning away from the laptop, “but I want you to think about something.”

“What would make you not want to put a stop to this if it was you?” Chloe asked her suddenly, challengingly.

“Nothing,” Max replied, her voice lowering to sound soothing and reconciliatory. “But that hard drive is only so big and that’s a lot of cameras. That means he probably reviews and erases it every night.” Rachel didn’t think the laptop Max was looking at had much storage space, so that made more sense than the idea that David was storing tons of footage. “If you think you can stand to leave it in place to do something that’s really going to stick in his craw, I’ve got a better idea.” Unsurprisingly, the thought of pissing David off made Chloe brighten right up.

“I’ll lend you my ears, Marc Antony,” Chloe said by way of agreement.

“Well,” Max continued, turning back to the laptop. “He’ll have to check the footage tonight, probably. Tomorrow at the latest. I say we go upstairs, find the camera in your room, knock it out and hope it was expensive. He can’t say anything if we do that without giving away what he’s doing. We take the whole hard drive and that might be escalation enough that he says something.” She’s thought about this, probably ever since we saw the feed. “I’d rather fuck with him right back than escalate things. Especially since he’s being so much more unpredictable- so much more unpredictable now, I mean.” Beside Rachel, Chloe stayed silent in contemplation.

“It’s probably a pinhole camera, something small. So you go upstairs, call me or Rachel and we’ll guide you to it.” Without even bothering to respond the bluenette pulled the garage door open and slammed it behind her on her way into the house. “She’s freaked.”

“She’s really freaked,” Rachel agreed, crossing the floor. “I’m freaked.”

“Yes she is which is why I want her to have a chance to fuck with him and- no, no you’re not,” Max replied without looking away from David’s e-mail inbox. “Keep an eye on the video feed will
“What do you mean I’m not freaked?” Rachel asked, frustrated. Max always did this shit, speaking cryptically when things were important. On the small vision at the other end of the bench, Chloe had not yet gotten to her room.

“I mean you’re pissed off, not freaked.”

“How do you know?”

“Because there are only three moods I’ve seen you get in that make you warm up like this and none of them is freaked out,” Max declared, turning away from the screen finally. Rachel hadn’t notice the room heat up, she usually didn’t until it was already a bit excessive. The photographer moved her hands from the keyboard and stepped closer to Rachel in a sort of aggression that had nothing to do with violence. “And I don’t think it’s either of the others. At least, I really hope not.” Rachel’s reddening face did so without her permission. “Okay, well maybe you’re pissed or embarrassed, but either way, it’s not the third.” With that Max returned to her work, leaving Rachel to do her very best to think about anything other than the third emotion which could turn her into a walking, talking space heater. Chloe came into frame on the television and Rachel turned away.

“Besides, when you’re freaked out you do much bigger, more noticeable things.”

“I do?” Rachel asked her as Chloe approached her closet, right hand clenched around her cell phone and left around something long and thin.

“Sudden winds and rains,” Max continued. Before she could explain further, Max changed the subject. “Sometimes I wish you remembered your rebellious side.” Rachel blinked and waited for some sort of explanation. “When I first met you you would shout down a drug dealer in an empty junkyard even knowing no one was around to hear you, you’d sneak off to punk shows and get into all kinds of trouble and get away with it. Besides, you were the person who saved me from whatever Nathan was-- yeah.”

“I just think things through more,” Rachel insisted. “Probably your influence.”

“You’re being careful and I get it. I wasn't careful once and now I have to live with the consequences. Lots of consequences.” Is she thinking about Merrick? The idea that she might have made it easy for Frank to kill someone? “At your core though, you’re a good person who does what’s right, so maybe it’s time to trust yourself within reason.” Max let out a sudden ‘ahah!’ Rachel wanted to push her, either to hear what she had found or to find out more about the supposed winds and rains that Max was blaming on her, but at that point Chloe called her, looking
visibly frustrated. She only hesitated for a second looking between the sight of a triumphant Max in profile and frustrated Chloe from a slight angle before she dug her phone from her pocket and answered its insistent buzzing.

“Tell Chloe I’m about to forward a whole bunch of emails to all of our addresses,” Max told her as Rachel answered.

“I can’t find this damn thing,” Chloe insisted. “It’s probably like Max said, really fucking small.”

“Max has something,” Rachel decided to lead in with good news. “She says she sent us all a copy.”

“What?”

“What do you have, Max?” Rachel asked. She moved closer to the girl and held up her right hand so that Max could turn and speak into the phone while she typed.

“Emails from David and Sean Prescott going back to last year, talking rates, talking about keeping Nathan out of trouble, a few emails from Wells that makes it sound like he knows. I was right. It’s all here, or enough to be damning if not enough for a court of law.” Rachel felt a different kind of warmth in her stomach as she watched Max’s eyes brighten and practically sing. The girl continued to forward one email after another. “I’m gonna delete all record of sending these to us, but we should all have a copy and I’ll get them onto the flash drive later. I’m gonna have to leave taking care of the camera to you and Rachel.”

“Go fucking get them, Super Max,” Chloe responded over speakerphone, her voice an odd mix of grim and relieved. Rachel could understand that. It was unfortunate that all of their worst fears about David (and then some) had come to fruition. It was, however, good that they had proof. Speaking of which, Rachel was going to take a few pictures of David’s storage set up before they left, for good measure. “Now let’s cost Sergeant Douchecanoel some money.”

“I thought it was douchefaucet,” Rachel insisted, taking the phone back but not bothering to take it off speaker. She left Max to do her work positioned herself in front of the television. It took she and Chloe no more than a minute to find the exact point spot where the camera was hidden. Chloe wasn’t sure in the end whether the end of the long screwdriver slamming into the camera simply knocked it back into the wall it was set into or actually broke it beforehand, but Rachel didn’t think it mattered. It would no longer be giving David any access to Chloe’s antics in the confines of her own bedroom without her consent.
When Chloe joined them in the garage it was with a look of smug satisfaction covering every inch of her face and making Rachel more than a little regretful that they were not somewhere more private than a house which was being recorded. It became quickly evident by the heavy bag over Chloe’s shoulder that she was planning on spending some time away from home, again. Probably at Steph’s, she’s practically taken over the guest room. That would, at least, make Steph happy as long as she did not know the context of the visit. I wonder what Steph would do if she did find out? Rachel wouldn’t like to be David in that case.

Then again, she wouldn’t like to be David very soon, anyway.

At one point, Max finished her work on the emails and set about erasing the footage of their time in the garage from the hard drive, explaining that she would rather David not know just how much they knew until it came time to use it against him. Let him think we just found the cameras, Rachel thought as she watched Chloe gently grab and cradle Max’s injured hand before nudging the photographer to the side to let Chloe do the job. Whatever I’ve got to do to put him in his place, I don’t want him to see it coming.

Max wanted her to trust her sense of right and wrong more often? She was going to start with Drill Sergeant Madsen and his immediate need to be taken down a peg. It was only a matter of time, but time was running out.
Chapter Twenty-Six: Atreus and Thyestes

Disclaimer: Anything familiar to you, I don't own. This is a work of fanfiction for personal amusement, fulfillment and a bit of self-therapy. I make nothing from any of it.

Notes: I wanted to talk with all of you briefly about something. Since about the time I began to write the first interlude I started to grow displeased with the pacing in relation to Max's secrets. At that point I took steps to rectify it and move that revelation up. Unfortunately, even having done that, I can promise you that as of the last chapter I will post today, there are still several chapters to go before Max's secret is revealed in full. However, in the coming chapters you will see the evolution of that plot line, as well as several others, including ones set into motion by the events of Chapter 25: Argus Panoptes. I hope that you understand that if there was an error made with the pacing, it has already been made and it would be detrimental to the overall story to infodump immediately. I want a 'natural' exposition to develop and even moving the timetable up, I cannot quite make it materialize immediately. I appreciate the patience with this failing of the story. I hope you enjoy, nonetheless. That being said, I am celebrating a personal milestone, graduating with my bachelor's degree. So, in celebration, today and Sunday's updates are going to be two chapters each as, since my last final exam, I have done very little besides write and edit. Hopefully, this both alleviates a little bit of the remaining wait and entertains you, as one of the coming four chapters is pretty lighthearted in comparison to many of its current compatriots and a few still to come. Thanks, as always, for the support and love on this project. Recently, as I began to write in longer bursts again, I remembered what it means to me. I wouldn't give up finishing this story for the world. Either way, expect another chapter in 2-3 minutes. Enjoy.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Atreus and Thyestes

September 9th, 2011 3:01 PM

If one were to look past the discoveries made on Monday afternoon, if one were to look past her fight with her mother about her sudden 'mood swing' and accompanying decision that she was going to be taking some time away from the house, then all-in-all Chloe would have to say it had been a good week. The fact that it was coming to an end and that meant that in a few short hours they were going to be engaged in world building and character creation for her first campaign as a Dungeon Master made it even better. That was why she was so jarred to come upon the sight of a police officer escorting Hayden Jones from the photography classroom toward the principal's office. Max was standing just to the side of that door, trying desperately to get the cop to even look at her.

“I saw everything,” Max insisted to the man, doing everything but actually reaching out to the cop. The officer was doing his best to ignore her. His face was twisted into a look Chloe would name embarrassment if she had to give it one. “He just attacked Hayden for no reason.” For his part, the larger boy turned toward Max and tried to relax her with a smile and a thumbs up. Chloe could understand why it failed, too: it was rather hard to give a reassuring smile when doing so let blood pour from your lip down your teeth and ultimately trail down your chin. Just behind the cop who had ignored Max (what, is she get him to leave Hayden alone) David emerged from the classroom
in his security uniform. Through the open door the other party--and if Max’s words were anything to go by, the guilty party--was still screaming.

“I want him fucking arrested,” Nathan Prescott demanded, the volume and pitch of his voice both higher than Chloe could have ever imagined hearing them. “Do you people know who the fuck I am?” A man’s voice sounded out from the room as if trying to calm him down or in some way placate him. Chloe didn’t recognize it and marked it down to likely being yet another police officer: she would have recognized most of the rest of the school’s security team, considering that whenever possible she worked with them on an issue and not David. Speaking of David, that was about the moment when he noticed Chloe standing a few steps behind Max, though the brunette remained entirely unaware of Chloe’s presence until the large man stopped and stared at her with some disdain.

“You two clear the area,” David declared. “This doesn’t concern you.” Max spun at his words and saw Chloe, which motivated her to take a step or two closer. She had not stood this close to David since their discovery of the house’s hidden cameras. If she could have, Chloe was fairly certain she would have been fine never standing this close to that asshole again. Several people passed by them without stopping, without looking, though she thought she heard a mutter or two which suggested people knew that Hayden had been attacked. Nathan’s voice rose in indignation at being asked to quiet down by the officer in the room with him.

“Nathan almost hit me with that chair, David, so I think it concerns me, thank you very much,” it took everything Chloe had to hold back a cheer. This was not the time or the place to celebrate or otherwise express how hot it was to see Max put the absolute shitbag in his place. Hayden was out of sight by the time David could bring himself to respond. It was a typical David response, where everyone was guilty except the guy who threw the fucking punch. Or in this case, the fucking chair.

“Move along and mind your own business unless you have something more to do with this than you’re letting on.”

“And what could I have to do with Nathan Prescott throwing a chair at me or Hayden or whoever he was aiming at, David?” There was no false sweetness to this question, none of Max’s usual attempt at reason. The photographer was, to put it very mildly, not okay. Behind Chloe a pair of footsteps came to a stop. Whoever they belonged to did not help David’s mood any more than Max’s surprising, building rage. Chloe glanced behind her to spot Rachel and Brooke. Steph was further down the hallway still, but even she seemed to know something was going on. That made sense since the only one being louder than Max was in the moment was Nathan himself.

“Someone shut that dumb bitch up,” Nathan called from the room. Chloe’s fists immediately clenched in response. As far as she was concerned you got to either insult a person or kidnap them. Doing both was way over the line.
“Let me put it this way, girlie. Move on or I’ll be reporting you to Principal Wells for disrespect.” Whatever Max was going to say when she opened her mouth, Chloe could tell from the look on her face it was going to end badly for everyone involved. She was relieved when Rachel reached up and placed her hand firmly over Max’s open mouth, muffling her response. The bad news for Rachel was that she had apparently forgotten that of the two of her girlfriends, the one with poor impulse control was Chloe, not Max. Her creepy, skeevy, spycamming stepfather threatening Max was enough to shove her over the edge once she was sure her girlfriend was safe.

“You wouldn’t know how to spell respect if someone held up a cue card, you fucking creep.” The man’s face transformed immediately from I’m High and Mighty to You Will Fear Me. Rachel sighed exasperatedly behind her and called for ‘a little help here’ when David opened his mouth to respond.

“I said move along or I will have to report your insubordination.”

“Big word for such a small di-” this time it was her turn to be silenced by a hand across her lips. The familiar scent of Steph’s shampoo (a particular floral smell she hadn’t identified) gave away just who began to push her forward, away from the classroom. She knew why Max was pissed, but the honest fact that a lot of Chloe’s rage was entirely personal. That was probably why Chloe reacted to being hustled away the way she did. Steph, caught off guard by the unexpected feeling of a tongue running across the palm of her hand, called out in surprise and jerked it away from Chloe’s lips. Chloe would have laughed about it any other time, but she had a goal in mind with this little bit of ‘acting out’. She turned to look over her shoulder as Steph wiped her hand off on it. The brunette did not stop hustling her toward the front doors of the school but that did not stop Chloe from matching David’s glaring, seething eyes. “Take a picture, it’ll last longer. You know all about cameras, don’t you David?” The man’s jaw clenched visibly and painfully shut.

Laughing, Chloe took one long stride forward to get out of Steph’s reach and was the first of them out of the doors to the school. She hoped Hayden was going to be alright but the whole incident—especially David’s behavior toward Max—had her livid. Once the entire party joined their wayward DM outside on the lawn in front of the school, she turned back to them. Rachel was releasing a fuming Max. The brunette looked cute with her pixie-cut all disheveled and Chloe beckoned her closer, reaching out to the photographer with a quick hug before saying her apologies, even if they were not aimed toward the right person.

“Rachel, Max, I have a confession to make,” Chloe started, sounding dramatic. “I licked Steph. Can you ever forgive me?”

“You’re a total dick sometimes,” Rachel reminded her, exasperated as she pulled her jacket on, quite suddenly. Chloe only turned a large grin on the group as a whole, relieved to hear first Max
and then Brooke break into some laughter. At least Steph was smiling as if all was forgiven. She didn’t seem to have minded Chloe’s off-color joke, at least. Rachel seemed to have more to say. Max stepped aside as the thespian drew nearer to Chloe, her face hard to read. “You don’t get to go up against David all by yourself, Chloe.” Chloe swallowed at the look which formed in the thespian’s eyes, silently asking: ‘you know why, right?’ Perhaps the mix of seething in anger and overcompensating with humor had not been the best way to handle the situation. All Chloe could do was nod to show that she heard Rachel.

“So, who wants to roll dice instead of think about whatever just fucking happened?” As it turned out, the answer was that all of them desired a tonal shift to their Friday afternoon. Chloe wouldn’t have blamed the others for getting exasperated with her, but as it turned out there was a surprising amount of forgiveness at work among their little circle, even from Brooke who was probably used to Chloe being a bit of a drama queen already. They split up, Rachel and Brooke in one car, Steph in another and Chloe and Max in the Frankentruck. While this was not actually the most ideal distribution for people, it at least got everyone where they were going and, once the other two cars had driven off, gave Chloe and Max a second to talk honestly about what had just occurred.

That talk began with a loud groan. Chloe took it to be a groan of frustration and reached out as if to pat Max on the shoulder. As she did, it became immediately obvious that frustration was the least of what Max was feeling. Chloe unbuckled her seatbelt as Max doubled over in her seat, face in her hands. She was visibly shaking in her seat The groan had changed to something of a scream that was being blocked by the photographer’s hands, one of which still bore the remnants of the cut Chloe had accidentally left her with during their investigation of the Madsen house. Chloe wasn’t sure what to say so she let Max spend all of the air in her lungs, her hand on the back of Max’s neck, rubbing at it, trying to calm her to some degree. She’s not just frustrated, she’s freaking out. Of course she is. She said he tried to throw it at her. Nathan Prescott attacked Max. Again. This time he hit Hayden.

Chloe scooted as close as she could on the old, torn up truck seat and wrapped her arm around Max’s shoulders. Very quickly the concern came that maybe this was Max falling into one of her ‘don’t touch me’ moods. Hesitantly, she unwound her arm from Max, causing the girl to lift her head from her hands in confusion. A little red, perhaps at understanding Chloe’s dilemma, Max pushed closer to her and this time it was the photographer who held onto her. The brunette pressed her face against Chloe’s shoulder and in response she stayed relatively still if one discounted returning the embrace.

“He was aiming at you?”

“Probably,” she admitted. “I was at the table with Hayden. It got him and then instead of like, dealing with it, Nathan just jumped over the table, ran right past me and jumped on Hayden like some kind of fucking angry dog.” Shivering in her arms, Max gripped more tightly at her. As best as Chloe managed to understand from Max’s muffled story, Hayden had only taken one or two more good shots before subduing Nathan, breaking one of his fingers in the process. Max had eventually fled the room along with the rest of the class. Instead of leaving the room when David
arrived and pulled Hayden off of him, Nathan had grabbed a chair and demanded the police be called before he agreed to go anywhere. And of course those assholes agreed. Whatever the case might have been, Chloe was not inclined to let go of Max until the shaking had died down enough to be barely noticeable.

“Are you going to be okay to go through with tonight?” Chloe gently prodded her, having released her but not quite having opened any distance between them. She wanted to see Max’s responses close up and personally. “I can just call it off if not, no one’s going to blame you.” Max shook her head once.

“No, I’ll be fine, just maybe a little out of it.” This seemed to end their prior discussion completely. By this point, the others were a good five minutes closer to the diner than they were, and Chloe pulled out her phone to make good use of that lead of theirs.

Me

Just get Max and I the usual. We’ll meet you at Steph’s house. She’s not feeling up to the diner right now and neither am I.

The story had the benefit of most likely being true. Rachel knew them well enough to make sure that the diner coughed up enough fries and a couple of burgers for them. Backing out of the conversation with Rachel, she landed on Mikey’s, instead. On the other side of the cab, Max was buckling in and trying to calm down. This isn’t the time to confront her, Chloe. Despite herself, as Chloe buckled up herself and started the car she let herself review the conversation from Monday night.

Mikey

Dude, you need to tell me wtf is going on.

Me

What do you mean?

Mikey

I decoded it. The key was Portland.

Me
‘Cool, what’s on it?’

Mikey

Do you have anything you want to tell me? Did Max actually write this

Me

No games if it says Max is in trouble you need to tell me now.

Mikey

It says a whole lot of stuff that doesn’t make any sense.

Me

Like what?

Mikey

Like that someone’s following her and she saw you talking to them in Portland, like you’re some sort of dream walker and Rachel’s the Avatar or some shit?

Either you’re keeping something from me and Steph or Max is delusional but either way she sounds like she needs help bad

Chloe?

Chloe

Chloe had not known how to answer. Later that evening she had found an email waiting in her inbox containing the decoded message, only it wasn’t a message. It was more like a stream of consciousness straight out of Max’s head. Now, as she drove toward Steph’s house, Chloe wanted for the hundredth time to confront her about it. All that decoding that file had done was tell Chloe that Max was keeping something from her and Rachel, something big. Put into context, one line made it sound like Max was hiding some weird ass ability of her own.
Chloe did her best to bury those thoughts during the drive to Steph’s but they were never far from the surface. The truth was that as much as this was a night for world building and character creation, Chloe still needed to get her head into the game a little bit. If not into the game, then at least on vaguely normal things. Or maybe not so normal things, like a certain flash drive. There’s an idea, Chloe told herself.

“Where’s the flash drive tonight?” Chloe asked Max, casually.

“Rachel’s got it on her,” Max responded, voice slowly normalizing. “Why?”

“I just want to be sure we have a safe copy of everything we’ve already got, including the stuff from David.”

“Copy on my laptop and a copy on the flashdrive,” Max promised.

“What if we hid that flashdrive away and found a cheap one to replace it? That way if something bad happens we at least have this much?” She glanced sideways at the girl, who looked almost a little relieved at the idea. Maybe she’s been worrying about the drive? Let’s try this.

“Something like a secret dossier?” Max asked her.

“Where did you pick up a word like dossier?”

“I read crime novels,” was all the answer Max gave.

The mood among the party was entirely different by the time they were halfway through a pile of hamburgers and fries. About an hour before the flashdrive had changed hands from Rachel to Steph and been lost somewhere in Steph’s home with a promise to silence in exchange for eventually being filled in on what was on it. Now, there were only two things on anyone’s mind: food and tabletop. Chloe preferred it that way. It made it easier to take her mind off of the fact that her stepfather had been recording what went on in her bedroom for God knew how long.

Chloe leaned back in her seat, only it was not normally her own. She was used to sitting along one side of the table instead of at the end. Steph usually sat at an end of the table, being the Dungeon Master typically. From here, she could imagine watching the lot of them handling dice and player sheets, not hamburgers and fries. Speaking of, the small sack of fries in front of her was finally
getting cold. This was a bit of a mixed bag, pun not intended. Different flavors were brought out by
cold fries than by warm ones. The mark of a good french fry in Chloe’s opinion was whether it had
any taste to speak of after it cooled. That was why, loathe as she might be to admit it, the diner had
the best fries in town.

“Are you guys going to be ready to character create any time soon?” Chloe queried. Max was too
busy with her drink to respond, Brooke and Steph were generally indicating positively. The only
one who was being intentionally difficult was Rachel. It wasn’t that she was saying, “no,” it was
mostly that for several seconds she refused to match Chloe’s gaze. When she finally did, though, it
was not to provide any kind of clear answer.

“Maaaaybe,” the thespian teased through a mouth full of fries. Chloe rolled her eyes with
exaggerated slowness so that Rachel could not miss it. Difficult woman, Chloe thought. Try as she
might, no immediate response came to mind. Oh god, I’m slipping. Chloe grumbled briefly and
then shoved a fry between her own lips.

“You know you three are fucking nauseatingly adorable sometimes, right?” Chloe’s gazed shifted
from Rachel, who was now pulling a face at her, to Brooke.

“Thanks,” Max responded before Chloe could, slamming down a tall to-go cup which sounded to
Chloe to be mostly ice, now. “But most of the nausea comes from those two.”

“Bullshit,” Brooke shot back, dismissively. Still, Chloe thought that the girl was finally getting
comfortable around the three of them. That was promising. It hadn’t taken Steph much time at all
but the rest of the school was different. It took a while for most people to get used to it and
sometimes they were still asked any number of questions about it. Most of the time people didn’t
cross any lines, but there was still the occasional shot thrown their way. Usually this came in the
form of a very suggestive question that Rachel would handle by shooting back at the asker or Max
would respond to by turning red and trying to ‘blankly’ stare the asker down until they backed off.
Chloe’s own answer to those questions varied depending on who was asking but the gist of it was
that she wasn’t going to kiss and tell.

Then there were people like Victoria Chase. Despite having had plenty of experience with people
whom she termed being ‘not so bad’ turning out to be otherwise, Max usually tried to convince her
girlfriend’s that Victoria’s bitchiness was the result of deep insecurity. Rachel seemed to buy it, but
every time Chloe caught wind of some comment from the girl about ‘Rachel Amber’s harem’ she
wanted to hold the pretentious Dolce and Garbana fangirl down and force her to listen to an hour
and a half of Lou Reed’s Metal Machine Music. Victoria had done the most to make them out to be
deviants, attention whores or worse, ‘faking it’ depending on what kind of mood she was in on any
given the day. Her apparent ascension into the ranks of the Vortex Club had done little to help their
popularity at the end of the last year.
Given no clear ‘yes’ or ‘no’ from Rachel, Chloe decided to just relax and wait until people had disposed of the majority of their food. That being the case, she called them to order by lightly whacking the edge of her Dungeon Master’s Guide against the table. It seemed to work relatively well as one by one from various bags or folders the party began to pull character sheets, pens and dice from their bags. While she was going to be taking up a different role for the game it was kind of nostalgic. A summer without tabletop used to be a fairly normal thing for Chloe. Now, it seemed like the summer had been missing an aspect of life that made it worth living. *Then again,* she thought, glancing down the table at Max toying with a D6. *It was.*

“Right, so we’ll follow a pretty standard plan for character creation. Might as well get the stat rolls out of the way, then go pick race and class,” Chloe leaned back in her seat, head turning slowly to Steph. She looked contemplative for a second and then turned to her own bag, digging a few spare six sided die from them. It took a few seconds for everyone to gather their dice together, but eventually they got enough for two people to roll at once. For Chloe’s part, she removed her beanie tossed it over her notes. They all had a pretty solid plan about what kind of character they wanted to play already, choosing to roll the dice first was just about making sure they had time to think about how to distribute the values they got.

“You’re enjoying this,” Rachel muttered at one point as she frowned at the dice in front of her and noticed Chloe watching sharply. “Way too much.” *Someone just rolled* low. Across the table from her, Steph opened her mouth ostensibly to comment but immediately shut it, grinning wickedly. Whether it was something a little mean or a little racy, Steph bit back whatever was on the tip of her tongue. At about that point Max muttered her appreciation of one of her rolls.

This was a quicker process than she expected. Everyone there was fairly quick on their feet with basic mental math and all four character sheets had their stat distributions recorded within a few short minutes. For the most part, people seemed to be fairly happy with their rolls, though Chloe watched Max mark down her lowest stat roll into the charisma slot with a pained wince. *Note to self, if the party gets split, that could come back to bite them.* Patiently, Chloe waited for the familiar and oddly comforting sound of dice hitting tabletops to stop and then cracked her knuckles. It sounded impressive in the silence left by the absence of dice rolls.

“Alright,” she called, rubbing her hands together as Rachel hurried to double check what looked from where Chloe said like racial benefits for humans. “Let’s start with Steph and go clockwise, tell us about your race, class and stats. Also, keep in mind I’ll want a copy by next week.” The brunette waited for her to finish speaking patiently and then, with a grin that betrayed how happy she was to get to play versus DM, glanced down at her character sheet.

“I’m playing Mara, a halfling paladin.” Across the table Brooke raised a hand for a high five. It took a bit of effort as Steph’s dinner table was actually rather wide, but they eventually got what they wanted. “But here’s the thing: she’s going to be a Paladin of a local war deity.”
“So she’ll go Oath of Vengeance?” Chloe asked, a finger rising to tap at her upper lip in a gesture of thoughtfulness.

“Absolutely. I’ve dropped my best roll of 15 into her constitution, next into dexterity and so on and so forth.” Chloe nodded. If she recalled, halflings got the extra point in dexterity per stat increase, so that made sense. She was going for a more dexterous paladin. It was going to be cool to see how she played out a halfling as a paladin of vengeance though. *I think I like the idea of Steph being the badass of the group.* “Oh, and I think she’ll be going Lawful Good, but she is basing that more on the ideals instilled in her by the Dwarven people whose deity she devoted herself to. By her own ideals, her people are typically too passive and allow a lot of evil to go on in the world in favor of defending the ‘old ways’. ” Chloe grinned and grabbed a pen from beside her to start taking down ideas. *Test the paladin’s alignment among her people, ties to her people. The halflings in this world are considered passive and conservative.*

“Excellent, Max?”

“I’ll be going for a chaotic good Tiefling fighter. All I really know about him right now is that his name is Andil and he is definitely wanted in the city he grew up in for burning down a corrupt lawkeeper’s home.” Chloe immediately took notes. *Wanted in home town for arson. Probably seen as devil-born or devil touched.*

“So, did the lawkeeper die?” Chloe queried, looking up. That was kind of important in case they ever ended up in a region Andil was from.

“Oh no, he wouldn’t kill the guy unless she caught him hurting someone, he just wanted to send a message that maybe taking a bribe from the local Thieves’ Guild after they killed his brother was probably a bad idea.” That left Chloe a few more ideas to work with. If they went through with working together to build a world, Max was going to have to eventually come up with a city name and an idea of the region of the map she-or more, her character- was from. “And I’ve put his dump stat into Charisma, best into Strength and Con. Unfortunately his Int score is kind of in the trash, too.” *Big dumb Tiefling, got it.* At Chloe’s prompting, Brooke took over.

“Halfling bard with his high stat being charisma, low stat is constitution,” Brooke declared right off the bat. “I do not know her name yet, but I think Steph and I agreed they’ll be sisters. I think what happened was that some of her sister’s bad habits as a kid rubbed off on her and she got bored living in their hometown and left. It wasn’t particularly well received by their parents and I think they both got disowned.” Across the table, Steph nodded as if in agreement with the idea. “The good news was she picked up a lot from the Dwarves they lived with, including love for panpipes. I think she’s with her sister hoping that together they’ll find an adventure that will give her some great story to tell and it will immortalize her in the dwarven canon.”
“I’ll work with a Fire Genasi rogue who introduces himself as Isp.” Rachel said after Chloe had finished her notes and gestured to her. *Oh sweet, I think I can get my hands on the info for Genasi. If not, I know Steph has the book.* “I know he’s going to be taking the thief archetype if he lives ’til level three and he’s definitely going to be dex focused but his dark vision should be useful as hell.” *Especially for the dungeon later,* Chloe mused to herself. “My dump stat will be in Charisma as well, so our bard is basically going to be the only hope we have of not being socially inept everywhere.”

“Hey,” Steph cried indignantly. “Mara’s not horrible with Cha.” Chloe leaned back and let them talk while she looked over the five or six notes she had taken through character introduction. There was still plenty to do for character creation but they had the easy stuff out of the way. It had the benefit of being the kind of things which let her know where she needed to start altering her plans to tailor them to the characters before her. The punk, if she admitted to herself, impressed that she was not anxious about the game or distracted by thoughts of other issues. Instead, Chloe thought, she had crossed the line from being *ready* to being eager for the night to progress.
God damn, I want a beer, she wasn’t always sure of much when it came to the blonde woman in front of her, but Rachel was fairly certain that if she voiced that thought to her biological mother, her legal mother would hear about it. There was no proof that they talked, precisely, but on occasion they would talk about things relating to her in very similar ways. It led to Rachel being sure enough about their communication to pick and choose her words carefully. So, she kept to herself her desire for a night of cheap beer and cuddling. She was, at least, promised the second and if she wasn’t mistaken there was something harder than beer hidden somewhere in Max’s dorm room.

Honestly, though, she was enjoying the feeling of comfort at seeing Sera again. It had been the better part of three weeks since Sera had had a night off that really coincided with Rachel being able to escape Arcadia Bay for a couple of hours. The woman’s slightly brighter blonde hair was pulled back most unusually as she gestured for Rachel to sit down on the old couch against one wall of her apartment. Rachel did as she was asked but took time to sweep her eyes once around the sitting room. It hadn’t changed any since the last time she was there. The carpet was still grey and ragged, the furniture more fifth hand than second hand and Sera still hadn’t been able to afford a television or even a laptop, though there was a radio at least two decades old sitting on a folding television tray to one side of the room. Sera often said she preferred music to the tube anyway.

It took the woman a moment to return when she disappeared to the small refrigerator in the attached kitchen, but when she did it was with a couple of cans of coke and what she called her ‘guilty pleasure.’ Rachel didn’t say anything out loud, but if Sera’s guilty pleasure was a bowl of relatively fresh grapes, part of her worried about whether the woman was eating well enough. All in all, the life Sera was living was not one Rachel was satisfied with. If she had had her way, the woman would have a much better time of things but that wasn’t the way the world worked and, Sera had told her several times that she was not supposed to be worrying about Sera. If anything, and only if Rachel gave her permission, it was probably supposed to be the other way around.
Rachel had given that permission, though she could still remember keenly how embarrassing it felt to do so.

“So, Rachel,” Sera settled back on the other end of the couch, a slow, luxurious sigh escaping her as she freed her hair. “What the hell have you been up to?” Rachel offered a grin in response to the honest question, the honest interest. These days, Rachel was able to see herself in Sera’s face more often. Though, it wasn’t helped along by how tired she looked. “I haven’t heard from you in a bit.” That was true if one discounted one or two text messages every other day. Rachel wasn’t sure if that was too frequent or too infrequent of communication but she had never particularly been handed a pamphlet that had guidelines for reconnecting with your birth mother. If there were rules about this kind of thing, Rachel was in the dark.

“Well,” Rachel trailed off. The truth was she knew exactly what she wanted to talk to Sera about and it both rhymed with and was David Madsen. She just wasn’t sure how to lead into the conversation. Going down that rabbit hole could have all kinds of consequences and not the least of these was the potential that Sera, stuck in a small apartment on the bad side (as if there was a good side) of Edgeton, Oregon could decide to get involved. Putting Sera in David’s path was bad news. If Rachel was pissed at him already she couldn’t imagine how bad it would get if the man turned on one of her mothers to top it all off. Telling him to go to hell would become at best a mere formality or at worse a self-fulfilling prophecy. “Max came back into town last week. We’ve been pretty worried about her, of course, so it was good to see her.”

“How’s she doing and is there a chance you’ll convince her to finally come and see me? I do sort of owe her at least a ‘thank you’.”

“She wouldn’t take it from you,” Rachel promised. “I’m pretty sure she’s just happy everyone got out of that alright. But,” back on the Max subject… “she’s not doing so hot. As best as we can tell she doesn’t eat too well. I’ve been being a total bitch about it, you know, putting her favorite foods in front of her whenever the school serves them, but there’s only so much you can do.” Not that I haven’t considered holding her down once or twice so Chloe can force feed her a damn meal. Sera nodded, her face darkening slightly. Rachel watched a thought cross the woman’s face and then get buried. As she did, though, Rachel began to get the idea that maybe Sera had something specific she wanted to talk about. And so do I, so maybe make this quick, Rachel? “Chloe’s um… well, she’s been better.” Rachel looked down at her hands quietly, trying to give Sera the opportunity to chime in.

“What about you?” the woman queried, finally. “Are you, you know, feeling well?” The stress on the last word made it clear she was speaking more on the level of mental and emotional health than say, a flu. Perhaps fittingly, Rachel had always found herself to do fairly well with most physical illnesses.

“The therapy’s helping,” Rachel admitted as she opened her momentarily forgotten can of coke.
Before she took a sip she reached out toward the bowl of grapes and took one. *Okay, so they’re good, so what?* “I mean, I’m getting better at recognizing what I’m feeling and sometimes why?”

“Which kind of brings me to asking why you look so upset?” To buy herself some time, Rachel popped the grape into her mouth. Her biological mother, leaned back against the couch behind her, arms only uncrossing long enough to pull from the can in her hand. It was while she was trying to figure out precisely how to answer that Rachel glanced around the room and noticed the lack of any ashtrays. *Holy shit, did she kick the habit?* There were plenty of people who weren’t living in stressful circumstances who seemed to have trouble putting cigarettes away. It was impressive. “One grape can really only buy you so much time, you know?” the woman asked in her low, drawn out and slightly scratchy tone, the kind that seemed to be her ‘down to brass tacks’ voice.

“I *am* upset about something but that’s kind of an understatement,” Rachel took a long sip from her can and sat it down between her knees, her left hand resting atop it for balance. “I’m trying to decide what to do about a problem and it doesn’t seem like there’s a really good option.” It was starting to feel warm enough—and Rachel was fairly confident that that was not her fault—that she placed the can of coke on the table in front of her and removed her favored jacket, the one stitched with a white raven on the back. It was aging well, she thought, laughing at the idea that she had had it less than a year. “In fact, all I can find is bad options.”

“What’s got you conflicted?” Rachel wasn’t sure how to explain it any better than she already had without giving anything away, so she responded with a question instead. Her bio-mom’s heavily lidded grey eyes sharpened as if recognizing the gambit for what it was, but the woman stayed quiet until she finished.

“How do you handle people who are up to no good? I mean, the ones who are at best assholes and at worst, dangerous.”

“Is that your way of saying you’re in danger?” Rachel shook her head and then immediately regretted it. The decision to be honest came almost as soon as she finished lying.

“Actually, maybe?” Rachel sighed and then spoke more openly. “There are a few people in Arcadia Bay that are at least assholes and a couple of them might be dangerous. And, yeah, I am at risk, but right now the worst that is happening is that one of them is following me around town sometimes. He’s also following Max, and Chloe and maybe even a friend of ours.” Despite looking exhausted, Sera dropped her air of relaxation and leaned forward, elbows digging into her knees. She clearly wanted more information. “I’m going to need a promise before I say anything else.” The request sounded somewhat on the desperate side and that was not how Rachel wanted to present herself to the woman.

“Which is?”
“Everything I’m saying is between us,” Rachel clarified. There was a moment of hesitation, of eyes meeting eyes, wills being examined, determination tested and after several seconds in which Rachel did not blink, it was Sera’s turn to sigh, loudly.

“Fine, as long as you don’t tell me that someone is about to be injured.” This caveat was fair enough and Rachel took another long drink to allow herself more time to process. She wasn’t entirely sure if she was anxious about telling Sera what was going on, or if thinking about all of this made her anxious. She knew without a doubt that thinking about it made her angry and she wasn’t interested in losing her temper and exposing her abilities to her biological mother, not when, a year and change later she still knew nothing about them. Also, I would hate to burn down the fucking building.

“Chloe’s stepfather, David.”

“Blowhard military guy?”

“That’s him. He doesn’t like her very much. He doesn’t like me very much.”

“Shocker, you’re two punkass kids who think authority in general is fallible. People like him hate that, because you’re fucking right.” The one thing that Sera did which endeared Rachel to her was to always tell it like it was, even if she did it in the kindest way possible. Besides, if Chloe had heard the woman use the term ‘punkass’ to describe them, she would have worn that word like a badge of honor for the next week. And she would have been insufferable doing it. The thought was almost enough to make Rachel smile. Almost.

“He doesn’t like her, so he definitely doesn’t like me or Max. Thing is, he’s the security guard at Blackwell and he’s definitely been following Max and I around on campus. We were digging around at Chloe’s place the other day– uh, before she moved out a few days ago?” Sera did not visibly react though, Rachel had no reason to assume she was doing anything but paying close attention. “And it- he had like, files on all of us and our friend, Steph. Makes us sound like we’re the biggest drug runners in Arcadia Bay history, because he saw Max buying pot once… kind of.” This did earn an eyebrow raise from Sera, but she did not interrupt Rachel.

“He saw her near a drug dealer, as far as we can tell. But he’s spun this really fucked up narrative about us and now that I know he’s following us around, it’s kind of scary.” It was only with some restraint that she did not tell her biological mother about the cameras all over the Madsen household. Perhaps it was the growing sense of anxiety in Sera’s eyes as she spoke, but Rachel did not think their confidentiality agreement would cover the existence of spycams in the bedroom of seventeen year old girls. And it shouldn’t, Rachel thought. But this is why someone has to handle
him. Despite the fact that the woman was already frowning, Rachel added, candidly. “Top it off, we found some e-mails that say he’s being paid to protect someone who is really really shady and kinda has a reason not to like me or my girls.”

“Yikes,” Sera started.

“Yikes,” Rachel agreed. “The worst part is, honestly, David’s capable of violence and so is the person he’s protecting. I don’t think David would help the guy if he knew what he was all about, but he’d never believe it if we told him. David… David distrusts women.”

“Starting to think women have a reason to distrust him.”

“Chloe thinks so,” Rachel added.

“You know, I burned my old life down a long time ago.” There was no accompanying massive tonal shift but Rachel wasn’t entirely sure where Sera was going with this. She grew still and quiet, making only the noise needed to sip from the can in her hand as the woman spoke. “But there’s a motto I’ve lived by my whole life and it’s the only thing I’ve kept from before. Defend you and yours in the moment but anything past that is about revenge and that’s a dangerous road to ride down. It’s okay to go to someone for help, Rachel.” There were many reasons that answer didn’t sit well with her. First and foremost, with the confirmation that David worked for the Prescotts she knew he had enough ‘help’ of his own that she wasn’t sure there was anyone left to turn to. Perhaps the most damning part of this, though, was that what Sera was saying was something akin to, ‘do nothing.’ She was being told to do nothing and that didn’t feel right at all.

Unbidden she recalled the sight of Max tied to Nathan’s computer chair, drugged half out of her mind. Following behind that thought was the image of David sneering down at Max and Chloe outside of the photography classroom, his derisive, cruel expression of superiority a beacon, like a douchebag lighthouse for all the douchebag ship captains to ever sail the seven douchebags. *Fuck that,* Rachel decided right then and there, even as she gave contemplative ‘hmm’. *I’m not going to be some passive little bitch and sit back and let the next person come along and hurt Chloe and Max.* Sera, Rachel decided almost immediately, was wrong.

“Could we talk about something else for a few? I need to think.” She hoped the lie wasn’t obvious. She hoped that the first time she went to her biological mom for advice the woman wouldn’t realize that circumstances had forced her to dismiss that advice out of hand. If Sera did know what was going on within the confines of Rachel’s head, she didn’t let it show, only nodding in agreement. The woman was still dressed in her uniform from the convenience store she was working in, so Rachel’s immediate inclination was to ask about work. Instead, more generally she asked, “What have you been up to since last time?”
They passed the next few minutes in discussion. Sera revealed that while work was tiring and unfulfilling it was good enough to keep most bills paid. More than that, she had applied and been accepted to the University of Portland to pursue a business degree. Realistically, she told Rachel, she is going to have trouble moving up in the world without it. She has nothing else and doesn’t have the energy or the time left in life to take a lot of risks. This is yet another time when Rachel disliked what Sera was saying, but kept it to herself. The idea that the woman in front of her who had already taken such great risks in her life was unable to take any more seemed absurd. It wasn’t her place to interfere, though. *Still, the riskier the road, the greater the profit.* Rachel blinked once as the thought rose to the back of her mind. *Oh holy shit, you just quoted the Rules of Acquisition.* I think Chloe’s already lost her battle for your sci-fi soul.

Despite disagreeing with a couple of things, Rachel found the discussion with Sera much easier than having one with her own mother. She wasn’t sure entirely how she felt about that, but by the time she got out of the woman’s apartment her attention had already been pulled away from the question. Though she had not particularly planned on this, Rachel made a quick stop at the town’s Big Box Mart before she started back toward Arcadia Bay. Her purchases were enough that, without a self-checkout lane she might have raised an eyebrow: a bandanna, black gloves, black ski mask, plain black sweater. The receipt she shoved into one of the bags could have screamed ‘cat burglar’ to anyone who looked. Rachel had no plans of wearing the outfit to steal anything, though the end goal of obscuring her features was much the same.

From the moment she had decided to stop at the store all the way up until she crossed into Arcadia Bay’s city limits and pulled over on an abandoned stretch of road, everything Rachel did felt cold and distant. Her very thoughts could have been messages sent to her from miles away. She could not shake the grim understanding that there was no one truly willing to act to protect any of them from people like David and Nathan. Chloe and Max were going through too much on their own for her to ask them to get involved, either.

This was on her.

Sitting on the side of the road, Rachel sent a text message to confirm her ‘appointment’ with her final stop of the day before she settled back in at school. It took Frank Bowers something in the way of five minutes to respond with an address where she could meet him. The drive took her slightly closer to town proper and the roads began to get more and more crowded as she went on. This necessitated at least a little more focus on the road and pulled her farther and farther away from the cold, distant voice in her head telling her that her bio-mom was wrong, that steps needed to be taken to ensure that people knew who they shouldn’t fuck with. Judging by the incident in the photography classroom, Nathan was apparently too stupid to remember his lesson from the year before, but maybe David Madsen wouldn’t be.

Maybe. She was going to have to take care with him.
Either way, her attention was pulled to the road throughout the trip. By the time she arrived at the very park where she first sat eyes on Sera Gearhardt, the very park that was the site of the start of last year’s forest fire, it was starting to look closer and closer to sundown. The truth was that replacing her nearly dwindled stash was something of a smokescreen. Ooh, good pun, Rachel thought as she turned the car off, eyes locking on the RV across the small lot. I’m keeping that one. She was coming to see Frank to make sure that he was free and clear. The idea that David had turned his watchful gaze on the man threw Rachel off.

Like it or not, she owed Frank big time when it came to connecting her to her bio-mom. Not to mention that whatever Max said about her knocking Merrick out, it was hard for Rachel not to think that Frank was the reason no one had seen him since that day. In the end she wasn’t sure how he’d respond to the idea that he was falling under more scrutiny than usual. She just knew that she should at least come and see and, maybe, tell him. Then again, he’s gotten a lot shittier since then.

The door to the RV opened and very briefly as Rachel got out of her car she saw the man framed in it before he climbed back up the steps. That was as clear of a ‘come on in’ as she was likely to get from him. Jacket fixed firmly into place she took the man’s show of hospitality before he found the need to ask her a second time. It took a moment to pull herself back up into the RV but when she passed the top step and the door shut behind her, she marvelled at how comfortable she had gotten to feel in there. It wasn’t that she was sure Frank wasn’t dangerous, it was more that she had made a habit for a while of visiting him whenever her or Chloe’s stash ran out. It had been some time, though, since her last visit.

For the first few seconds, Pompidou raised hell from behind the door of what she knew to be Frank’s bedroom. Without speaking a word of greeting to her, Frank took a step back into his ‘kitchen’ and snapped his fingers once. It was a piercing sound, certainly loud enough to be heard by the dog in the back, who gave one disappointed half-whine and then grew quiet. Personally Rachel thought that the dog’s viciousness was something of an act. Then again, whether Frank had adopted a ‘tough guy’ persona for real or not, dogs were typically pretty protective of their owner and able to read the owner’s feelings toward a person. Maybe Pompidou was nothing to be fucked with, but she had not seen him in some time. The last time he had still somewhat resembled the small, nearly rotund puppy of his youth, even if barely.

“You can come out when she’s gone,” Frank assured the dog through the closed door and then turned back to her. “What?” he asked, apparently reading something in her gaze that Rachel had no conscious knowledge of sending out. The man tossed aside a ‘Tapout’ cap, revealing the worst case of hat hair Rachel had seen in some time. She wanted to get a read on if he looked bothered, tired or harried, anything to suggest that he was having difficulty but nothing jumped out. If Frank was seeing evidence of David’s watchful eye, he wasn’t letting on about it. If he thinks we’re working for Frank, he’s watching him, Rachel thought, sure of herself.

“Nothing,” she said.
“Well, do you want the usual or not?”

“Yeah,” Rachel replied. “Fifty, right?”

“Fifty,” he agreed, before disappearing from the kitchen toward a rack of shelves a little farther back in the RV. Chloe might have lost the war on what type of sci-fi Rachel liked, but she had won a different battle. Rachel reached into her back pocket and pulled loose a trifold leather wallet. As far as she was concerned anyone who didn’t carry one of these was nuts. It beat the hell out of lugging a heavy purse around. Then again, there’s a reason people carry them, I guess. I just haven’t found it yet. She dug a few bills from the wallet and slid it back into place as she broached the subject she had been trying to since stepping in.

“Shit been going well?” Rachel asked.

“Fuckin’ peachy, Amber,” the man shot back, one hand rising to itch the side of his face, the other absently digging through the shelf. She wasn’t sure precisely what he was looking for, but she decided to approach things from a different angle.

“So, doesn’t the RV draw some attention at this point?” Being blunt either worked fairly well with Frank or it completely bombed. She wasn’t entirely sure why that was. Sometimes she thought he was bit slow on the uptake but at other points he acted sharp as a tack. Tonight, it seemed, it was going to bomb.

“No more than anything else,” he replied, turning his brown eyes on her all of the sudden, instead of finding whatever he was looking for. The man let both arms fall to his sides and turned to face her. Rachel responded by crossing her own arms across her chest. This was as close to a gesture of peace as she was going to offer the man. She wasn’t foolish enough to outright trust him and even if she were he seemed to like someone expressing confidence in their ability to protect themselves. “Not like I go parking in front of the police station with it. Why?” Suspicion was almost like an afterthought in his voice, but it was still there alongside narrowing eyes. His right hand was gripping at something, suggesting he might have found ‘the usual’ all prepped and ready for her.

“No reason,” she replied as off the cuff as possible. The truth was she was fighting a little battle inside on whether or not she ought to warn Frank then and there. Frank represented this ambiguous figure around Arcadia Bay. Reasonably, she should feel grateful to him for helping Chloe and Max rescue Sera from Merrick. That’s almost everyone she cares about owed to him all in one fell swoop. That being said, her ambivalence came from his attitude, the wall he kept around him and the idea that he might have killed someone. It had little to do with the dealing of drugs: people either chose to do them or not. Or they’re slipped into their drink, Rachel thought, swallowing. She
hoped he did not sell to Nathan anymore. Unsurprisingly that last detail was one she got stuck on, especially given how it affected Max. More than that, Rachel had to remind herself that willingly or not he had made Max an accessory to murder and the brunette was never going to forget that.

Unable to reach a decision either way, Rachel paid him once his suspicion calmed enough to take it and then made her excuse to leave. Frank must not have been feeling particularly chatty as he let her go without so much as a ‘goodbye.’ Neither her frustrations in her attempt to figure the man out, nor what she told herself was the imagined sound of a camera shutter as she stepped out of the RV did much to pick up her mood. All told, Rachel left the lookout hoping for an evening curled up with Max in front of Netflix.

Half an hour later, long after she was parked on the grounds of Blackwell Academy, the text she received from Frank was enough to make her cement her belief that the only good thing she had done with her day was to purchase the outfit she currently had laying on her bed, still in bags. Well, that and come back to Blackwell Academy and drag Max away from her long-running study session for cuddling and pretending to watch Star Trek.

Frank

Amber do you wanna tell me why twenty fucking minutes after you leave the cops show up to ask me about selling drugs to a high school girl?

Me

I wouldn’t have said anything, it wasn’t me.

Frank

Someone was probably following your ass. If you want so much as another joint in this town, you won’t bring shit like that down on me again.

Shifting from her spot on Max’s bed, she put the phone back into her pocket and pulled closer to the girl. All pretense of watching a show was long gone by that point and they were simply enjoying being close to one another. Frustrated, she buried her face against the back of Max’s shoulder and rested one hand atop her stomach. Though Max reached up to place her hand atop Rachel’s it was pretty clear that the brunette was only barely awake, certainly too out of it to ask Rachel who she was texting. Rachel was fine with that. There was a story that needed telling but her irritation also could do with some soothing. The scent of Max’s shampoo and conditioner, the warmth of a quilt slung over both of them and the occasional grasp of the photographer’s hand to one of hers was wonderful for that.
Rachel wasn’t stupid, she was able to piece together what must have happened pretty well: David had likely followed her to Edgeton and then back to Arcadia Bay. She could imagine the man practically drooling when she pulled up in the same lot with Frank. There was no other real explanation for the police being called on Frank so soon after she left. It meant that warning Frank about David keeping an eye on him had become both more important and scarier. *You know, this would be easier if you knew if he was friend or foe.*

“Rachel?”

“Yeah, sweetie?”

“It’s starting to get warm in here.” Max turned and slipped the quilt down the bed until it rested beneath at its foot. The brunette was a little red in the face. *I didn’t think I was getting that upset,* Rachel told herself.

“I think this one’s just you,” Rachel shot back, trying to anchor herself in the moment. Max looked pensive for a moment. Rachel’s eyes wandered the girl’s rosy (if too-gaunt) cheeks and traced the way the red trailed down her face, down her throat. No, this one was definitely on Max.

“You know people have body heat normally, right?” Max replied, laughing as she rolled over to look her more directly in the eyes. Rachel *hadn’t* really been thinking about normal body heat, only her tendency to heat up a room when her mind wandered or other distractions elicited other responses. Max could see this and looked poised to tease her about it.

“I’m not warm,” Rachel responded, feeling a bit stubborn on the issue.

“In that case,” Max started, moving herself closer and closer to Rachel. For her part, Rachel sat aside her worries for the moment, but also denied Max the end of that thought as their lips met. *Maybe I’m the only one who wants to handle Sergeant Shithead, but sometimes, baby, it’s good to be me.*
Chapter Twenty-Eight: Ecstatic Revelations

September 12th, 2011 4:30 PM

For the most part, it had been something of a calm day. Their party was at three: herself, Max and Kate. Rachel, it seemed, had a headache and was going to take a nap. Max hadn’t acted particularly worried but Chloe found the sudden illness at least concerning enough to offer to bring Rachel a meal, something which was soundly rejected. That was how she found herself on the far edge of Max’s bed, backed up against the wall and half-reading *Slaughterhouse Five* for English class in the middle of the day when she would much rather be doing anything but school work. *I can’t say that I’ve ever actually been alone with Max and Kate at the same time.* Chloe’s eyes trailed up over the top of her book.

They weren’t reading in silence but were discussing the requirements of some assignment for the photography course they were in in quiet voices. Something about it seemed to annoy Max, judging by the way she kept frowning at the page. Whatever the annoyance was, Kate seemed entirely nonplussed. Chloe returned to her reading though she marked Max’s frustration down as something to keep an eye on. Chloe was, given everything going on in her own life, trying to take a vacation from worrying too deeply about anything that wasn’t homework, the immediate health of her girls or related to tabletop. Unfortunately, one of those topics was rife with all kinds of pitfalls.

“I still can’t believe Mrs. Drewer’s going to retire,” Kate said, as the conversation died down. This drew Chloe’s head up. She hadn’t heard anything about that. Considering the woman was by far Max’s favorite teacher, it might explain Max being in not such a great mood. Speaking of Max, the brunette suddenly fixed wide eyes on the guidelines in front of her, not quite looking up. Chloe doubted Max had any idea that she was being watched. Chloe turned the book over and rested it in her lap. Max continued to read something that Chloe was fairly certain she had already read two or three times in the last minute.

“It’s really sad,” Max agreed, though Chloe thought she heard a tension underlying the girl’s voice. “She’s probably my favorite teacher, but she’s way too young to be retiring unless something else is going on.” The brunette turned the paper over so quickly it made barely any sound. “Probably with the school.”
“Well, I heard it was really unpopular when they decided to make it a two-year senior year program, maybe she just didn’t like the idea,” Kate offered. “Besides, she can probably get away with retiring with some benefits and find somewhere else to hire her. I don’t know how long she’s worked here but Blackwell must look good on a resume.” Kate was occasionally glancing up at Max as she spoke but she seemed oblivious to the slight uptick in Max’s breathing or the way the paper was starting to shake lightly in the photographer’s grasp. Chloe was not. She stifled a sigh as she scooted forward on the bed until her feet were on the floor. Max didn’t seem to notice the movement. Whatever music had been playing quietly from Max’s computer in the background moments ago was no longer running. Chloe noticed its absence.

“It was pretty shitty,” Chloe said quietly. Kate didn’t seem to care much for her language (or Rachel’s for that matter) but sometimes it still snuck out around the girl. For her part, Kate barely reacted to it, simply turning to look more directly at her to show she was listening. “I mean, Mikey was pretty broken up about it.” Actually, not sure I can really forget his face when he first heard. “Even after he ‘got used to the idea’ he was pretty down. I hope he’s better now.”

“That’s too bad,” Kate replied, placing the paper in her hands down and looking wistful. “Mikey was such a good guy. We were friends in elementary. He was quiet but he and I would always read together at recess. Everyone else acted like we were weird for reading. Not Mikey.”

“Did you know Steph too?” Kate shook her head.

“She was the same year as me, so I knew her but we never really talked. Always different teachers,” Kate mused. “But she’s turned out to be really smart and very pretty.” Chloe nodded. That much was true. In a lot of ways, Steph shored up a lot of Chloe’s weaknesses in science classes and she did the same for Steph. Though, they both remained less than stellar in biology. Chloe wasn’t entirely able to suppress the smile. “And I saw her sketchbook the other day. It’s awesome.”

“It really is,” Chloe chimed in. This was when she realized that Max still hadn’t spoken.

“I knew Courtney Wagner, but she ignores me now,” Kate added. “We went to church together, used to have sleepovers, the whole nine yards.” Chloe’s response was off the cuff and not thought out at all. Though she saw the effects of it almost immediately, it took her a few seconds to comprehend them.

“I mean it’s one thing if people change and grow apart, it’s another entirely to ignore someone. Shitty.” Again, Chloe thought nothing of this and only looked over at Max to try to ascertain why she was so quiet. What she saw when she did, though, was that the girl’s eyes had finally drifted from the paper to look at Chloe herself. They were wider than ever as if in some surprise and hurt. They certainly didn’t water, but as soon as Max realized she had been caught looking, she jerked
her head back to the document in her hands.

This, Kate noticed. As understanding washed over Chloe, she felt a mixture of exasperated and dumbfounded. Yes, she now understood why talking about the topic of friends ignoring one another might upset Max. The room grew uncomfortably silent and Chloe closed her book and set it aside. She did so as softly as she could but when the book closed it was still apparently loud enough to make Max jump. *Okay, okay, that’s enough of that.* She stood up slowly and took a couple of steps toward the girls backed up against the far wall of the room.

“Can I borrow Max for a few Kate? I promise to have her home by ten.” Quietly, Kate said yes and Max lifted her head to see Chloe’s outstretched hand, pale blue nail polish and all. Max seemed conflicted about taking it, which Chloe was trying not to let hurt her. Once they grasped at each others’ hand, Chloe pulled the girl into a standing position and then without letting go of her made for the door to the dorm. The hall was mercifully empty when Chloe poked her head out of it and then eased Max from the room. The photographer shut the door behind them and Chloe exhaled. “I think I need to know what happened in there,” Chloe started. “From the beginning, the part with Drewer.”

“To-to explain that, like, to explain most of it, you’d need to know things.” Chloe blinked at the familiar refrain. ‘*I can’t tell you because then I’d have to tell you everything, and we can’t have you know what’s going on in your girlfriend’s mind, or anything. That’d be crazy!*’ Swallowing the metaphorical bitter pill, she tried to figure out how best to *safely* and *effectively* respond.

“This is about those things you can’t tell me, right?” Max only nodded. One second, Chloe was telling herself to stay calm. The next her hands had risen into the air of her own accord, and she was either groaning or growling. The transformation on Max’s face was immediate, from upset to borderline panicked. “Look, first,” Chloe started, “the other part I was talking about, about people falling out of contact wasn’t supposed to be a shot at you and I’m sorry if it upset you.” She waited patiently, and eventually Max nodded and lifted her eyes from the floor to Chloe’s face. Chloe pulled out her ace in the hole. “Second, you saved an encoded document onto the flash drive with all the Prescott shit and I sort of sent it to Mikey and we cracked it.” It wasn’t that Chloe didn’t want to ease Max into this revelation. Damn did she ever. It just *came out* all at once. The reaction was severe and immediate and after all this time Chloe knew better than to consider it an overreaction.

Max’s head snapped up again as if receiving sudden whiplash. Chloe instantly went for the girl’s eyes, where everything else had been replaced by some sort of all encompassing terror. They almost looked darker than normal, though Chloe knew that wasn’t how it actually worked, that it was just her mind playing tricks on her. Max seemed to be waiting for something from her, though her entire body was tense with the anticipation. What did she expect? Max was waiting on some sort of damning proclamation if her usual feelings on the subject were anything to go by.
“Which one?” the question was louder than a whisper, louder than normal conversation even, approaching a panicked yell, though not quite reaching it. *This is all gonna break down fast if I don’t do something about it right now,* Chloe told herself as she reached out to take Max by the shoulder, to calm her, comfort her. *Anything to make her understand I’m not running from her, here.* “Which fucking one?” Max asked again, though she shot back to press right up against her own door rather than be touched. Chloe immediately brought both hands up, open palms out to show she wasn’t going to try to touch her.

“‘Chloe goes into peoples’ dreams. Rachel makes fire and wind and even rain. They would believe me if I told them about all of it.’” Answering the girl’s question seemed to do the opposite of putting her at ease. In fact, Chloe was relatively certain Max’s eyes had just shot at the door at the end of the hall, leading to the staircase down and out of the building. *Well, shit.* Max’s throat worked to try to swallow at something. “Max, can you tell me who it was I was supposed to have seen?” Chloe already had a theory on that, but that theory made no sense. There had been a woman in the club, one who Chloe had briefly mistaken for Vanessa Caulfield, but in retrospect the woman’s hair had been too long and she had been far too young.

Max opened her mouth and moved it silently a few times. It was reminiscent of a gasping fish, especially when paired with the eyes threatening to bug out of her skull. Floundering, the brunette again shot a look down the hall. *She’s gonna bolt,* Chloe realized in a moment of perfect clarity. Before Max could run, Chloe turned and put her own back toward that very door, hands still raised and took a couple of steps away from Max, down the hall. Of the two of them, Chloe had somewhere to go if she left the building. Max did not.

“I was scared shitless for you. I still am. I wouldn’t have done it for any other reason.” The truth was that the document had sat there, taunting her for some time before she convinced herself to pursue it. When someone held as big of a secret as Max seemed to, the idea that there was information sitting there within easy reach, information important enough for Max, a high school student, to want to encode, it had been too tempting. There, in that document could have been the answer to everything. “I’ll leave now if you want, I promise. I don’t want you to get upset.” Max tried to speak again, body slackening slightly against the wall. “I’m sorry, Max.” She was. *I fucked it up, I think.*

A strangled sound eerily close to her name escaped Max’s throat and Chloe paused, three or four steps away from the girl, hands still raised. The girl shook her head, emphatically and Chloe watched her trying to work feeling into her limbs, try to regain control after a ‘deer in the headlights’ moment. *If she wants me to stay, I’ll stay.* Chloe no longer trusted that the decision to confront Max about this had been particularly smart but she was sure of one thing. She had no other ideas about helping the photographer in her rapidly deteriorating state, and communication from the Caulfield parents suggested they secretly shared her concerns. Add to the top of that her own building frustration with being kept in the dark and maybe she had simply snapped. Chloe wasn’t sure, she sucked at analyzing things after the fact. All she knew was that it had backfired.

“What is it you can do that is like what Rachel and I can do?” Chloe asked, voice at a normal
conversational level. Max’s response was to shake her head at first and then in a wavering tone to answer with more cryptic bullshit.

“You wouldn’t believe me,” Max said. “Might not even if you saw proof of it. Sometimes you don’t, I think.”

“What does that mean?” Chloe asked. “It’s not like you’ve ever actually told me about whatever this is.” The girl shook her head again, though it was more emphatic and this time it seemed to calm her more than express her tumultuous emotional state.

“You’re right, I haven’t.”

“Like, is it something closer to what Rachel does or to me?”

“Neither. It’s like nothing you can imagine. Or maybe you can imagine it, but you can’t imagine half of it.” Chloe seized onto this small bit, this bit of reaction from Max, this tiny seed of half of an answer like a man dying of thirst in the desert who had been dropped unceremoniously at the edge of a beautiful, wet oasis. She wanted to drink. *Fuck, do I ever.* “It’s like neither, but it’s fuckin’ scarier. It ends lives, it levels cities.” The brunette’s eyes never moved from hers. She stood like a different person, tall and confident in her words and hardened. She looked like the girl who Chloe had seen approaching her from the end of the street which held Max’s childhood home last May. *If someone had leveled a city in modern day America, I’m pretty sure no one could hide it. Besides… Max isn’t a monster.*

Max wasn’t a monster. The realization was enough that Chloe slammed the palm of her hand firmly against her forehead. Whatever kind of ability or power Max had gained that was like and unlike those she and Rachel were sitting on, it was this that made Max afraid of herself. *She’s afraid she could hurt someone, no, lots of someones. Jesus this makes so much fucking sense.*

“What else do you know?” Max asked her. “Anything I haven’t said? “

“No, just what was in ‘why’.”

“That shouldn’t have been there. It wasn’t supposed to go on the flash drive.” Max let out a bitter laugh that actually comforted Chloe a bit. She finally dropped her own arms to her sides. “I was giving David all that shit the other day and I can’t even save a fucking Word doc to the right place.” *Maybe, or maybe part of you wanted to be found out.*
“I mean, I figured that but you have to understand. We’re getting desperate here,” Chloe said. “You’re not okay and we don’t know why or– hey, fuck why but what about how to help?” For some reason, this Max seemed to be capable of handling Chloe pushing like this, a complete change from merely a few minutes ago.

“You should have asked me.”

“Fuck, okay, look,” Chloe barely bit down on her anger, sensing some sneaking into Max’s voice. “No, that’s not okay to say. We both know you would have lied to me about it or just said, ‘I can’t tell you.’ And maybe you think that’s the right thing to do for whatever reasons of your own but don’t pretend like it was as simple as just coming to you and telling you we’re upset.” Max’s arms crossed her chest and as much as Chloe hated to approach an argument with the girl it was infinitely better than seeing her devastated and scared. “Look at you, Max, you’re lighter than anyone on this floor. Kate and Victoria both probably have 20 pounds on you. That’s not okay at your size. You’re not eating. You’ve been in Arcadia Bay two weeks and I’ve seen you eat like five times with my own eyes.”

“And since you haven’t seen it, it hasn’t been happening?” Max replied, haughtily. Is it insane that her being so pissy makes me kind of happy?

“And let’s not talk about the part where you sometimes fall asleep mid-convo,” Chloe talked over her.

“No danger of that with this one, is there?” Max shot back, louder still. “No one on this floor’s sleeping tonight if we don’t figure this shit out.” The smirk rose to Chloe’s face first and when its twin managed to sneak past Max’s affronted glare, she snorted despite herself and found that it was difficult, for the moment, to stay mad at the girl. Max’s anger broke, too, judging by the loud, long-suffering sigh that emitted from her lips or the way she uncrossed her arms. “Mikey saw it too?” she finally asked, voice lowering. Chloe nodded. “Rachel?”

“Not yet,” Chloe said. “I wanted to talk to you about it first. I wanted you to tell me everything.” Max shook her head. “You know the day’s coming, like, very fast. I’m talking more days than weeks.”

“What day is that?”

“The one where you tell us everything or else.”
“Or else what?” This was not a challenge, it was fear. Not fear of Chloe, precisely, but she recognized the fear of losing the relationship. Hell, she’d been feeling it very briefly, herself, a moment or two ago as their conversation crossed the line into argument.

“Or else Rachel and I are gonna get hurt, more than we already are and, frankly, it’s going to be on you.” Chloe raised her hands in surrender and then turned away from Max. “I think I’m gonna head over to Steph’s and see about plotting a bit more for Friday.”

“You know I love you, right?” Chloe paused, only a step or two further down the hall. She couldn’t recall Max actually saying those words to her, or for that matter to Rachel either. She expected a great flood of warmth at the thought and maybe it was nice to hear but it did not fight off the realization that she was probably going to have to push Max past either of their points of comfort to get the truth and, at this point, it was inevitable. Max didn’t intend to hurt herself, Chloe or Rachel but it was happening. Chloe was reaching the end of her willingness to put up with the girls she loved getting hurt, even if it was by one of their own.

“I love you too, Max. I just think I’ve gone as far as I can without getting answers. Think about it, for both of our sakes.”

Chloe was already out of the Prescott Dormitories when she realized that Max’s original and obvious discomfort had all begun when they started to talk about her departing photography teacher. Somehow, that little detail had gotten lost against all of Chloe’s frustrations about Max dodging her questions. What was it, she wondered as she made for the parking lot, that had Max so upset? Sure, it was sad to see a favorite teacher go, but this was the kind of upset one experienced when something particularly bad was happening. A retirement was more bitter sweet than anything, as far as Chloe was concerned.

Fuck it, she thought. Max will tell me that and more soon enough. Maybe tomorrow, maybe the next day, but I’m done with waiting.

Chapter End Notes

Look forward to a second chapter today.
Chapter Twenty-Nine: Orpheus and Eurydice

September 12th, 2011 11:20 PM

Rachel’s calves didn’t hurt as much as her heels. She wasn’t sure what to make of that other than to assume that maybe during clandestine activities, she needed to find better or at least more comfortable footwear. It was starting to cool down outside, something which Rachel could comprehend even though she was still, herself, fairly warm. Only part of that was down to the outfit which obscured her features and covered her from head to toe in black. The rest of the unnatural warmth came from deep within. At first, as Rachel took up position crouching behind this wrecking trash bin, she had considered focusing on staying calm. Calm wasn’t what she was going to need, she was going to need her anger. It did not come to her like an old friend, she did not treasure the anger, she just recognized that she was going to need it for the night to come.

For about the fifth time, Rachel forced herself to stay low behind the trashcan and run her eyes across the Blackwell Academy parking lot. Her own vehicle sat in one corner, parked conspicuously far from her usual spot-mostly because that spot was rather close to where she now hid—and about five or six other cars belonging to students who lived in the dorms but had their own rides popped up here and there. Three of the remaining cars were security, including David Madsen’s Overcompensator. That just left one car that Rachel could count that stood out at all. If she was a betting girl, she would place that as being Mrs. Hoida’s. The English teacher had taken to working late into the night, ever since a year before when she had tragically miscarried.

Rachel used to find it incredibly sad but had come to understand that people really did process grief in wildly different ways. Rachel read and listened to music. Her mother took long walks and, unfortunately, drank ever more expensive brands of wine. There was no right or wrong way to handle grief, unless it involved doing one’s self harm. Avoidance is useful in small doses, Rachel thought, quoting her therapist. But avoidance isn’t everything. Rachel shifted slightly as she hunkered back against the stone wall behind her, almost trying to wedge herself between the can and the wall.
Her thick hair strained against the bun beneath her mask as Rachel cricked her neck to try to relieve some of the tension she felt from the shoulders up. This bun was not quite so ornate as Kate’s, more designed to lay as flat as possible. The heavy clothing on her frame was fairly loose, enough to obscure the majority of her frame, she was pleased to note. This last detail had been enough to inspire Rachel’s coming performance. It was going to be the most important act of her life and damn if it wasn’t a one-man show with a small audience.

The seconds seemed to give way to minutes, but Rachel knew that she had to stay calm. Her phone was safely back in the dorm along with anything which might give away who she was or where she was hiding. She did have an old analog watch that even the dim light of the parking lot might be enough to let her see, but that would require lifting one arm of the sweater and taking her focus off of the world around her. Rachel inhaled, unfortunately treated to the stench of the can beside her far more completely than say the scent of cut grass behind her. He always comes by this time of night, Rachel reminded herself. For the last few days, though she had said nothing to Max or Chloe about it, Rachel had been doing David a favor and trying to show him what it was going to feel like to realize he had been followed, his every move watched and analyzed.

Just before 11:30 each night, David made his second sweep of the parking lot, and the only other active members of his security team snuck off campus to smoke pot. Poor stick up the ass mother fucker, Rachel thought at the man, he’d lose his mind if he knew. No, the watch was going to have to go unused. She was not about to surrender the one upper hand she had on David Madsen, his complete and utter lack of awareness that she was waiting. Rachel exhaled and, instead of worrying, about the time kept her eyes locked on the ground for the sight of his long, extended shadow as he descended the stairs and her ears out for approaching footsteps above and behind her.

Run yourself through this one more time, she counseled. He can’t see anything but your eyes and it’ll be too dark. Take even that away from him. Her right hand clenched around a particularly bright LED flashlight. With that in his eyes he won’t know what’s going on. Now, your voice. Deepen it, slow it down. Make yourself sound like one of the boys. Mimic Eliot maybe, he likes to talk slow and deep like he’s hot shit. Say everyone’s full name, as slowly as possible. Make him uncomfortable, confused. Throw him off his game. She was cut off from her plotting by what might have been the sound of feet on cement, just on the edge of her hearing. Or maybe the wind’s playing tricks, either way, get down as low as you can. Show David that he’s not the hottest shit to walk Arcadia Bay, you are. The only thing that might back him off you, the girls, Steph and Frank is to show him there are things going on here that he can’t comprehend.
As she listened, trying to pick up the sound again, Rachel brought herself so low her hands were pressed against the ground. *David, mocking Chloe. The fear you see in her eyes around him. Her face when she saw the camera. Max’s confliction, the way she bites her tongue every time he looks at them. The files. He thinks we’re the bad guys and he lumped Steph into it, too, that sack of shit.* She began to breathe slightly faster, which was a step further than she wanted to go, but that was alright. She needed the fire, tonight. *I need the fire.* The footfalls became clear: heavy and booted they smacked of a large man who walked as if he had never heard of stepping lightly in his life.

The shadow came next and despite being stretched out by the low lamp post behind him, it looked right for David Madsen. *We’re all creatures of habit,* she reminded herself, crouching low enough that her thighs were finally beginning to ache. Slowly, against the ground, the flashlight spun in her right hand so that the button would be in reach of her thumb. Beneath her left hand some pebble dug into it, through the thick dark gloves. Her nose threatened to rebel against the stench of garbage. The shadow grew large and longer as David descended the stairs into the lot. *He’s taking his sweet ass time.* The man came into view finally but didn’t even look toward her. He did, however, slow.

Emitting from the long, thin flashlight in his hand, bright light passed over all of the cars in the lot, one by one. He did it slowly, in one scanning motion, but it was not enough. *No, don’t let be this the day you learn to half-ass something.* Rachel thought, desperately, chest beginning to heave slightly. *Come on, you spycamming sack of shit, go check the cars out!* The fact was that David was a problem she had to act on now, before it was too late. The photography teacher’s departure from the school at the end of the year wasn’t the only one announced: the head of the security department was leaving, too. If David took over that position there was no chance in hell they were going to have an ounce of peace on campus, much less elsewhere. *Power in the minds of the power hungry,* Rachel thought, *I’ll show you power, just start wal- there!*

*Yes, mother fucker.* David took a step or two forward and that was all that needed to happen. At this distance he was about ten feet ahead of her when she rose to her full height, as unimpressive as it might be and brought her right hand up. How many times had David Madsen heard her voice? How many meals had they shared together when Chloe could stand to be around him? How often had she slept under the same roof as the man? If there was ever a time for Rachel to find out if she was a good actress, it was here and now. *Voice low, draw it out, full names, act like some cocky sack of shit.*

*“David Norman Madsen.”* In one way it sounded good to her ears, but in another she swore she could hear herself properly over her attempt at obfuscation. Whatever the case, as low as she forced her voice it was loud enough to draw the man’s attention. He spun on his heel, fairly dexterously if she did say so herself. She could hear his foot drag against the ground as he turned
and then, when she was trying to get one last look at his face, the man brought his flashlight up and blinded her. *God fucking damn it*, Rachel’s left hand came up at once to block the light and, squinting, she raised her right alongside it and returned David the favor with what she thought was a *much* more annoying flashlight. David cursed aloud.

“Identify yourself immediately and put down that light,” David had skipped the deescalation portion of his training as a security guard, Rachel knew that much for sure from the way the man’s voice went immediately to yelling, to anger. Then again, if he wasn’t as stupid as he looked he was probably a little bit scared. As it so happened, Rachel felt very little fear of her own. His voice just made her more and more angry. The warmth beneath her clothing was beginning to cancel out even the cool breeze of the fall night. She did not drop the light or give him the satisfaction of knowing who she was. For a moment her silence is met with only frustrated sputtering. *Get down to business or he’s going to call for backup or just try to tackle you. He doesn’t care about getting physical.* She could feel the bandanna against her mouth partially muffling her voice, and projected a bit harder to counter that. This only the made the strain on her throat and vocal cords worse.

“I know you’re double dipping,” she started, trying her best to make her voice sound more like a teenage boy’s. “I know you’ve got a conflict of interest here, when it comes to protecting the school, which should be your job. What happened to Hayden Jones only proves it. Hayden Jones was attacked by another student completely out of the blue and was suspended for defending himself. The attacker, the instigator, received half the punishment of the victim. That means you’re not alone in this.” She was surprised, even as her left hand began to shake, that she was able to keep it together. Her voice came out steady, low and slowly, each word stretched to just short of the point of absurdity. David’s grumbling and attempts to break into the conversation were gratifying to hear. He wasn’t going to wait much longer.

“You listen here,” he started at a yell. Rachel spoke over him.

“You’re supposed to be the good guy, though. You’re supposed to be better. You’re supposed to protect people like Hayden Jones.”

“He’s so angry all the time. If he had this power, the town would have burnt a long time ago. The forest fire would have been like nothing in comparison. Blackwell wouldn’t even exist. Even as she began to grow more and more frustrated at not being listened to, she could hear him huffing and puffing at the very same.
“I know that you and Raymond Wells are in Sean Prescott’s pockets.” David only called again, this time in fewer, shorter grunting words, for her to identify herself. “I want you to do the right thing for once in your life and confess. Tell everyone the truth and stop working for the Prescotts.” It’s not working. He’s not listening. You have to play his game. What was his game, she wondered, as he tried again to blind her with his flashlight. He was looking for an opportunity to tackle her, Rachel realized. His game is violence and fear. Everyone has to be scared of the big bad soldier man. His manhood depends on it. A grim understanding set in. He’s too stupid to understand anything else. ‘Fight fire with-’ and all that.

David faked as if to charge forward and Rachel stiffened up. She could feel the heat, no longer comfortable, protective warmth but slowly building agony. It was pooling somewhere in her chest, as if encircling the very heart of her. He was threatening her in how he stood and moved, trying to intimidate her. If that didn’t work, it was going to step up to verbal threats. After that, her physical safety was in question. This was the man that David Madsen was. This is why you’re out here doing this at all, don’t forget it. Don’t forget what he did to Chloe. Don’t forget everything he did to Chloe. When he spoke, she found her breath hissing from beneath her front teeth.

“Last chance, punk, identify yourself or I will take you to the ground.” No, no you won’t.

“Nathan Prescott is a rabid dog. If you keep trying to protect him from the consequences of his actions, there will be consequences for you.”

“You’re going to threaten me? You just crossed the line,” David told her, before taking a step forward. Honey, you wouldn’t know the line if someone held you down and beat you with it. Rachel could see his muscles tensing beneath his clothes, he was going to run, to lunge. The moment of confrontation had come. Let’s go. Rachel knew that both the rage and fear she was feeling in that moment were just a quarter of what Chloe had had to go through since this man came into her life. Rachel didn’t know how Chloe had stood it this long. Her left hand stretched out toward the can beside and behind her.

She called the rage and the fire and they came like faithful pets. Last time I let it get too out of control and everything went to shit. Not this time. The heat left her chest, traveling down her left arm and causing the rest of her to cool enough that she noticed it. For a moment it seemed to exist
within the tip of her left middle finger and then there was a notable explosion to her left. David lunged but stopped halfway through the gesture so that he stumbled and nearly hit the floor. Out of the corner of her eyes she saw the lid of the trash can fly higher into the air than she could keep track. Its sides bowed out and a strong fire roared simultaneously to life. She might have been standing in the air after a dip into a lake for as cool as Rachel immediately felt.

“I need backup, I repeat, I need help. IED at the east lot, I repeat, IED at the east lot.” David was reaching across himself to press the button on the walkie talkie strapped to his other shoulder. He’s calling for help. Good, let him be afraid. It’ll take those stoned fuckers two minutes to get here. I’m not done yet. Her shoulders heaved in the night, the flashlight rising and falling from where she aimed it in the process. Time to show him what this really is. He needed to understand that this was no bomb or anything of the sort. This was a force he could not begin to understand, could not begin to deal with. This was a force of nature. Please don’t fail me now, she begged her cooling body. This was nowhere near as bad as the night she hurt Nathan.

I can do things that would make you piss yourself, old man. In this way Rachel finally exposed her abilities to someone other than Chloe or Max. Rachel dropped the flashlight and it fell to the ground with a loud clattering. Mercifully it still worked and she could see David with some clarity between the fire beside her and the flashlight to her right. Rachel raised her right hand, her heartbeat still wild in her chest, and focused hard on David’s face. She didn’t have to dig too deeply into her memories of all the times the man in front of her had disrespected her or those she loved. All she had to do was remember the camera feed and Chloe’s face, the look of someone who felt wholly violated. David had done that. David had violated Chloe’s privacy, had, in essence, violated her autonomy.

That look on Chloe’s face was all it took. As before the fire came into being as warmth, heat in the core of her chest. As before it traveled where she willed it, up along either arm, through to her fingers. David froze mid statement as the flame emitted and began to form in the air in front of her. Okay, asshole, look at this. You know nothing. The fire formed into a ball no larger than her own head. There it hung and there it spun, lighting the area around herself and David from something like ten or twenty feet up. In fiction, when one found themselves with power, they were supposed to go mad from it or perhaps become addicted to it. All Rachel felt was ice cold and bone tired when the heat passed from her body. David, though, was backing away from her in something that resembled fear closely enough that Rachel was satisfied she had gotten her point across to him.

“You are playing with fire. The Prescotts are sick and you are acting like their puppet. From now on, stick to doing your job and let Nathan Prescott reap the consequences of his behavior.” The fire dimmed and finally darkened as she lowered her hands and, without bothering to retrieve her flashlight, Rachel bolted. What she knew for certain as she glanced back behind her, was that
David was not following her. *Maybe I shook him up,* she thought. *Maybe it worked. Maybe he changes.* Running along the roadside was a plan for a short time but as soon as she was out of view of the lot she was going to have to think of something else.

That time came fairly quickly. Glancing back over her shoulder turned up no pursuit and no angle at which she could see anything of the lot but the faint orange glow of a trash fire. A copse of trees on her right seemed as good an area as any to jump into to get off the road. One way or another, the police were going to be coming to the school in no time. Branches brushed past her, snagging at the skimask insistently. Without it, her long, thick hair would be caught by every other branch. Any kind of movement would have been difficult. Now, while frustrating, she could at least hide herself far enough into the trees that if David were to find his wits and chase after her he’d have difficulty finding her. *Think Rachel. Think. They’re going to do a headcount at the dormitory,* she told herself, pulling to a stop with her back pressed against rough bark. *If the cops get called on a bomb threat, this place is going to be a circus.*

*It’s so cold.*

There was not much in the way of strength in her limbs and that was a problem. If she wanted to get back to the dormitories before the police came she needed to be fast. She needed to be nimble. Her whole body shook with cold. Quick was unlikely, nimble impossible. *Like last November,* she told herself. The cold wasn’t quite as bad at this point, but it was still enough that she shook the branch she reached out to grab to steady herself. Last November she had carried a barely conscious Max along the back perimeter of the campus during an emergency without being seen.

*Only prayer is that I can make that trip again,* she thought, *but if I do, there’s no guarantee that David won’t be waiting outside of the dorms.* Slowly, Rachel crept forward. No sound of police sirens came to her ears. It was almost too easy for heavy, unfamiliar black work boots to stomp a path back toward the school without her being seen. The outline of the cars in the lot were the first things to come into view, highlighted by reflections of a dancing, malodorous trash fire which she could smell even from where she was, creeping toward the school. Next, passing in front of the flame briefly, she caught the wide frame of David Madsen, mostly shadow. *Probably on the phone with the cops.* Him still being in the lot complicated things. Either she went around the lot and not only took more time but raised her risk of being seen by David’s fellow security guards, or she cut across the lot and almost certainly would be seen by David.

Rachel was just beginning to formulate a plan when the night was pierced by a shrieking ring. It
was not the sound of a siren approaching, oh no, it was the sound of a fire alarm. *That makes no sense,* she told herself, breath catching in her tight, heaving chest. *No sense at all, there’s no fire alarm near the fucking parking lot.* It took her, in her cool, weakened state a moment to gather her wits about herself. When she did, Rachel realized that the ringing was coming from the main building on the campus, the school itself. David, who had been hesitating in front of the can and had not yet noticed her approach, screamed frustration into his walkie-talkie and then bolted from the lot, up the stairs.

*Oh my god, I don’t know who you are, but thank you.* With her path clear it took Rachel little time to climb the small barrier separating the road from the parking lot and only slightly more to climb the scraggly, old stone wall between the lot and campus far enough for her to reach up and pull herself up by the railing. There was no one around to see her, though if she squinted she could still make out David’s form in the soft light of street lamps lining the campus paths as he ran as fast as his legs could carry him toward the school. Rachel was not used to acts of god working out for her but if something really was wrong in the school, she was going to *so* reconsider this whole not believing in God thing. *Or at least in Karma.*

For the most part she was running through grass. There weren’t paths built around this part of campus because why would anyone want to take the long way somewhere? That was for the best: where there was a path there would have been a series of lamps designed to keep students from falling and cracking their skulls at night. That was fine. Shaky as she was, her legs at least continued to do their job. The problem was, though, that as much as she was supposed to be on a stealth mission, she was wheezing, gasping as her chest continued to tighten. When her mouth wasn’t open, greedily sucking in every bit of oxygen her lungs could hold, her teeth were chattering together. It was only with great effort that she rounded the corner and kept her eyes wide open as she rushed along the length of the back end of campus.

She was halfway to safety when she noticed the doors on the back of the school building burst open. For a moment she expected to see David rushing out, having spotted her from the corner of his eye. Instead, the short looping path leading back to the rest of the school showed someone small and lithe escaping the screaming fire alarm of the building. Unfortunately for Rachel, that person was running off the path and almost straight at her. Her options were to run and make good time or stay low and hope she had not already been seen, that this person’s path was coincidence. Rachel did not slow her pace but she did turn to try to watch through the spots forming in her vision as the person running from the building passed beneath the last street lamp between them and Rachel. Then and only then did Rachel suspect that the fire alarm was no coincidence. Bolting towards her in her signature grey hoodie and jeans, short brown hair disheveled and out of place, was Max Caulfield. *How in the name of fuck?* Rachel asked herself. The ski mask was still firmly
in place but if Rachel squinted as she slowed she could see Max’s eyes locked on her and the girl
was not just approaching her as a stranger, she was smiling and laughing in the night. Rachel
wasn’t sure whether to run from Max or throw off her mask and kiss the girl. *Maxie, you got some
'splainin to do.*

She was freed from the decision and all other thoughts when one gloved hand was seized and
jerked forward by the brunette. *How does she know it’s me? She has to know it’s me.* Rachel was
forced to stumble forward, feeling horrible about the fact that she was slowing Max down, Max
whose legs were probably a good two to three inches shorter than her. The thing was, now that she
was not alone, the cold did not instill as much fear into her and though she still drew loud, ragged,
gasping breaths, something deep down told Rachel that everything was going to be alright. She was
with Max (*who for some fucked up reason knows it's me*) and that meant that she was safe.

If she could, Rachel would have made night into day in celebration. Instead she ran, eyes focused
on the back of Max’s head, always chasing the girl, always chasing. They moved through relative
darkness but Max did not slow or hesitate, she stepped with purpose and took the longest strides
she was capable of. It took all of Rachel’s focus to not trip and fall or otherwise slow her girlfriend
down but soon they rounded yet another corner and there, in the distance (and not too far, at that)
were the Prescott Dormitories.

No one had been brought out of their rooms yet. In fact, judging by the darkened windows, people
were completely unaware anything was going on. She thought it still quite a risk to make for the
front door and was about to ask Max what to do in breathy, teeth chattering, broken English when
Max pulled her more insistently. To a mix of relief and confusion, Max did not turn toward the
front of the building: she led her around to the back. Max slowed and released her hand, pressing
her left pointer to her lips and then turning back toward the building.

Lined up in front of her in two rows were a series of windows, each blackened and dull as the
students behind them either pretended to sleep or actually did. Max was focused on the row on the
first floor, the boy’s dormitory. When the girl raised a hand and began to point to one after another,
Rachel realized she was counting. There, about six windows down was one which was cracked just
barely open. Max gestured once and then hurried over to it. Rachel’s legs protested any further
movement and they did so loudly enough that she considered just hiding back there and hoping for
the best.

In the end, she followed the photographer to a window, her mind bursting with questions that
usually boiled down to ‘how’ and ‘why.’ Max pursed her lips and let loose a low, but rather loud
whistle which made Rachel’s stomach churn. Even on the first floor the windows were too high for
Rachel to climb into in her current state. She wasn’t sure what was happening, but a moment later
the partially open window rose and a dark hand stuck itself out. Rachel shot a look toward Max, who only gestured her forward hurriedly, blue eyes barely readable in the night. What Rachel could see, though, spoke of a mischievousness that Rachel thought went deeper than just pulling a fire alarm. That had to be her, Rachel told herself. Too many coincidences.

Rachel recognized the way the hand grasping hers held on, from various scenes in theater class, not to mention at least one during an actual play. The wide-shouldered boy pulling her from the ground and into his dorm room was Hayden Jones. She only caught his face after their joint efforts pulled her high enough that her shaking right arm could find purchase on his windowsill. Together, they got her inside and she rolled uselessly to Hayden’s floor before crawling out of the way of the window so he could help Max. She heard the boy’s confusion as he hastily questioned Max about who he had just brought into his room. Apparently, Hayden was expecting a party of one, tonight.

“Rachel,” Max hissed at him as she crossed the threshold. “Rachel.” This was all the explanation Hayden seemed to need as he gave one more great heave and he and Max collapsed messily to the floor beside Rachel. As the three of them disentangled themselves, Rachel felt her breath starting to stabilize, even after having been struck in the chest by Hayden’s elbow. What the hell are these two up to? Rachel asked herself. Once Max was on her feet she hurried to the window and slammed it shut, lowering pale blinds over it. By that point, Rachel had gotten to her knees but found any attempts to stand on her own aborted by shaky legs.

The light of a small television in one corner of the room came to life, bathing the room in a pale, warm glow. Max turned to Rachel and held one hand out, the same hand that had only two minutes before come out of nowhere to help Rachel haul ass away from the the scenes of their individual criminal activities. I love this girl, she told herself as Max hefted her to her feet. As soon as Max was sure Rachel would be able to stay standing on her own, the girl took a step or two back, doubled over, placed her hands on her knees and laughed, loudly.

“Holy shit,” Max exclaimed. “Holy shit! That was—that was amazing.”

“But did it work?” Hayden asked.

“It not only worked, there was a bonus,” Max explained. “Well, two if you count me realizing that
someone else was up to some undercover bullshit too.” That seemed like as good a signal as any for Rachel to pull her mask off. The bandanna came with it, but not without pulling a hair or two loose from Rachel’s rapidly unraveling bun. Her chest still felt tight, she still shivered and her breath was still ragged but all told she was beginning to feel a lot more in control of herself. *Now if I can warm up, I might not lose my fucking mind before Max tells me what the fuck is going on.* “It got a little complicated, that’s why I’m late. But we’re good.”

“And the fire alarm?” he asked her, voice low and conspiratory before he realized he was talking in front of Rachel and relaxed.

“Improvisation,” Max said. “No one saw me, don’t worry. Mission accomplished.” Hayden shared a high five with the girl as she straightened up and then turned to Rachel, quizzically. Finding that she wanted her hands free, Rachel immediately stuffed the mask and bandana into her large, black sweater top, before pulling her gloves off. *Oh shit,* she thought, realizing they were lightly singed. *Of course they are.* She wanted to laugh, but got the feeling it would hurt to do so. It was a heady, adrenaline laugh. Her vision cleared before her very eyes as Max gestured for Rachel to breathe. “I just had to cause a little diversion for Rachel to get back safe. We met halfway to the dorms, because I knew damn well what path I’d take if I was her.” *You know me too well.*

“I’m not sure what you were up to tonight,” Hayden said, “But I hope it went well.” Then, turning grimly back to Max, his upper lip curling slightly, Hayden added, “You actually got it?”

“I got the file, and I got the file that that file was trying to hide,” Max promised him. “Nathan Prescott’s actual Blackwell Academy file.” *You sneaky, gorgeous little minx!* The next time they had a date night on their plates, Rachel decided she was taking Max somewhere *nice.* That meant leaving Arcadia Bay, but so be it.

“Good,” Hayden hissed. In that light, the look of disgust in his eyes was enough to make Rachel shiver. The boy who had gone to bat for Nathan Prescott time and time again, telling everyone that he wasn’t so bad when he just ‘lightened up and let loose’ was no longer feeling so beneficent toward the Prescott heir. Rachel couldn’t blame him but she was a little jealous of him: she wanted to break one of Nathan’s fingers too.
“Don’t believe anything you hear about what else happened tonight,” Rachel counseled the boy. “It’s going to be twisted so far around that I look hella like some sort of monster.” Hayden tilted his head at her, eyes narrowing not in suspicion but in some concern. Why are people like Hayden rare? Generally jovial, trusting everyone to a fault? I get that it gets them in the shit sometimes, but the world would be a better place. Either way, his getting burnt by Nathan had clearly not crushed that spirit, as he might have worked with Max for revenge but had had no reason to pull some stranger dressed like a fucking cat burglar into his room.

“At this point,” he told her, bitterly, “I’m willing to believe the school will spin anything to make decent people look like shit and shitty people look angelic.” Rachel only nodded as Max began to gesture toward his door. “No,” he said, quickly. “Not like that.” Max and Rachel both stopped in the middle of turning to leave. “Give me the gloves, the mask. I’ll hide it in my shit until wash day. That way if you go walking out of the room you don’t look like you’re about to get caught by some 1950s copper with a billy club.” Max snorted suddenly, making Rachel turn as the girl slammed her hands over her own mouth and nose, shoulders shaking. Setting aside Max’s laughter, Hayden had both a good idea and a good point, but she was going to do him one better.

“No staring,” she told Hayden, then glanced back at Max. “That doesn’t go for you, though.” Max lowered her hands, looking momentarily confused as Rachel pulled her sweatshirt off, wrapping the mask, bandana and burnt gloves inside of it. The brunette graced her with a mostly humorous appreciative whistle, but Rachel was well aware that no matter how cold she was, beneath the sweater her shirt was sticking to her by the power of enough sweat to fill a damn pool. To Hayden’s credit he glanced away the moment he realized what she was going to do and only took the shirt and other gear with a nod. Wonder if they smell like ‘running from someone’ sweat or like burning.

Either way, she was suddenly grateful that she and Max had picked the same night for their clandestine activities, as Hayden was proving a willing and capable accessory. This might have gone to absolute shit at the end without Max and, Hayden’s right. Anyone could come out of their room with all that noise going on at the school and catch us going upstairs. She shivered more strongly than a moment before against the faint airflow meeting sweat-soaked skin. Whether the police were going to pull them all outside or not, Rachel felt like she had to get changed and soon or she had no chance in hell of warming up. Again, Rachel gestured toward the door.

“Thank you,” Max told Hayden before moving to the door.
“Goes double for me,” Rachel added in just above a whisper.

“If you ever actually get to use anything you found tonight, drinks are on me for both of you and Chloe,” Hayden said by way of response, opening the door for them both. “Now get the fuck out of here before someone hears us,” he advised, as if that was not their plan already. The last thing Rachel saw of the boy was a wide and slightly peaceful smile. *Hayden got to exorcise his demons tonight.* While her limbs felt a tiny bit stronger her legs were still protesting the ten minutes of crouching and all the running after when they reached the end of the boy’s dormitory hallway in silence.

Their only communication in the girl’s hall was a pair of mutually adoring smiles before they split off. In her room, Rachel discarded the remainder of her sweat soaked clothing, did her best to wipe the sweat from her forehead and changed into something like what she would normally wear to bed: a plain brown tee that she thought actually belonged to Max and a pair of shorts. Still, there came no knocking, no voice rousing people from their beds. She could, however, finally hear sirens. *That whole thing took like ten minutes,* Rachel thought with some awe as she retrieved her phone.

*Me*

*How the hell did you know what I was doing?*

*Max*

*Fire doesn’t float normally. I was done and heading back to the room and heard a fucking explosion. Then there’s something hovering in the air like a wizard’s Fireball. You tell me. How did I know you were up to something?*

*Me*

*Don’t get smart mouthed with me, young lady*

*Max*
What were you doing?

Me

Promise to keep it on the downlow?

Max

Yeah

Me

It’s a secret.

Max

No fair. :( :( :( 

Me

You’re fucking incredible do you know that?

Max

I’m offended it took you this long to figure that out.

Me

Love you.
Max

You more.

Chapter End Notes

Notes: And that's the end of our double chapter celebration. As of the night before last I have written up to the end of my more detailed outline, meaning it's time to expand on further chapters. I should begin working on the last half of Part 3 within the week. In the meantime, you all enjoy yourselves.
And now we continue. I told a friend that I considered the first half of Part 3 to be David Madsen and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Month. Well, this is ostensibly one of the worst parts, for him. As for the other parties involved, I promise not everything which results from this is bad. I'll try to give you guys the tiniest bit of breathing room before the next bit of shit hits the fan. Hope you enjoyed.

Disclaimer: Anything familiar to you, I don't own. This is a work of fanfiction for personal amusement, fulfillment and a bit of self-therapy. I make nothing from any of it.

Chapter Thirty: Zeus to Mount Ida

September 13th, 2011 5:32 PM

It felt weird as hell to be sneaking into the house. Not that the two weeks she had spent at Steph’s place made her home alien to her, it was just that she hadn’t felt the need to sneak in so long. As far as Chloe was concerned no one who lived within its walls had either the right or privilege to know where she went and when she came back. The one thing that Chloe knew for sure was that her stepfather was at the house. It had gotten around pretty quickly that David did not come in to work that day and while that had instantly stuck out at Chloe as making this a bad day to try to sneak back into the house and get more of her school and tabletop gear, there was at least one book up in her room that she needed for Friday and another that held two or three chapters she needed to read by the following Friday for a history quiz.

In short, Chloe told herself as she glanced over her shoulder once at her stepfather’s car and then eased the front door shut behind her, needs must. Pausing just in the doorway she waited for her stepfather to come running but after two or three seconds he seemed to be completely unaware of her presence. She heard a television running in the living room but didn’t think it was going to be quiet enough to mask the sounds she made once she finally got upstairs to her room. That’s alright, she counseled, just lock the bedroom door when you get up there. Chloe took each step up the staircase with an agonizing slowness and when it came time even did her best to skip the sixth completely. Every staircase has that one that squeaks.

To make the slow climb a little less unbearable, each time she paused to listen for David’s
approach she recalled a line she had been asked to deliver for her audition for the school play. Keaton had been disappointed that she had no role picked out, but nonetheless at his prompting she had done her best to deliver various lines and by the end she remembered him eyeing her as if she had promise. That promise, Chloe thought personally as she took another slow step up the stairs, was probably to play another genderbent character. Or to play a character while genderbent myself. In truth Chloe couldn’t be assed to be too concerned about it: Rachel was happy with her own audition and that was more than enough for Chloe. *I hope she can beat out Juliet or Dana for Ophelia.*

At the top of the stairs she shifted her empty backpack to one shoulder and walked calmly down the length of the hall. Still, there came no change in sound from below. Her bedroom door opened under her left hand and she was halfway to shutting it before she took in sight of the room. Last year, feeling unwanted and unsafe in her own home, Chloe had packed away most of her belongings and put them in the closet, the effect being that the room was mostly clean and orderly despite the graffiti’d walls, paper-stacked desk and a small pile of books in one corner. Now, all of these things and most of the contents of her closet were strewn about the room.

*Mother fucker,* Chloe thought, before shutting her bedroom door behind her. It felt eerie to be standing among the mess of the destroyed bedroom and more uncanny still to not recognize it as her own. She actually missed the soft beige walls and the thick comforter of the guest room at Steph’s house. Not to mention the lack of reminder that David had no respect for her as a human being. Chloe was able to rescue a bit in the way of socks and underwear from the debris in her room ( *nice to know he has no lines,* she thought, staring at the upturned drawers laying beside her dresser) before she began to fill the remaining space in her bookbag with a couple of necessary books ( *including the monster manual*) and the papers scattered haphazardly about her desk. Several ideas she had sketched out were crumpled or torn, but they had survived David’s manly little freak out mostly intact. The bag was approaching something like heavy when Chloe slipped from her room, convincing herself she had no reason to sneak out of the bedroom window: he was the one who had done wrong in violating her privacy. *Sneaking will just make him look right. He is not right. He doesn’t get to look right ever again.*

Unfortunately when she turned, the ‘he’ in question was waiting for her at the top of the stairs, between her and her easy escape route. David Madsen was as broad shouldered and displeased as ever, though Chloe was confused by the odd red hue of the top half of his face, as if he had been lying in the sun with everything from his nose down covered and had received a minor sunburn. Her eyes traced to his and she tried to read the state of his mind. It was not good. David went from 0 to a hundred in a second flat, from calm to rage at the very sight of her with a fat backpack slung over one shoulder. *Shit shit shit shit!* Chloe kept toward the stairs but sidestepped at the last moment, putting her back to the wall not far from her mother’s bedroom door, hoping he would take the hint and move out of her way without a word. It was a long shot and she knew it, so when David moved closer to her instead of getting out of her way, stepping around the bannister as if to intimidate her into staying in place with angry dark eyes, the irritated twitching of his ridiculous moustache and the furrowing brow.

*I don’t like where this is going,* she thought. Alarms were going off in her head that maybe this
wasn’t the angriest she had ever seen David, but it was close and he had her backed against a wall and in a very tight space. _And he’s angry so fast._ She hated herself in that moment for deciding not to bother Rachel or Steph, for deciding that if Max wasn’t going to open up to her today then she wasn’t going to bring Max along. Her stubbornness had gotten one of them in trouble before and today, today it looked like it was her. _He won’t just attack right off the bat will he?_ The man’s fists were opening and closing, as if her very presence upset him. _I just want to get away from you, just let me go and I won’t come back again._

“What are _you_ doing in _my_ house? What are _you_ taking out of _my_ house?” One hand rose, a large, thick finger jabbing into her shoulder as he all but barked at her. “Well?” Chloe glanced up. So he wasn’t off his rocker insane? _No,_ she realized as she heard the slur in his words. _Holy shit, he’s drunk._ She was moderately concerned about him being capable of violence before, but now she knew that she was in an unsafe situation. _All I wanted was the fucking sketches of my god damned dungeon._ In the past to get David to even half of the anger of this state, she would had to do something really horrible, like stand up for herself. Now her appearance was enough. “No? Nothing to say? Well that’s new, isn’t it, smart mouth?” _Fuck it,_ she thought, _fuck this._

As much as Chloe hated it, she had to press herself near him, shoulder actually bumping his as she sought to squeeze between him and the wall behind her. The stairs were only one or two steps away, if David just let her go they were both going to be fine. Well, he would probably walk away with a hangover, but that was on _him._ She managed to get about half of her body past the man before what she was doing registered in his mind. So intent on getting to the stairs, Chloe was trusting only in how _rarely_ he had been moved to violence in the past to protect her. Today was, for some reason she was not entirely aware of, not an ordinary day for David.

She still wasn’t used to the feeling of his calloused, meaty hand slamming shut around her wrist. The last time his grip had been tight and controlling. This time it wasn’t about holding or redirecting, it was all about pain. It worked, too. A sharp pain shot up from the point of their connection, enough that she had some _serious_ concern he might be capable of breaking it without much effort. _He’s not trying to hold me, he’s trying to hurt me. He wants me to hurt._ Her backpack dropped to the ground with a loud thunk as she groaned, freezing in her attempt to get past him. The man reached out with his free hand to grab hold of her shoulder and he was just pushing her back toward the wall behind her when she made the decision that she wasn’t about to find out what else David might have in store for her when no one was around to see or hear.

Cocky and assured of his superiority, the growling, snarling man never saw the first blow coming. Chloe had been forced into enough situations where someone needed a very _literal_ kicking to know that when her booted right foot swung up it did so with enough power to cause one very literal pain very easily. The thick, heavy toe of the boot found purchase on the man’s groin and she watched the drunken guard’s face screw up comical in pain. Any part of it that was not red shifted to something resembling the flesh of a tomato before her very eyes and sure enough, he released her, doubling forward in reaction to the pain.

Reasonably, Chloe would look back later and tell herself that she was fine, then as he was
somewhat neutralized. She could have stepped around the man and hurried down the stairs, run to her truck and escaped without bothering to give a shit about her back. She could have left the bag behind, run out into the street and screamed for help. She could have locked herself in her truck and called 9-1-1. She could have done any of those things but she didn’t. This man had pushed her around, hurt her, insulted her and insinuated any number of things about her for almost two years. When she added the thing he must have seen as a result of the little peepshow camera he hid in her closet, David Madsen struck her as a predator, regardless of the fact that his violence was not sexual. He was still violent. He was still openly abusive. He preyed on those who he either had power over or pretended he had power over. David Madsen was everything that Chloe hated and he had been a permanent fixture in her life for far too long. It didn’t matter that he was married to her mother.

*It doesn’t matter,* she realized the moment the man doubled over. It didn’t matter because the family ties were cut. Perhaps that realization, the loss of her mother, the loss of her family was what made Chloe not escape David. Whatever the exact cause was, she struck with as much force as her right hand could muster and felt the snap of bone and cartilage as she broke her stepfather’s nose. The rest happened in sharp detail and slow motion. David’s hands went up to his nose and recoiled backward, away from the pain, crying out in response. A shattering noise, this one much louder than the breaking of his nose reached her ears. She understood its source in the same way you instinctively know to pull your hand away from fire. *The bannister is giving out.*

His recoil followed through and Chloe watched the man lean back far enough to go through the bannister. For reasons she could not understand she took one lunging step forward and grabbed David by his right hand and the collar of his shirt. If she did nothing he was going to take a long fall down just enough stairs to become seriously injured. She could not pull the heavy man forward so she threw herself at him and the force was enough, if only barely to press him against the wall beside the stairs as he landed on his ass with a mighty thud. David did not roll.

Instead, looking up at her from around an otherwise bloody face, David Madsen was shocked. She pulled herself to her feet as the man who had caused her to lock doors in the house, to shiver in fear, to actually cry once or twice stared up at her helpless and confused like an infant or a small animal. Chloe couldn’t discern the source of his bewilderment, of his helplessness. A broken nose hurt but it didn’t stop you from standing, from moving. She’d gotten into one too many fights to be mistaken about that. David just stared at her, weak, infantile. Chloe couldn’t pull her eyes from the blood matting his moustache as she stood over him and when she smiled she understood Max’s grin after putting Damon Merrick on his face in the junkyard because she felt every ounce of that hateful, vicious satisfaction and hated herself for every moment of it.

“What in tarnation?” From somewhere close to the sound of the television downstairs a woman was screaming. It instantly snapped Chloe from that mood, that grim satisfaction. The woman who gave birth to her was running toward the stairs full tilt, judging by the sound of footfalls. In no time at all, they would match eyes over David’s half-prone, dumbfounded form. *I should have let him fall,* a part of her argued with the rest of her.
“If you ever,” she said, her voice immediately at the top of her lungs, “ever touch me or someone I love, someone I consider my friend or fuck it, someone I hate even an ounce less than you again, I will tell everyone everything I know about you.” Chloe made this a promise as she backed up toward her backpack. A head of blonde hair appeared just high enough for Joyce to turn and recognize her as David moved his legs, not to stand but to unfold his body from the uncomfortable, even dangerous position it laid in. “I mean everything,” she promised David, lowering her head. “Do you understand me you sack of shit?”

“You know nothing,” he spat at her, all anger and rage but no threat, arms flailing, unable to stand, unable to lean forward far enough to hurt her. He was nothing. He had always been nothing, all that was necessary was for someone to come along and teach him that. Chloe was savagely happy it had been her. “You always think you know everything, but you don’t!” The yell was desperate, reaching, grasping. It was the wail of a baby for its mother’s milk. It wasn’t even particularly eloquent.

“You just sit right there and listen to a story,” she told him, leaning slightly forward as if talking down to him like the child he was. Then she turned her eyes on the person who had raised her as an infant and realized that the ties that bound them had been cut. As far as she was concerned the woman in front of her was David’s enabler, David’s wife. The mechanical act of birth and the entirety of Chloe’s childhood were weighed against the complete betrayal that enabling an abuser was and Chloe was the Anubis who found it wanting. Dad, forgive me. I’m so sorry. There must have been something I could have done but it’s too late now. Don’t hate me. Chloe lifted her backpack as her birthgiver called her name in soft confusion, something almost resembling fear. Her rage was keeping tears at bay, but it was not going to last forever, not now that David was on his ass. Adrenaline only held for so long without constant pressure. “I know you work for Sean Prescott, to protect his sack of shit son from the consequences of his actions. I know Nathan is sick, sick in the head and not getting the help he needs. I know that he drugged someone and photographed them while they were out. I know that that is the kind of person you’re taking money to protect. That’s the trade off for mom’s grand wedding, you making a deal with the devil. I’m not fucking stupid which is more than I can say for either of you.” Chloe exhaled and then seized the bag at her feet.

“I know you would have punched me in the face on campus, with my head turned, not even seeing it coming if Ms. Grant hadn’t come out of the cafeteria when she did, because you are a coward.” Now she looked away from her stepfather to her mother, whose eyes were watering, but was no longer looking as if Chloe would grow a second head at any moment. “I know that David has cameras all over this house. He’d have one in my bedroom still but last week Rachel, Max and I found his setup and fucked with it. I know he was peeping on us, all of us.” Glancing back, David had stopped drunkenly trying to grab and throttle her. It made him look less like a giant infant, but no less pathetic, lying there, chin pressed against his chest.

“I know you stalk me and the people I love. That’s right, we found out a long time ago but that manilla folder on top of the cabinets in the garage proved it. Why aren’t all the photos you take in there, too? Keep them for your personal fuckin’ collection?” She didn’t want to finish her grand soliloquy. She wanted to draw it out further, mock this man, make him feel as small as he was, so
Chloe took a step forward until, leaning over the remains of the banister, she was looking down at him. David was confused now, no longer raging, just lost, as if he couldn’t comprehend how this little girl got one over on him. Joyce was holding her breath two steps below him and when he reached out to her for help, the woman backed down a step. It did not make Chloe feel any more kindly toward the woman, but her heart warmed at the idea that David had no lifelines immediately in his presence.

“I know that you are a cowardly, sexist little pig. I know you pick on teenage girls to fuck with them because it makes you feel big, it makes you powerful again. You have people to order around again, now and you can threaten them because they will fear you. I know it helps you pretend your clinical paranoia is reasonable. I’ve known all of this for so long and I’ve tried to keep it mostly to myself, to deal with it, for her. But I’m done. She doesn’t give a fuck about how I feel, and I don’t give a shit about how she feels either.” The lump began to rise in her throat, the rage gave way. She was not Rachel or Max. She did not have a storm inside her, she could not rage against everything in front of her until the end of time. Chloe took one long stride over the man which turned into a hop, one in which she landed with watering eyes on both feet somewhere on the third step, Joyce Madsen in front of her. “And I know that if either of you ever hurt Max Caulfield or Rachel Amber, I will burn your fucking world to the ground. Now get the fuck out of my way.” At this, Joyce pressed against the wall to let Chloe past. She didn’t have the grace or kindness to look scared or ashamed, just sad and self-pitying. I should have spoken up sooner, dad. I wish you were here. You would have known what to do.

The one thing Chloe knew for sure as she shut the front door behind her, bag full of stuff, was that she would never spend another night under this roof. This moment had been coming for two years and she had felt it time and time again. Little pieces of the way anger fought tears had danced across her relationship with Joyce and David Madsen for a long time. A hundred confrontations in which she wanted to yell at the blonde inside, a hundred arguments where Joyce pretended that Chloe was being crazy. A hundred conversations where she gaslit me rather than see what was right in front of her.

As Chloe threw her bag into the back and opened the driver’s side door of the truck, the world blurred beneath tears. The front door of the home opened and Joyce Madsen strode out. She was there, a mosaic stained glass image in the distance as Chloe rolled her window down and gave the woman one last chance to save some face. She shoved her keys into the ignition and tried to blink the tears away. They came anyway, as she seethed, air hissing past her teeth. It was going to take time for them to fade. I am going to scream if I have to speak to them. I am going to cry. I am going to cry when I talk about this in a few minutes to Steph. This has always been coming.

“Where are you going?” Joyce Madsen asked.

“I’m going home,” she told the woman. “You and your sick little family enjoy yourselves. Hope you’ve got a spycam kink, he’s got you covered.” The truck started and she squeezed her eyes tightly, then opened them. Her sight cleared enough that she felt comfortable to throw the vehicle in reverse. For what she sincerely hoped was the last time, she heard the man behind Joyce call her
name and saw David appear in the doorway. Her left hand slid from the wheel and when she was sure they could both see her clearly, she flipped them off. She paused long enough to turn the radio up, to drown out anything either might say and then pulled away from the house. The voice in her head that had told her she should have let David fall went quiet under the onslaught of the music. *For once in your life,* she told herself, *you did the right thing, even if it was way too late.*

Chloe knocked on the door to the house. For the last two weeks she had been opening it up to let herself in, practically living there. The problem was that this was different. This time she was coming to beg for something big. Not a night, not even two weeks. Something much more. She still understood why Steph’s face was twisted with confusion when the door finally opened almost half a minute later. Steph’s mouth was open to ask what in the *hell* she was doing when Chloe realized that this was that ‘in a few minutes’ she had been thinking of as she drove away from the *Madsen* house. Did Steph see how completely she felt broken or did she see some sign of how angry she still was? Either way, confusion became concern and Chloe followed the line of the girl’s eyes to the blood around the neck of her shirt or on her fist. *Speak, Price.*

“I-um,” it took a lot for her to keep the heavy bag on her shoulder as she tried to match Steph’s gaze. “I need to know if you think we can make this ‘me staying here’ thing a little more… long term.” Chloe swallowed. The lump in her throat had never gone away and every last bit of pride she had squeaked by it with her words. If Steph said no, she was going to beg Rose Amber and she didn’t know what the consequences of that would be. Steph’s silence began to scare Chloe though the way her face hardened only confused her. This wasn’t the kind of thing Steph would get mad about, she would just say ‘no.’

“Chloe are you alright?” Steph asked, finally, leaving her front door wide open as she stepped down onto the porch. Chloe’s eyes shot sideways to her favorite chair on the porch, one she often sat on when reading for class or the play in the afternoons. Her audition only about two hours ago felt so far away, like another lifetime. “Chloe, are you okay?” Chloe finally shook her head. “No,” she said. There was no pity in Steph’s eyes. She had gotten better about that. Or maybe Steph had just gotten to *know* her. There was care though and this strange undercurrent of anger which Chloe thought it might be a bad idea to get on the wrong side of. “I don’t think I have a home right now and short of the cops coming to pick me up, I’m not going to sleep under David’s roof ever again.” When Steph didn’t speak, Chloe jumped to fill in some blanks, to try to convince her. “I promise I’ll find work. I’ll do whatever it takes, I just need somewhere to stay, even if it’s just when your parents aren’t here.”

“Stop being stupid and come inside,” Steph told her, tugging her insistently toward the door. “Fuck rent, just toss some cash toward food bills when you can and we’re fine. Otherwise this house sits here empty and worthless.” *It’s not empty,* Chloe wanted to say, *you’re here, and that’s enough.* For the second time that day a hand closed around her sore, aching wrist. This one was soft and its gentle tug insisted that she come inside, come home. “You’ve been moved in for two weeks, Chloe. What the hell was supposed to change between now and then?”
“Now it’s not temporary. I can’t go back, I won’t go back,” she insisted as she followed the brunette inside. The sound of Steph reaching past her to close the door, that satisfying thud, was oddly comforting. Though she had been gone from the Madsen house for almost fifteen minutes, it only now felt like she had crossed the threshold.

“Doesn’t matter, I never intended on letting you go back there, Chloe. It’s only you being a hardheaded ass that made you not see that. Rachel knew it, Max knew it.” Chloe shook her head but it was at the back of Steph’s head as the girl pulled her again, still softly, still coaxingly as if she were a scared pet, toward the kitchen. “But you’re going to have to tell me why you came home bloody.” In an odd mirror of the day they discovered the cameras in the Madsen household, Steph led her into the kitchen and not to the table but over to the sink, where she insisted that Chloe wash the blood from her right hand. Perhaps it was that act of gentle care on top of everything else that pulled the stopper. Chloe stood over the sink, cold water running across her sore fist, knuckles torn and blubbered.

Any and all attempt at speaking came out a mix between a child’s tantrum and the sound of an injured animal cry. As soon as Steph let go of her hand, she took it to mean that the blood was mostly gone and began to splash cold water across her face. Each time she found herself still unable to form a word, she splashed herself again, gasping against the frustrated sounds she was making. Steph’s hand on her shoulder, her soft attempts to pull Chloe from the sink did nothing. Chloe was glad she didn’t try to get more forceful about it. At some point the girl must have pulled Chloe’s beanie from her head so it did not get soaked because Chloe spotted it on the counter out of the corner of her eye. After her fourth or fifth splash of water, Steph began to talk to her.

“Come on, come sit down.” Chloe thought she was right. This wasn’t helping, this wasn’t doing anything. The stream of water died as she turned the knob and walked, cold trailing down her face to her ruined shirt and started for a kitchen chair. Steph redirected her quickly and Chloe let herself be lead to her favorite spot on the right end of the absurdly large brown couch. Steph sat beside her, but turned toward the back of the couch. Chloe looked down at her right hand. The blood was not gone without a trace, but at least she looked less like she had dipped her torn knuckles into a can of paint. Warmth settled around her shoulders and she looked to the side to see the comforter from the back of the couch around her. It was unnecessary but it reminded her of long summer nights sitting on Steph’s back porch, doing nothing but listening to music and looking at the sky. It reminded her of time before she had confronted Max, before all of the issues weighing on her in that moment became monumental, giant stone monoliths of lore.

“I think that’s better,” Chloe finally said, after a few minutes.

“I texted Max and Rachel,” Steph told her. Chloe couldn’t remember the girl ever pulling her phone out, but then Chloe had no idea how long she had been sitting there. Maybe it had been a few minutes, maybe it had been an hour.
“Can I explain it all at once? To all three of you?” She turned enough to see the girl beside her nod and then asked, “Can I just have a fucking hug?” Steph nodded again, this time smiling sadly at her. *Can I just sleep for a year?*
Max was waiting for in the hallway, phone still in her hand. There was no pretense about Max, fuck it, there was no pretense about either of them. They were both pissed. What little Steph had been able to glean from Chloe and pass on to them was that David had crossed some sort of line when Chloe went to get school books from her bedroom at her mother’s house and she was now, declaring her intent to never live there again. He learned nothing from last night, Rachel thought as she took in the sight of Max, staring at her with questions in her eyes.

“Are we going to Steph’s place or are we going to Joyce’s?” Max asked her, voice low, serious. “Tell me now so I know whether to calm the fuck down or to call Joyce and tell her we’re coming.” There was no bombast in this statement. Max was not letting off steam by saying these things, she was serious. If Rachel said the words and drove the car she knew that the two of them could very easily confront the Madsens in their own home. The thing was that unlike Max, Rachel was not normal. There was no universe where, if they went to the Madsen house and found that David had done anything to hurt Chloe, the house would not burn to the last cinder. The question was serious, so it deserved an answer.

“Steph’s,” Rachel replied before she pulled her jacket on. The thing hung heavy on her, in that way that sometimes made her want to hunch under it when she first wore it. Her legs were groaning at her for walking anywhere else. After all, last night they had gotten quite a workout and then still did their job for school that day. Let’s take a breath, Rachel. Chloe needs you. Distracted as she was, the blonde took a step away from the door to her dorm before she realized she had not shut it and had to turn back to do so. Max did not stop, keeping up her pace and striding toward the door at the end of the hall as if it owed her something. Go get ‘em honey.

The only downside to Max taking the lead was that she had to pause and wait at Rachel’s car as Rachel eased her sore legs down the stairs into the lot a moment or two later. To her credit, she
stayed calm as Rachel took a second to glance toward the few twisted leavings of the trash can she had destroyed the night before. *And fuck it very much,* she thought, a bit proud of herself, all things told. It was an unfortunate reminder of what the anger currently bubbling around her chest right now could do, but Rachel had Max at her side and their girl was ‘safe at home’ as Steph put it.

She could calm down if she chose to and so she did. The ride to Steph’s (*Steph’s and Chloe’s,* she corrected,) was mostly quiet except for two or three of Max’s aborted threats toward David Madsen. Calming down or not, Rachel understood Max’s clenched fists and jaw. If they walked through the door and found Chloe injured, Max was going to have to give Joyce that warning call, anyway. At one point, just as they were pulling up to the large, red brick house, Rachel shot a glance toward Max. The girl leaned forward, resting her head in her hand, face turned into a grimace and then she rose all at once, shaking slightly. Rachel called her name and turned the car off, earning a slightly confused look and then Max turned toward the door, as if realizing they weren’t moving.

They unbuckled and got out of the car without speaking again. Between the two of them, Rachel thought, nothing needed to be said. Their girl was in there and if she was in trouble they were going to handle it. Part of what Rachel loved about the girl beside her is that she was one of the few people Rachel knew could *usually* be counted on to handle things, even if she thought that Max had been too soft on David Madsen. *Whatever Chloe’s about to tell us, I think it’s going to change Max’s stance on that particular douchenozzle. Huh, what the hell, I think ‘douchenozzle’ does fit better.*

They didn’t knock. Steph had told them not to bother and so they didn’t, but Rachel, concerned perhaps about how cognizant Max was of the moment, let her go in first. Steph called to them from the back of the house and Rachel passed a bathroom on one side, a living room on the other and into the kitchen, where Chloe sat staring down at a glass half full of ice and water. Opposite of her, Steph was sipping at a dark, long necked bottle. Frankly, Rachel was rather surprised Chloe didn’t have a beer in her hand. Max seemed to take a cue of some sort from Steph because as they approached the table the girl dug a green stainless steel bottle that Rachel recognized as usually containing less water and more *vodka* from her bag. Steph gestured for them to sit down, mouth twisting into a frown as she glanced at Chloe.

“Chloe?” Rachel asked as the two of them stopped behind their chairs. At this the bluenette lifted her head and seemed to notice them for the first time. To her credit she tried to smile, it just looked hollow and half-hearted. Both the ring of her old, off-white vneck and the bottom of her neck itself were stained red. When Chloe leaned back in her chair and released the glass of water, Rachel saw yet more blood, which looked to have been poorly washed away, on the girl’s fist alongside signs that she had punched someone very hard. *She had to defend herself against him today.* Chloe’s eyes were watery and red, puffy and swollen. That meant tears. Rachel’s voice was robbed from her, but Max’s not so much.

“What happened?” Max asked, her tone calm, controlled as she eased into the seat closer to Steph than Chloe. A loud, hollow *thunk* accompanied Max opening the bottle in her hand and taking a
long draw. Almost imperceptibly, she winced as she swallowed. *Vodka. But she didn’t eat lunch.*

“So,” Chloe said as Rachel filed a firm chewing out away for Max to enjoy later, “I sort of broke David’s nose today.”

“My hero,” Rachel told her, reaching out to grasp Chloe’s left hand in her own.

“Um, this is kinda hard to talk about so, can I get it all out?” Chloe asked, and Rachel swallowed. This was not a thing to make jokes about, she realized as Steph nodded supportively. Max responded with utter silence, but took another small drink. *I’ll carry her out of here if she isn’t careful.* “Thanks.” Chloe’s words were short and stilted, as if they were some sort of effort or as if she didn’t know what kind of feelings were attached to them. Rachel knew that kind of situation better than anyone. She went to squeeze Chloe’s hand but when she did the girl winced. Rachel looked down at the hand. Around the wrist a ring of bruises about right for the size of David’s hand was forming. They were going to be dark, too.

“So, I decided to pick up some things from my room and I snuck into the house and went upstairs. He had completely trashed it.” Rachel grimaced. “I found some clothes, but there’s still so much over there.” This was said with some tone of loss or wonder or both. Chloe’s right hand passed across the grain of the wood tabletop back and forth. The texture of the wood seemed to be a comfort to her as she found the words to continue. “I got everything I thought my backpack could carry… it wasn’t enough. It wasn’t enough to be worth it, at least?” This last was said as a question, asking to be understood. Rachel only nodded and this time carefully, softly ran her fingers across the back of Chloe’s left hand.

“David heard me up there and came up to wait. So when I left he kind of just grabbed me and backed me up against a wall. I thought I could get away but he was drunk and angry. I mean really mad. I didn’t even do anything to set him off, I just tried to get away. I guess I should have tried harder or should have been quieter or shouldn’t have gone there today, but, I wanted my things.” *It’s not your fault,* she wanted to tell the girl. *You can’t control when David acts like a manchild.* “He was going to hurt me so I hurt him.” Beside her, Max lowered her left hand and rested it on Rachel’s right knee, squeezing as if to brace her, to remind her to be strong.

“I broke his nose, broke the bannister, he almost fell down the stairs. Why did I stop him?”

“Because no matter how much of an ass he is, you’re a good person,” Steph answered. “You’re a good person who didn’t want to see someone get seriously hurt.”

“Not true,” Chloe told her, shaking her head animatedly. It was probably the most life they’d seen
out of her yet. “I stood over him, I enjoyed watching him hurt, confused, lost. Part of me still wishes he’d fallen.” Rachel shook her head.

“Steph’s right. You stopped him, you did the right thing and it’s okay to admit that while also admitting that there are worse people who could be chosen to fall down a flight of stairs.” This attempt at humor was unsuccessful. Rachel quieted again but her right hand reached sideways and she took Max’s bottle off of the table without asking. She took far too large of a swallow. The liquid in it burned like pure fire on its way down her throat, bracing and familiar, almost comforting in how unpleasant it was. Rachel slid the bottle back and waited.

“I said a lot. I told Joyce everything. I mean everything. More than I meant to. Then I was just yelling, just trying to scare him and it was pointless, because he was already scared. The way he looked up at me, it wasn’t that he was scared I was going to hurt him. He was scared that I had turned what he thought he was into something else. He was just laying there helpless and stupid and couldn’t even get up without a hand or without sliding partway down the stairs.” Chloe was shaking her head now and it was all Rachel could do not to reach out to her. “I just told them to fuck off, that I wasn’t moving back. I told Joyce about the cameras, about the Prescotts, the files he was keeping, the ones we have on him, but I didn’t tell him where we hid the drive.” Chloe looked up suddenly, eyes wide as if she needed them to know that. Rachel nodded. She also saw recognition on Steph’s face. “I just yelled about the pictures, about him following us around. She looked too stupid and hurt to answer. Like I was hurting her. Like it was my fault.” Chloe’s free hand clenched into a fist and Rachel heard her speak over tears, as if they weren’t allowed anymore.

“I’m sorry,” Max told her. “I’m sorry we didn’t do anything about David before.” For one insane moment she thought about exposing what she had been up to last night even with Steph sitting there on Max’s other side, watching quietly. Rachel did turn her way though, and she thought that the artist was not so much watching them as thinking.

“There was nothing any of you could really do, though, is there?” Steph asked. “David did all this shit. You had no choice but to keep trying to stay out of trouble until he threatened one of you.” Rachel privately agreed, but found the words hard to parse through. She and Max were going to have to pay David and Joyce a visit tomorrow but it was going to have to be after school and with the coolest heads the two of them could possibly muster. For a second, she craved the burn of the drink Max was passing back and forth between her hands, but Rachel swallowed it and turned back to Chloe, who had fallen silent.

“I just yelled,” Chloe finally said. “I yelled until I was done and I left and now I can’t go back.” It felt like an unfulfilling ending to the story, but it was heartfelt and true. Rachel rather regretted that she did not see David knocked on his ass, herself. He didn’t learn last night, he might not learn today. I need to get it together and warn Frank. There was a time for texting your drug dealer and telling him that your girlfriend’s stepfather was stalking him. That time was not now, that place not here. At Steph’s suggestion the four of them retreated to the living room where the seats were softer and there was a television to fill silence whenever no one had anything to say.
Rachel found Steph’s character sketch for her halfling paladin when she sat down in the recliner, leaving the couch to Chloe, Max and Steph herself. The sketch was half done and Rachel wondered if this was what Steph was working on before Chloe got home, perhaps intent on showing it to her as a conversation starter. The day could have gone so much different for them both without David Madsen’s rage. Quietly, very quietly, Rachel decided she had to examine the question of whether she thought something she said and did the night before had anything to do with his drunken anger, with him assaulting Chloe.

She would be lying to herself if she gave any answer but yes. Before she and Max (who would be drunk by that point, Rachel guessed) left the house that evening, Rachel would have to pull Chloe aside in private and tell her everything. Her guilt demanded it, if nothing else.

*September 14th, 2011 3:47 PM*

Frank

Amber I was followed home last night by some kind of fucking “True Detective” You have any thoughts about that?

Me

Isn’t your home your RV?

Frank

I was followed to where I usually park my RV smartass

Me

That kind of sounds like a problem

Frank

No shit. What do u know?

Me

I think I know who it is
Frank

You gonna tell me or is it 20 ?

Me

David Madsen- Chloe’s stepfather

Frank

You and your little friends are going dry. Until you hear otherwise lose my fucking number.

“Son of a bitch.” Rachel slid her phone back into her pocket, raised a hand to her left temple and rubbed against a growing headache. Max turned a concerned look on her. “Frank cut us off.” The brunette looked unimpressed at this declaration. She probably had a fairly full stash rather like Rachel did. So David got his nose broken by Chloe and went out to harass Frank? Jesus, does this guy ever learn?

She had woken up with the best of intentions for the day. She was going to stay calm- calm, cool and collected. She was going to go through her day, spend her morning with Max, go to classes, meet Max, Kate and Steph for lunch and everything was going to be alright by the time she and Max were standing here; or at least, as alright as things could be. As Rachel looked across the porch at Max, listening to the sound of raised voices, shouting from behind the front door, she recollected on how far the plan had gone off point. Rachel passed one of the large, black trash bags (‘donated’ by Samuel when he turned his back on his cart some time shortly after lunch) to Max. The girl barely met her eyes when she took it: she was trying to hide the combination nerves and anger. Neither of their moods was helped by Joyce Madsen screaming at the top of her lungs inside, clearly upset. Trouble in paradise, I see?

Things went wrong almost from the moment she woke up, receiving a text informing her that last night Chloe had finished the majority of the contents of Max’s abandoned bottle of vodka and was currently hungover in bed. Rachel hadn’t expected Chloe to come to school yesterday, at all, but the idea of her sitting at home miserable while Steph was out of the house left a sour taste in Rachel’s mouth. Adding to that an inability to get Max to have breakfast, (‘I’m not hungry,’ she had insisted,) and she was in a pisspoor mood before class even started.

It had taken an hour for David’s month long vacation announcement to reach her. An hour after that it reached Max and they had been in the hall talking about what it meant when Eliot walked by with Nathan, making a comment offhandedly about the police responding to a domestic dispute at David’s house and how Chloe had gone crazy and attacked him. The gist of the story he was telling Nathan seemed to be that David had acted improperly with her and she had responded violently. In
essence, a thinly veiled accusation of molestation. Rachel had been stopped from breaking *his* nose only by Max physically wrapping herself around Rachel’s middle. By this time, Chloe was probably wide awake and mostly over her hangover. Steph had likely reached the house and here Rachel stood beside Max trying to figure out how best to go into the Madsen house, clean it of anything that was Chloe’s (or at least her clothing) and then get out without Rachel making it all into ash.

Frankly, as David gave a great, bellowing cry of frustration from what might have been the back yard, Rachel turned away from the door and settled down on the porch. Max looked hesitant above her, but the brunette eventually agreed. She watched Max fold first one leg and then the next, lowering herself into a sitting position not more than a foot from Rachel. Unlike Rachel though, she was turned to watch the door. Rachel couldn’t blame her, she didn’t want to be surprised by anyone coming out of the building, either. She sighed and leaned back on her hands, turning her head to look into Max’s eyes. It took the photographer a moment to notice she was doing it.

“What?” Max asked her, quietly. If she was trying to go unheard, Rachel was going to laugh. The two inside the house weren’t going to hear either of them unless they really *were* packing a bomb.

“I just wanted something other to think about than David and about doing something more than breaking his nose.” Max nodded, hand shifting to rest atop Rachel’s. “I want you to make sure we get a new flash drive made with the new info you found the other night.” Again, Max only nodded. She was looking at Rachel with eyes like a camera lens, sharply watching her and taking photographs when an important look crossed her face.

“Are you planning some kind of revenge on David?” Max asked her.

“Night before last I tried to scare him. He’s been following all three of us, Steph and Frank. I just wanted to scare him off, then.” She wasn’t entirely sure why her voice was all calm as she continued. “Last night I thought about giving David what he deserved after we got back to the dorms. You were barely on your feet, Chloe was kind of fucking drained back at Steph’s but I was angry still. I could have used that anger, but you know what?” Max tilted her head, those eye-lenses zooming in. “I’m not David. I don’t need to stoop that low. Besides,” and now Rachel smiled at her. “He’s gonna have to live with the fact that his 120 pound step daughter broke his nose and then saved him from falling down the stairs. As far as I’m concerned, unless he keeps up his surveillance state routine, he’s gotten what’s coming to him.” *David got his. I’ll have to watch him for the next few days, but if he keeps his behavior in check, then I’ll let it go. At least he won’t be on campus for a month.* Rachel rather thought she was going to take a sick day or two to be sure, though.

*Relax, right now Chloe is safe, Steph is safe, they’re at their house. Max is safe, she’s by my side. Can’t I just relax?* Almost as soon as the thought was finished, the screaming between David and Joyce returned. *Oh right, that’s why. I’m about to walk into that.*
“I think it’s time, Max,” Rachel said. In her jacket pocket were two more trash bags, which were hopefully, all told, going to be enough to at least bring all of Chloe’s clothing, if not the rest of it to her. When the two of them were side by side in front of the door, and only then, Max knocked. It was loud, forceful beneath Max’s insistence. It was loud enough, at least, to quiet the sound of shouting. Rachel would have been willing to make a bet on who was going to answer, judging by the sound of heavy boots thunking against the thinly carpeted floor of the hall leading to the front door. Rachel did not hide her smile when the door opened.

In addition to the **deserved** addition of a bandage on David’s nose, he was sporting a pair of shiners the likes of which Rachel had never seen. If there wasn’t the potential of the man staring down at her like she was a bug flying off the handle, she would have taken a photo and framed it for her dorm room. *Max does have a camera on her.* David took a quick look at the two of them, spotting the unfolded trash bag in Max’s hands and then turned around and slammed the door in their faces before either of them could speak. He was dressed in a pale blue polo which was visible in the small windows to the left of the door. He looked fairly well put together but he seemed more interested in returning to the kitchen than letting them in. Rachel was rather happy not to have the man in her presence any longer than she had. Max banged harder on the door, going from quiet and concerned to aggressive. Apparently neither of them were particularly emotionally stable. *Maybe Joyce should let us in, let us get Chloe’s shit and get out of here. And maybe I need to call Frank.*

It took a moment for anyone to turn down the hall and by this point Rachel was watching through the window with no hesitation to note. Oh sure, it was bad manners to look into someone’s windows, but then, privacy didn’t matter much to one of the people living there and, for all the screaming and yelling he was there still, meaning it must not matter much to the other. This other, Joyce Madsen, was the one who Rachel finally saw coming. She exhaled and glanced sideways at Max.

“Joyce is coming,” Rachel told her and watched the girl relax to some degree. Perhaps like herself, Max wasn’t particularly fond of seeing either of them. Still, Rachel far preferred the blonde approaching them over her husband. When Joyce opened the door she expected Max to greet the woman, as they had always seemed to share some sort of warmth between them, maybe due to her role in Max’s life before Rachel met either of the girls. Max remained quiet as Joyce examined them through puffy eyes, her face cross, her jaw set. When she spoke to them it was from a throat hoarse with screaming.

“I figured it would be you two,” Joyce muttered. Rachel thought she was attempting to speak softly to them, but was not quite able to get her throat to cooperate. The anger in her features eased, smoothed, but did not go away.

“Yes ma’am,” Max replied. It was the single most formal thing Rachel could recall Max saying to Joyce. *Ma’am* was what Max reserved for impersonal teachers or Rachel’s own mother (who knew all about the girls’ relationship through a series of events Rachel did not particularly care to think
about involving no courtesy in the way of knocking) but never for Joyce. Joyce was ‘Joyce’ at worst, ‘hey you’ at best. “We’re here to get Chloe’s clothes and as much of her other things as we can carry.” This was the part of the conversation where they gleaned whether or not Joyce was going to involve the police if Chloe tried to move out. Rachel held her breath. She was especially cognizant of a strong gust of wind that blew from behind her toward Joyce, whose hair shifted pitifully under its assault.

“Will you tell me where Chloe is?” Joyce asked Max, as if she was unsure that she could get the same response from Rachel. *She’s trying to take advantage of Max. She knows Max loves her.* Rachel wanted to speak up, to call Joyce out on this low move, but the minute she opened her mouth, Max pressed a hand to her shoulder, comfortingly. Making sure to hold Joyce’s gaze, Max shook her head slowly like a disappointed parent. The waitress deflated slightly.

“That’s kind of down to Chloe at this point,” Max insisted. “That’s her choice. Y—” the brunette’s mouth slammed shut and Rachel watched her swallow some comment. It was odd to see Max this conflicted about her anger. Max was usually a master of righteous fury. Yesterday she had been chomping at the bits to come to the house and scream herself raw at Joyce and her bumbling husband. Today Max walked like a man through a minefield. Every step measured and taken so delicately it could be her last. Rachel just wanted self control enough not to set that field aflame.

“Please, Max. Lord knows I love Chloe. I have *tried and tried.* She has made it clear that that wasn’t enough and after what I’ve seen,” Joyce sighed and Rachel again got the self-pitying vibe from her, the one that Chloe sometimes pointed out as making it impossible to speak to her about anything she did wrong. “I can’t say she’s wrong. Just, I want to know if my little girl’s alright.” *I wonder how she’d feel to know Chloe calls her by name?* “I want what’s best for her.”

“I know,” Max said, voice lowering. The photographer looked away from Joyce with watering eyes. Rachel broke in despite herself.

“I-I don’t know,” she added, causing Joyce to turn her head around quickly. “I know you love her, or you say you do and sometimes you act like it, but you can’t use our past on me like you can on Max.” The woman began to look mildly affronted but Rachel didn’t want to give her time to argue that point. She knew manipulation, whether conscious or not, Joyce was being manipulative and with everything else going on in Max’s life, Rachel wasn’t about to let her sink her claws into the girl. “I actually think you’re a good person Joyce, but you’ve learned to use a person’s love for you like a sword and a shield. I don’t have the long past with you that Max does to weigh against what I saw happening to Chloe last night when she talked about yesterday. So when I look at you I see a relatively well intentioned person who forgot to put her family first, who keeps shifting the blame everywhere but at herself.” *A lot like my own mother.* “I see someone who’s used to emotional appeals making them untouchable. Right now the only emotions I have for you are shitty, because Chloe doesn’t fucking *cry* but she did last night.”
“I love my daughter,” Joyce repeated, emphatically. Rachel believed her. She just wasn’t sure she believed Joyce loved her enough to do the right thing. Not right now.

“Then let us go upstairs, get what she needs and then we’ll get out of your way.” As Max spoke, Rachel realized that for the first time since they arrived David was completely silent. Whatever he was doing, she suspected it involved silently fuming about their presence. Joyce Madsen stepped aside, crossing her arms. It seemed to be about all that Rachel and Max were going to get. Rachel wondered to herself why she was dressed for work when it was clear she had not gone into the diner that day, but that was a mystery she was not inclined to pursue. “Our loyalty is to Chloe,” Max added, seeming to find her voice properly. “Right now that means not telling anyone where she is, not cutting her off from the one place she feels entirely safe.” 

Chloe’s room was as she had described the night before, clothing, papers and various odds and ends spread about the room. Max got on clothing and Rachel took to gathering books, papers and notebooks, trying her best to keep everything nice and neat. She was surprised by the sheer amount of sketchbooks and notebooks Chloe had. She was even more surprised by the fact that most of those notebooks were actually full of text. Rachel didn’t feel like there was time to stop and read anything to get an idea of what she had for various reasons (including the fight resuming downstairs in the kitchen) but she did wonder how she had never noticed Chloe writing all the time. She would have had to to fill this much paper.

Rachel wasn’t sure who had it worse. Max had infinitely more volume and was taking time and care to properly fold the majority of the clothing but it was all grouped into one of two areas. The texts and sketchbooks on the other hand had been strewn everywhere. In one case, Rachel retrieved a page, half crumpled from the windowsill. When her bag was nearly full, she pulled out the remaining one and declared it would have to be a ‘hybrid.’ Max worked in silence so Rachel matched it. It wasn’t comfortable silence: nothing about this was comfortable.

The truth was that Rachel suspected that at any moment David might come up the stairs raging at them. If he was capable of actually attacking Chloe, he was capable of anything as far as she was concerned. The potential damage that she would end up doing if she lost her cool, well, Rachel really didn’t like to think about it. Despite threats to the contrary that night in the Blackwell parking lot, Rachel didn’t particularly relish the idea of hurting anyone but the concept of self-defense did not escape her as a worthy ideal. If it looked like he was going to lay his hands on her or Max, he was going to get burned.

All told the three bags were probably full to the brim even before Rachel retrieved Chloe’s favorite pillow. That didn’t stop Max from pausing, turning around the room once and then striding to the closet confidently. Rachel tied the two bulkiest and heaviest of the bags off. It was better that they hold until they reached Steph and Chloe’s house and need to be ripped open to get at what was inside than that there was a spill out on the lawn or worse, in the car on the way there. Rachel watched as Max knelt on the edge of the closet, reaching for something along the floor.
“Don’t judge,” Max advised her, half smiling as she rose to a standing position. “But this might be the kind of thing Chloe needs.” Mr. Sharkie, who Rachel had never paid much attention to, was stuffed under Max’s arm. In her left hand, though, was an old collapsible spyglass. It looked very cheaply made, she wasn’t sure it had much value or use at all. Max noticed her looking at it and turned slightly red. “Pirate’s treasure map,” she explained. Rachel raised an eyebrow, unable to resist smiling as Max’s complexion only darkened. “Whatever,” Max exclaimed, apparently catching on to Rachel’s attempt to tease her.

They hauled the bags downstairs without incident. So raucous was the fight raging in the kitchen that neither of them seem to notice either of the girls abscond with their freshly pillaged booty. Rachel waited until the bags were packed into the back seat and she was behind the wheel of her car to breathe a sigh of relief. It felt good to actually be doing something helpful, something that had minimum consequences for everyone involved. Rachel started the car and rested her right hand on the gear shift. She was taking last look at the house when she felt Max’s hand close over hers.

“Chloe’s gonna be okay, you know that.”

“I know that,” Rachel promised the brunette, giving her the widest smile she could muster. “She’s got us, and frankly, we’re pretty badass.”

“Pretty badass,” Max echoed, releasing her hand so she could shift into reverse. “Pretty damned badass.”

_Hopefully this will cheer Chloe up enough that she’ll come back to school tomorrow and get back into the swing of things. No David there, which I’m guessing Steph’s already told her by now. Rachel didn’t spare much thought for David’s sudden ‘vacation.’ If there was any justice in the world he was just scared and deciding to lay low. Unfortunately, there’s really not. Which means David is going to be bitter, angry and probably as big an ass as ever. He’s not going to leave Frank alone. He needs to be morally superior and he just got fucking embarrassed. He’s not going to stop until someone gets seriously hurt._

As soon as they got where they were going, Rachel texted Hayden to let him know she’d be by for her ‘gear.’

Chapter End Notes

Hey, it’s that time of the week again. Oh, man. I wish you all could see how much progress has been made on Kaukasos since I wrote this chapter. Somewhere in the
realm of ten chapters are now sitting backed up, waiting, so I hope you enjoy as those continue to come out. On my end I'm approaching the end of Part 3 and it is kinda crazy to consider we're almost in the home stretch on this story, but it's fun and there's still plenty to go. Wanna shout out to my friend and betareader Seraphzerox. He's been tearing into this story like crazy especially over this last week and a half. If you're looking for something to sink your teeth into between Wednesday/Sunday updates, I recommend checking out his story, Life is Strange: Days Beyond. An interesting cast of characters and an interesting premise come to Arcadia Bay.

That's it for me, for now. Hope you all don't mind the end notes as there will be a couple more during Part 3, there are some things that I feel need to be said, morally speaking. Have a good day.
A few trees near the three of them rustled in the wind. Chloe, despite the growing knot of tension in the back of her neck, spun to lean her back against the table and relax, watching the leaves shift in the breeze. Perhaps, were she not waiting, seemingly in vain, for Max to speak up and spill her secrets, it would be a good day. It was neither too hot nor too cold, classes had been fairly merciful and Eliot had received detention in physics for some offhand comment about how the school would probably need to train new security guards to ‘resist persuasion’ from students. (Not only was the sentiment generally awful, Chloe knew precisely who it had been aimed at, the rumor going around about an improper relationship between herself and her stepfather remained a topic of discussion among a small faction of students whom Chloe wished nothing but a long life of herpes.) Now she and her girlfriends were sitting around a favored gathering spot and she was about to go home, do homework, cook food, all without fear of David Madsen standing over her shoulder, telling her she was worthless.

It should have been a good day. However, despite being warned very bluntly that Chloe needed Max to start giving her answers, Max remained a mystery. Chloe could recall at least three times throughout the day where she had prompted Max to answer some questions and she could recall all three times the way the girl went silent, shut her mouth and looked down at the table or ground. Chloe had not forgotten the reasoning behind this behavior: she knew that she was asking a lot of Max. She also knew that for a year now Max had asked a lot of them both. In this way, it was time for the photographer to reciprocate. Every passing hour where Max pretended she had not been given the warning just left that knot at the base of Chloe’s neck to grow.

Quietly, Chloe almost wished that she hadn’t driven to school that day. It was a stupid thing to do, all told. She could have always ridden with Steph. Kind of wasteful on her limited supply of gasoline and even more limited supply of cash. Not that Steph’s willing to take a damn cent. I’m starting to wonder if I can find a damn job in this city without standing over a fryer. She didn’t find anything wrong with flipping burgers, but Chloe had to believe there was something else for her in Arcadia Bay. Either way, it’s probably better for everyone involved if I don’t use the truck as often.
“What’s the rest of the day look like, Chloe?” Rachel asked her from across the table. Chloe eased herself back around on her seat, frustrated by the momentary impulse to look directly away from the brunette beside Rachel. Instead she let her eyes pass over Max’s face and offered a small smile. Pissed as she was getting to be she hated the idea of sending the wrong message. She was not abandoning Max, but there was going to be an argument very soon if the girl did not open up.

“I think I’ll go back to the house soon and start some homework. There’s also the matter of dinner and I don’t think I want Chinese, McDonalds or to step foot anywhere near the Two Whales for the next few weeks.” Rachel nodded and Max grimaced. Fair reactions both, but Chloe was a little more emotional at the concept of seeing Joyce again. She wasn’t entirely sure how either of them would respond, for one thing, and for another a public meltdown was not something she was prepared for. Don’t even really care for private ones. One thing was for sure, if they were to see each other this soon, one of them would end up upset, especially given the story Rachel relayed about her mother’s attempts to emotionally manipulate Max.

“Well, I’m proud of you for turning into a model student,” Rachel replied, shutting her copy of the Hamlet script. Chloe felt a jolt of guilt bubble up as she realized she had forgotten a little detail. “But it’s Thursday.”

“The first play practice,” Chloe acknowledged. The wind brushed briefly through her hair with enough force that, were it as long as Rachel’s, it would have messed it up. Lately, she was given to wondering when that happened how much of it was chance and how much of it was a harmless jab from the blonde across from her. Max’s revelation about the extent of Rachel’s effect on the environment around her had been surprising to the blonde but not unduly so for Chloe. She still remembered the night after A Midsummer Night’s Dream, the sudden and inexplicable winds that had manifested around American Rust Junkyard and nearly blew her from her feet once or twice. Chloe patted the bag beside her. “I’ve got my script. I promise I’ll be back in time.”

“Chloe, if you need to take a day, I think people will understand,” Rachel added, voice trailing off as if it was only obvious.

“No,” Chloe replied, feeling a bit of irritation edge into her voice. “You’ll understand. No one else knows what happened.” A sound like a hum of contemplation escaped the photographer opposite of her. Chloe had to admit Max’s quiet was not being received as gracefully as it could be. Maybe part of it was down to wanting to think about anything other than how weak she felt after her confrontation with her mother but the urge to push Max harder was growing stronger. It didn’t help that when Max was looking at her or speaking to her she did so as if Chloe was fragile china. That was probably the only real consequence of her explosion at the Madsen house, as long as one set aside that she was living with Steph. Beyond that and Max apparently wearing kid gloves around her, the world was mostly unchanged and if Chloe was honest, that was kind of eerie. Chloe laughed to herself.
Some word, aborted halfway through, reached Chloe’s ears and she looked up to see Kate a few steps from the table. At being spotted, the typically somewhat quiet girl’s face passed from concerned to relax. Chloe watched her brighten up as she and Max called out to her, gesturing her to the table. A fourth was probably a good addition to the table, at least until Chloe left. There was tension in the air and she knew that at any point someone could pull a knife out and cut that tension. While part of her would rather they all had it out right then and there, Blackwell’s public areas weren’t exactly what she would call conducive to such personal conversations. Besides, Max would just clam up again.

Kate settled onto the bench beside her. The girl was rapidly becoming one of those people around school that Chloe look forward to seeing. It wasn’t entirely about appreciating how close of a friend she was becoming with Max, it was something about the way that, regardless of how different she might be from them, Kate reached out to anyone and everyone. The dirty-blonde (not that dirty, Chloe thought, and immediately—not to mention halfheartedly—scolded herself for taking things into the gutter) was capable, under bad conditions, of being genuinely shy but that didn’t seem to stop her. Chloe respected that. She was also capable of admitting that the girl was cute and if that was going to be enough to send Chloe to hell, then at least she knew someone who would let her get used to the flames.

“Hey,” Chloe greeted again as Kate leaned against the table. It seemed that whenever a moment wasn’t dedicated specifically to just Chloe, Rachel and Max, Kate was with them unless one discounted nights spent at Steph’s. Not that Steph would mind. They got along fairly well together at lunch, after all. More than that she usually spent the afternoon doing homework with Max and sometimes Rachel, too, at least until the girls split off for their ‘alone’ time. As conversation struck up around the table, Chloe quietly relaxed and queried herself on just how jealous she was that Rachel and Max lived feet from each other and could essentially find time to themselves whenever they wanted. Unless one of them came to Steph’s or Chloe snuck into the dormitories, it was pretty hard for her to get time with them, time that was becoming more and more important the longer they were together.

“How are you handling school?” Chloe finally asked Kate, when there came a lull in the conversation. For the most part, early on the girl had seemed incredibly overwhelmed and marked her time with Max or Stella as her only real escapes from the that feeling. Now she walked at least with enough confidence in the halls that she was not being constantly eyed, scorned. Though she still gets shit from Victoria Chase and the Mean Girls.

“Honestly? It’s kind of… what’s the phrase? It’s a culture shock.” Chloe nodded, swallowing. She sometimes found the topic of conversation they were gearing toward uncomfortable but that came from some internal prejudices. “There’s also a lot of reading,” Kate added, as if she felt a bit silly admitting it. Apparently the conversation wasn’t going to be steered into any minefields today. “Like, I love to read for fun. It’s just that I do it at a steady pace and I do it for fun. I can’t enjoy it when I’m chugging through that fast. Especially if it’s actually a good story.”

“Speed reading shit sucks,” she agreed. Kate looked a little embarrassed as if the word choice
wasn’t one she would have chosen but Chloe pretended not to notice.

“I’m with Chloe on this one,” Max chimed in, seeming a bit more herself with a fourth person around the table. Just as Chloe had predicted, Kate was redirecting energy away from their little dramas. It meant that Chloe had less opportunity to prompt Max to finally tell them her secret but it also meant that there was less awkward silence. Chloe was getting tired of awkward silence, especially where Max was concerned. “I miss reading for fun but I never get to do it anymore.”

“That’s sad,” Kate told her, sympathetic.

“The only thing other than school stuff I have time to read is the script,” Rachel mused, gesturing to the ring bound book in front of her. Again, Chloe felt frustrated. The truth was that she had barely read the script at all. She was going to be a hazard in the play if she did not get her shit in gear, and soon. The good news is that she was not in the majority of the play: relegated to the role of Laertes, she indeed found herself playing a man, but she also had few lines compared to Hayden (Hamlet) and more than Nathan (Osric.) To pretend that she did not find that amusing would be a lie.

“In general I’m just having trouble adjusting,” Kate added. “Mom and dad weren’t so sure about sending me here. I know this sounds childish but I don’t want them to find out I’m struggling and think they were right.” Chloe nodded. Quietly, she wondered if Kate’s adjustment issues were about the assignments or the people.

“You know if we ever do anything that makes you uncomfortable, you can tell us, right?” Rachel asked, giving voice to the discomfort in Chloe’s stomach. Kate shaked her head once, insistently, but did not speak. Chloe exhaled as quietly as she could, trying to push out the sudden feeling of anxiety the discussion left in her. She was more than down for Kate telling them if they made her uncomfortable but not so sure she would be entirely willing to give up little things like holding the others’ hands if the girl were to ask. Avoiding major PDAs with Kate around seemed fair, though for someone raised in a strict conservative environment.

Then again, Chloe reminded herself, Kate hadn’t asked anything of them. There’s no reason to worry, this is just Rachel being a decent person and maybe a little overbearing. Chloe elbowed Kate, whose head was beginning to dip a bit. She shot up quickly and turned confused eyes on Chloe. She was prone to such open outbursts of emotion it was simultaneously hilarious and endearing. Chloe hadn’t particularly done it very hard, so it might have looked like an overreaction to someone on the outside. Chloe knew it was just the way Kate was. Or perhaps she’s not used to being touched, who knows?

“Chin up, bud,” she said, trying to offer the girl the most sincere smile she could even when she didn’t feel like smiling much. Across the table Max caught her eye and it was only politeness that
made Chloe break eye contact so she could focus on Kate. “The reading will thin out a bit and teachers will stop shoving so much down our throats. They just like to look imposing and shit at the start so you don’t slack off during the year.” Kate gave a hesitant nod. “They like to pretend to be hardasses because it’s a private school.” Chloe’s voice dropped low and drawled out in an imitation of Principal Wells. “We have a duty to upkeep a certain standard, a certain reputation for excellence here at the prestigious Blackhell-woops, I mean at the prestigious Blackwell Academy.” Kate seemed to wear a look saying that perhaps she thought Chloe’s imitation a little mean, but before she was done, the dirty-blonde was smiling. Good. Chloe told herself, feeling a bit more like smiling herself. Better that she’s smiling. It’s always better when they’re smiling.

“Thanks,” Kate told her, then the others. Chloe took that as her cue, pressing both palms down against the surface of the picnic table.

“And that’s my signal. I need to go help Steph with dinner before practice.” Chloe parted from that side of the table by giving Kate one rough pat on the back and then crossing to her girls. “What about you all?”

“T’ll join these two for homework until practice,” Rachel told her.

“And after that,” Max said, “We have a date with Captain Janeway aboard the Starship Voyager.” Chloe sighed, making a great show of exasperation mostly because it was expected of her as she came to a stop behind and between them. The truth was that she was not feeling super playful toward Max.

“Not this again,” Kate mumbled, looking down at her hands. That, at least, drew a snort from Chloe, who threw her hands up in mock surrender and knelt down between them. Rachel and Max turned and matched her eyes, one of them reluctantly.

“I love the hell out of both of you,” Chloe said, trying her best to express her honest care. She pecked first Rachel and then Max on the cheeks before she turned to the last. “I hope we can talk soon. I think time’s running out, okay?” Max’s immediate response was to pale slightly, but Chloe tried to feel hopeful about the girl responding with a nod. Chloe shot Rachel a look promising that she was going to fill her in later and then glanced at Kate. Kate was still staring at her hands and Chloe thought that her face was rather red.

Okay so that was a bit much, maybe? Or maybe she just has to get used to minor PDAs. Or maybe we need to just convince her to talk about the big gay polyamorous elephant at the table? Either way, gonna have to be when she’s ready.
“Kate,” Chloe called across the table before she stood. “Take care of these girls.”

“I’ll try,” Kate responded. She found her voice again and added, “but they’re kind of a handful.”

“I know,” Chloe lamented, turning to look toward the parking lot.

It was kind of crazy to think she could walk across campus without even a chance of running into David. That, however, is precisely what happened. The only person who bothered her on her walk to the lot was Victoria, who made some crack about Rachel losing a member of her ‘carpet muncher harem.’ The socialite had been less than pleased when Chloe told her that she thought that Victoria ‘doth protest too much’ but the honest truth was that if anyone gave off some serious closet case vibes it was probably her, given how obsessive she was about sending hate their way.

The drive home was peaceful, or at least as peaceful as her rumbling, roaring truck could get on the road, spitting enough planet killing exhaust to make Chloe wince each second. Given the prior two weeks (not to mention most of the summer) Chloe was more than comfortable with the trip to Steph’s house. In a way it really was comforting, like coming home. On the porch, waiting for her when she stepped out of the truck was her favorite deck chair. Sitting just a chair over, Steph looked up from her history text to raise an eyebrow at Chloe.

“You’re home early,” she observed. Steph knew that there was a little trouble in paradise brewing between she and Max and Chloe figured the girl was quick to see whether or not her early homecoming could be contributed to that. “Or couldn’t you stay away?”

“Play practice,” Chloe said. “I forgot all about it. I figured I’d come home early and give you a hand with dinner.” Steph’s book shut with a loud ‘clap’ and as Chloe reached the edge of the porch she rose.

“Thank Christ,” she said. “If I have to read another word about Pompey, I’m going to stab someone on a boat somewhere.” Chloe felt like she was missing some context, but that would come with time if she was a good girl and did her homework. She wasn’t entirely sure if she was going to be but it was good to get inside and follow Steph to the kitchen, where she finally sat her bag down on the kitchen table. It sounded fairly loud across the room, earning a raised eyebrow from Steph. Chloe tried to ignore it, embarrassed to admit she had taken almost every book she owned out of her locker that day because she was about half a week behind on reading. Note to self, dump bag in your room before practice.

“Right,” Steph said, apparently letting it drop. “So what’ll it be?” Together the two of them looked at their options. There was some limited produce available which Chloe thought she could throw
together with some of the frozen chicken breasts in the freezer and bake into a decent enough meal. Looking at a potential side dish, though, they found themselves relegated mostly to corn or mac n cheese. At Steph’s suggestion, Chloe fished a quarter out of her pocket.

“Heads Mac n Cheese wins, tails corn loses?” Chloe asked the girl, playfully. Steph rolled her eyes and simply dropped a couple of boxes of Kraft dinner on the table. For Chloe’s part, she flipped the coin anyway and watched it fall, letting it land before she pocketed the quarter and went to hunt down a pot to boil the pasta in and a pan to bake the rest. *Tails never fails,* she mused, dragging first one and then the other out. Steph started the oven heating as Chloe took a step back.

As a younger teenager she had cooked fairly often. Mostly it was breakfast foods she had been taught by her father or by Joyce. Still, Chloe could count on two hands the number of times she had cooked *anything* in the last year that didn’t involve a microwave. That was probably not *good.* *Max is always saying that I should keep learning,* she thought. *Then again, she talks like she thinks she can do better. I would love to see it.* Who knew, maybe Max was secretly Top Chef material. Maybe that was the power she was keeping to herself: Super Max, able to summon a three course dinner with the power of her *mind.*

Chloe didn’t think so, but there was always the chance.

“So how bad are things going to get between you and Max?” Steph asked her suddenly. Chloe wasn’t sure precisely how long she’d been lost in thought but the girl was already starting to spread carrots around the baking pan, among the chicken. Chloe pulled open a bag of broccoli and started to do her part. “You’re spacing out a lot. That must mean it’s *bad.*”

“Hella bad,” Chloe admitted as she turned the bag upside down, spreading a fair amount of what her six year old self would have called ‘little trees’ about the pan. It was impressive to think that at that age she and Max had only been friends a handful of years. There should not have been a time when they weren’t more familiar with each other than themselves. “Like, I’m going to make sure we find somewhere private, like the junkyard to have our fight if Max doesn’t tell me what’s going on by Sunday.”

“What is it she’s keeping from you, anyway?”

“It’s complicated,” Chloe said and then wanted to slap herself. It wasn’t like Max hadn’t used that particular line to deflect questions in the past. *Focus on dinner,* she told herself, *where’s the Caulfield- the cauliflower! Damn it.* “Like, it’s a lot of things.” *A lot of things like the things you should probably all tell Steph since she’s wrapped up in this too, Chloe? Like those things?* There was no one to tell to shut up and stop pestering her with these completely valid points. She wished there was. “But basically, Max- it- ah damn.” The bag of cauliflower ripped under her grip and she sheepishly caught it before things could fall everywhere. While Chloe spread a bit of that into their
dinner, she thought on the best way to say it. Steph was patient.

“It has to do with why Max isn’t doing so hot mentally. Why she freaks out about certain things, or why she has trouble eating, why the anxiety, why the depression. I mean sure there’s probably a massive physiological component to it but there’s some sort of secret at work and Rachel and I have been right on the verge of knowing it for a year and I don’t think we can do what we should do to make sure she gets help without knowing it.” The brunette beside her sat a pot half full of water down on the stove and began to open and pour in the two boxes of pasta. “Basically it’s one of those things she’s given little hints about for all this time and it’s just to the point where if she doesn’t talk soon, I’m going to lose my cool.”

“It can suck not knowing what’s going on with someone you care about,” Steph said. This time Chloe definitely felt guilty. It was the kind of guilt where she felt herself bowing under it a little. The words were said with special significance and the girl’s sharp dark eyes were on Chloe. She tried not to think too much about the implications of bringing up ‘caring about’ someone in a context where Chloe was talking about one of her girlfriends. That was an entirely different beast of a question and not one Chloe was prepared to dedicate her limited processing power to. The main part, though, the fact that Chloe was not being entirely forthcoming with Steph, Chloe could admit.

After all of this time it would have been a sign of abject stupidity for the other girl not to catch on that something was not particularly normal about Chloe, about her girls. If Steph was looking at Chloe demanding answers from Max, there was bound to be a day where she might do the same to Chloe. And what happens when that day comes? We’ll burn that bridge when we get to it. That being said, Chloe’s guilt did not let her shrug the moment off, not if she were to turn and see Steph still staring at her, insistently, or perhaps just pointedly. By the time Chloe dared to look, though, Steph was retrieving butter and cheese from the refrigerator, as if no moment of serious importance had just passed between them.

Damn. That girl might be a Dungeon Master, but she sure knows how to play.

“So, the session tomorrow?” Steph prompted in a moment such coincidence that Chloe almost shivered. Christ, if there’s anyone else with a super power out there, can it please not be Steph reading minds? Please and thank you. As dangerous as an angry Rachel could be to someone she hated, somehow Steph with the ability to read minds seemed like a hazard waiting to be unleashed on an unsuspecting public. “Are you ready?”

“Am I ready?” Chloe asked, affecting an air of superior confidence. “Are you sure you’re ready not to be the one pulling the strings again?” she teased. Steph shook her head dismissively. “Okay but for real, I’m nervous but I’ve got everything up here,” Chloe poked the side of her own head. “And in my notes, so I should be ready.” That wasn’t entirely true, there were still loads of questions she had and she knew that inevitably she was going to have to make rulings on rules and mechanics.
Ironically, Steph was probably the person she should have been talking to about these concerns, but Steph was going to be playing. That wouldn’t be very fair to her. Between the internet, Dungeon Master’s guide and a couple of other books she had picked up as well as the SRD online, Chloe thought she could manage it. They had had a good campaign under Steph but it was very focused between about six localities. Chloe wanted to go out there and give them a chance and an excuse to go exploring, adventuring without the threat of a horde of undead pouring down and eradicating civilization.

*Not that beating up skeletons wasn’t fun as hell, hypothetical mindreading Steph.* The whole bit had been mostly in jest but Chloe found herself shooting a glance at the girl beside her as she swept her beanie from her skull. Steph did not seem to notice her looking. *Okay, you’re being absurd now, Chloe. Mind reading. Laughable.* As opposed to fire, air and water bending or sneaking into peoples’ dreams at night. Chloe had more than a few stories she could tell about accidental forays into Steph’s mind at night. She kept them to herself, but it did make her consider that her ability was not closer to mindreading than not. Certainly, she knew things or suspected she knew things about the girl that no one else did. Despite having only met her mother once, Chloe certainly had enough basis to not care for the woman. *Which you’re basing off of her not being in any dreams, ever.*

While the oven heated the kitchen, she retreated with Steph toward the living room. There was time still for a little bit of television, a little bit of music and surfing the net while the food cooked. There would be time enough to eat and then split. Chloe just had to learn to take things a little more calmly. Inside these walls, the timer ticking away in the back of her head, counting down to a showdown with Max was allowed to go quiet. Inside these walls, she was allowed to relax. This was what she remembered home being like in the days of William Price. *That gives me an idea.*

Chapter End Notes

*Hope you’ve all enjoyed your breather. Next chapter, things heat up. Out of the frying pan, and all that. Seeya on Sunday.*
You know better than this, Rachel told herself as the vehicle slowed. The mid afternoon sun forced her to squint and flip the visor overhead down. Far in the distance, a speck she knew to be a car went up and then back down, vanishing behind a hill. You should have told Chloe about this or at least Max. She had not. She had not let on that she was going to be doing this at all. Rachel checked all of her mirrors as she eased the Sedan forward, slowly coming to full speed again. She wanted to be able to stay close to the car in front of her but not so close as for him to see who was behind him and realize he was being followed. He has to know what my car looks like by now. God, I hope he's distracted and angry.

For almost five minutes she had not seen a car other than David Madsen's. It was simultaneously relieving and concerning. They were still just barely on the edge of Arcadia Bay, but they were not heading in a direction Rachel had ever traveled alone. That meant that staying as far back from him as possible was the only chance she had of not getting made before she reached wherever David was going. At least he'd know what it felt like to be followed when you didn't want to be, she thought, bitterly. The downside to keeping her distance was that each time something like this happened. When David passed over a hill, if there was a side road nearby or he got a particularly wild hair up his ass and slammed the pedal to the metal he could theoretically escape her without much of a problem.

She just simply didn't know what the better option was.

Rachel figured her best option was, if that happened, to look for any side roads that looked like they had fresh tire tracks in them. They were already on a back road, after all. Most side roads were dirt or gravel or, Rachel suspect, were actually extremely long driveways to homes situated outside
of the city. Out in this direction the countryside was pretty damned sparsely populated. You were more likely to find a small wooded area than you were a house. Sounds boring, she thought. Maybe I don't want fuckall to do with this whole 'drive through the countryside' thing.

She crested the hill and was pleased to see David still on the road. At least she figured it was David's car unless one of a similar shape and color had turned onto the road and David turned off. Don't rule anything out with Sargent Stepdouche, here. It was better safe than sorry, though, so Rachel kept on the road. I hope Chloe slept in this morning. I hope Max ate this morning. She had kept her phone on silent most of the day so that, on those occasions where she followed David on foot, she could not be given away by a sudden ringing. That meant that she had missed more than a few messages from the girls.

Frankly, though, after a day full of a whole lot of nothing, including one quick shopping trip where she nearly gave herself away by knocking over a display of Bush's Baked Beans, Rachel was glad to be back in her car. She was just growing to dread what was coming. If she was right and David was after Frank with this little trip into the country, that meant that David was currently leading her to what Frank talked about as his 'home.' There were about a hundred and one problems with that idea, including one she had not really let her mind make manifest until she noticed the houses spreading out, the city giving way to a whole lot of nothing.

If you had to hide a body, where would you take it? Rachel had never particularly thought about killing anyone, but if she were the type, she reasoned that hiding a body in the middle of nowhere was the safer choice. They were almost certainly going to the middle of nowhere. You're probably just being paranoid, Rachel. You've spent too much time chasing David and he's rubbing off on you. What was the phrase? ‘And if you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.’

Mercifully, when David took a sudden turn from the road, Rachel could see him doing it. The road was flat and the day clear and he was still about a quarter of a mile ahead of her. They were mostly alone on that stretch of road and it had turned to gravel some time ago, so Rachel slowed even further. Okay, breathe. If you're right, just warn Frank and then do like we planned. Lure him away. Everything’s gonna be alright. Tomorrow you’ll be able to tell Chloe and Max about this shit and they’re going to be a little jealous they weren't there.

The ride was even bumpier the slower she took it but, Rachel slid past the turnoff at the speed of creeping death. It was a long, winding driveway. She caught sight of four things and tried desperately to analyze them as she eased past. First, there was a house that might have been white at one point but the paint was chipping off. If she was not mistaken, part of its roof was missing. It was absolutely ancient. Parked not far off from it was David’s dark car, with the ‘true detective’ who drove it nowhere to be seen. A small brown toolshed rested almost as close to the far edge of the property as Rachel could see from the road and, right beside it, sat a pale RV which Rachel knew fairly well.
She found it a fair guess that this was what Frank called his home. Rachel continued to roll by, not bothering to speed up until she could no longer be seen from the driveway. She did not want to make any sudden noise and draw David’s notice, though she wondered why she had not seen him during her drive by. He’s smaller than a car, she told herself. Probably just a little far from the road for me to spot him. The turnoff to the property began to vanish in her rearview mirror as Rachel coached herself on how to recognize it again from the road. Unfortunately ‘a dirt drive surrounded by trees’ was not a particularly unique landmark out in this particular stretch of nothing and nowhere.

The jacket around her shoulders was beginning to feel heavy and constrictive when she pulled the car over half a mile later. It was nothing compared to the outfit waiting in a plastic bag in her backseat and it also didn’t have the stench of sweat and burned fabric in it, but Rachel still shrugged the jacket off after shutting down the engine. Probably her favorite item of clothing thudded on the passenger’s seat loud enough for her to remember that her phone was waiting in its pocket. Okay, now’s where I probably piss Chloe off a bit, she thought, dialing Steph. The phone only range three or four times before the brunette on the other end answered her phone.

“Rach, what’s goin’ on?”

“Not much,” she lied, trying to match Steph’s casual, friendly tone. There wasn’t much casual about her pounding heart and the horrible thought that David could lead to the discovery of, at best, where Frank kept his supply and at worst where he might have buried Damon Merrick. “But I need a little favor. Shouldn’t take more than a minute.”

“Hit me with it,” Steph replied. She heard the clink of silverware against a plate. I suppose it’s getting close to dinner? Rachel thought, slightly worried that she had not felt hungry since she had eaten a banana that morning. Can’t give Max shit if you start doing it yourself. “Rachel? Y-Yeah, it’s her,” Steph was talking now to Chloe. “You want to talk to Chloe?” The girl was obviously confused about Rachel’s tone and hesitation.

“More than you know,” Rachel told her, “but not this second.” She sighed into the phone and then continued. “You were telling us a couple weeks ago about that site that lets you send a text from a restricted or unknown number right?”

“Yeah, what about it?”

“I need you to send one for me, preferably as soon as possible. Like, 9-1-1 style as soon as possible.”
“What’s this all about?” Steph asked. The sound of a chair scraping against the kitchen floor in the background suggested the girl was going toward her laptop. Rachel breathed a sigh of relief.

“I need to distract someone or something really bad is going to happen, any moment now. Grab Chloe’s phone before you go, you’re gonna need it.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re texting David Madsen.” Steph went quiet on the other end of the line, beyond a momentary muttering to Chloe and then after a few seconds Rachel started to hear typing. There was nothing and no one in Rachel’s rear view mirror and she rolled her windows down so that she could hear if, gods forbid, she heard a gunshot. On the phone, the typing began to die down. “Are you ready for the message?”

“Yes,” Steph replied. “You’re hanging up as soon as this sends aren’t you?”

“Kind of in a dangerous situation, so I’m sorry, but I am.”

“Then get out of it without getting hurt, do you hear me?” Steph paused and waited, and Rachel, smiling despite herself answered.

“Yes mistress,” she retorted in a low, Igor-like voice.

“Don’t let your mouth write a check your ass can’t cash,” Steph finished. “Give me that message.” Rachel decided to let the racy response slide and paused long enough to be sure her plan still made sense. Nothing had changed so that she particularly questioned anything about it, so she gave the message to Steph that she had always planned to.

“It has to say, ‘We need to meet. Pan Estates. Thirty Minutes.’ and you’ll need to sign it S.P.” There was a slight pause before she heard the typing continue.

“Are you sure about this?” Steph asked. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes,” Rachel promised. “And I’m going to tell Chloe and Max what I’m up to in a couple of hours
so if you can try not to worry about it, you’ll probably be hearing the whole tale about the same time.” She imagined Steph’s sharp eyes filling with frustration and knew that this was asking a fair amount of her, to get her involved without giving her any information. It’s not like she doesn’t know David works for Prescott. She has to understand what I’m trying to do here. “I won’t lie to you and tell you I’m going to be safe. But I’ve done stupider shit with less preparation.”

“You’re going to come back from whatever you’re doing or I’m gonna whip your ass from here to Hell.” That’s more like it.

“Yes ma’am.”

“What did I say about writing checks you can’t cash?”

“If I didn’t come back, before you start that posthumous ass kicking, tell the girls I love em.” Rachel hung up before Steph could say anything else, or before she could. Outside the wind was picking up unnaturally. How long has it been? Five minutes? Too long. She pulled up her conversation with Frank. The last message in it had been essentially Frank telling her to fuck off and never text him again. She didn’t think she had the luxury of following that order, not anymore.

Me

Frank I followed David Madsen, he’s parked near your RV right now.

Frank

I know, staying low. You need to find a way to get him away from me. Or else.

Me

Or else what

Frank

You know what.

Me

If DM is there, it needs to be moved today. I think I know what to do to get him away for now.
Frank did not respond again. That was alright. Rachel wasn’t entirely sure she expected one. There were three unread messages from Chloe and one from Max. Rachel set aside her phone, intent on answering them later. For the moment all she could do was sit there in her car and count. When she had counted the passage of five minutes in relative silence, she started the vehicle and did what was surely an illegal u-turn. *There’s no place like home, there’s no place like home.* She turned the old blue sedan around and made for Arcadia Bay.

It was kind of absurd, she thought to herself as she drove, that all of this was happening on such a nice day, especially for late fall. Somewhere, kids were playing games. Somewhere someone was having a birthday party. *Oh fuck,* she thought as the road began to pass from gravel to busted, cracked pavement. *Max’s birthday.* Her girlfriend’s birthday was four days away and somehow, Rachel hadn’t realized. *And this is the perfect time to remember, too,* she chided herself. Rachel reached down into the console by her right leg and freed a pen. Across her left arm she scrawled, hastily, ‘Max 16 Weds 21.’ The pen dropped from her hand as she tried to throw it back into the console but Rachel wasn’t about to reach down for it while she drove.

Over the next few minutes she drove with her destination firmly in mind. She was not off to Steph and Chloe’s place nor going back to Blackwell to see Max. Rachel had a job to do and it did not involve having time with one of her girls or any of her friends. No, when Rachel shut the car off it was on Cedar Avenue, a block down from the Madsen residence. She left the keys in the ignition and scooted her seat back. It was not what would particularly call dignified nor comfortable to change clothes in a car. It was, at least, not difficult.

She worked quickly but took the process one article of clothing at a time, and was eventually able to get the sweatpants and sweater part of her ‘cat burglar’ outfit in place. The mask, bandana and gloves could wait. As for the boots, she was already wearing them. *Actually,* Rachel thought. *I kind of understand why Chloe likes a pair of heavy boots on her feet. Hers look better with her style, but that’s fine.*

Once she was as comfortable as she thought she was going to get, Rachel leaned her seat back slightly. From her angle she could still see the house but, someone was going to have to be specifically looking into the car to really see that she was there. With any luck, David was none the wiser that he had a tail. *If luck was on my side I’d be snuggling Max or Chloe or both, not giving Douchebag Madsen a taste of his own medicine.* She couldn’t come up with a counter thought for that sentiment so Rachel simply sat and waited, trying to remain calm and attentive. The silent phone helped, but it was tempting as hell to pull it out and read her missing messages, to call Chloe or Max. Her attempt to get answers from Frank was met with total silence.

*Me*

*Did you send your friend away?*
David Madsen returned home an hour later and stayed for no more than half an hour. She watched the entire thing go down from down the road. He had pulled into the driveway, gotten to the door and been forced to knock for some reason. A brief, if hostile looking conversation had taken place between Joyce and David that had stressed her out, made her concerned that he was going to spot her car at any moment. Instead, after the two disappeared inside, she had been only given a few minutes of rest before David came flying out of the house in a long jacket.

Me

Your visitor is on his way.

By that time the sun was beginning to sink below the horizon. Rachel prayed it held out a little longer. She had done her best not to follow David too closely, waiting a couple of minutes before she started her car and made her way toward what she suspected was Frank’s property. The downside of this was that as the day turned to night she was going to have more and more difficulty finding it. By the time asphalt turned to gravel, Rachel had been forced to turn on her headlights. Still, the head start she gave David was more than enough to keep the man from noticing her: she didn’t spot him once the entire way to Frank’s.

That being said, as she realized she was coming to the turnoff in question, Rachel’s head swung around. It was dark as night on the property where Frank’s RV had been parked earlier that day, but the faint light from what she guessed was a pair of headlights at least suggested that David was there, as she predicted. Okay, okay, fuck. If Frank’s there, I need to get there. I was hoping he’d just run or something, but he hasn’t said fuckall. Half of a mile down the road, not far from where she had parked earlier, Rachel pulled off into the grass and shut off her engine. She made sure that the doors were unlocked and then stored the keys beneath the front seat.

Me

I love you both. Just in case you ever forget it or doubt it or something

Rachel pulled her battery from the back of her phone. The phone she stuffed into the glovebox and the battery went down the back of the pouch behind the driver’s seat. There was no lump in her throat this time at the thought that that message might be incredibly necessary. She wasn’t intent on anything horrible happening tonight but that was what people always did when they went off to battle. Not that she wanted a fight. Still, she couldn’t help but harken back to an episode of Deep Space Nine, to the squat Chief of Operations recording a goodbye to his wife and child, to the science officer reassuring him that they all do it, before every fight. Rachel wanted to suffer the fate that Jadzia Dax had predicted for Miles O’Brien: to live to be 140 and die in bed, surrounded by family and friends.
I’m sorry, Chloe. I think I’m a Trekkie. It’s a foregone conclusion.

It took far less time for her to work the bandanna, gloves and ski mask into place than it had for her to get the sweater and sweatpants on. Clad head to toe in black, again, Rachel adjusted herself. *If you have to scare David again, do it all at once. Big and flashy, anything to make him run. If he runs, you can get Frank to run.* The car door shut behind her, making a louder sound in the night than she had wanted it to, and Rachel turned and began to run. Heavy footfalls fell first against gravel and then against the grass on the opposite side of the road as Rachel made her way back toward the last known position of Frank’s RV.

It took her far longer than she wanted to admit but Rachel was not a sprinter and it was a dark night, devoid of city lights. There could have been any kind of snake or rodent, rock or root in her path and Rachel was as likely not to see it as she was to see it through the darkness and the thick, unkempt grass at the roadside. Rachel was feeling *unaware* of herself, much as she had before she started therapy. It was so severe a shift that frankly she didn’t read the signs of nerves: shaking hands, dry mouth, rapid heartbeat for what they were until she observed that quite out of the blue the sky had begun to cloud and the winds were swaying with an unusual wind.

The gusts that resulted were fairly impressive by the time she turned down the drive. David’s car sat halfway down it. Originally all Rachel had wanted was to keep David away from Frank. Now, as she approached the guard’s car, she could hear the sound of two men arguing in the distance and she knew Frank was still there. *Maybe I can still get him away,* she told herself as she came to a stop, kneeling behind David’s vehicle. The car’s headlights were still on but they weren’t aimed very well to give Rachel much of a picture of what was happening.

In fact she only knew that the two of them were standing so close together because of the glare from a flashlight in David’s hand. *LED flashlight. My flashlight. Asshole.* If she were to try to get Frank away from David, or perhaps to stall David from going and getting help (*assuming that’s his plan,* she thought) she was going to have to do something about his wheels. The exact words being shouted back and forth were beyond Rachel’s comprehension, but they were growing quicker, less silence between them. *It’s heating up.*

And perhaps, she realized, that was what the situation called for. Looking down, Rachel placed a hand on the rear left tire in front of her. *Maybe that’s what I need to do.* If she wanted to do *anything* to help Frank out at all, she was going to need her fire. Now was as good a time as any to call it. The fire came with its own downsides, though, beyond the risk of causing a forest fire, that is. The first was the rage itself. That particular emotion was the easiest key she had found to accessing the heat, the fire inside of her. There were others but they were not particularly conducive to the situation she was in. As for the rage itself, well, it made her feel like shit and she always crashed for half a day afterwards, emotionally. Pairing the pervasive cold when she overdid the fire and her memory of the state that had left her in the year before, Rachel was dubious about risking it.
Yet, you got yourself into this. You knew this was going to have to happen, do it. Truth was, thinking of David for any particularly long period of time got her pissed enough on its own. Frank had saved Chloe and Max and her biological mother from Damon Merrick. She owed him this one. Closing her eyes she pressed a glove hand against the tread of the tire and focused. David fucking Madsen. Works for Sean Prescott under the table. Pushes around those weaker than him. Makes them feel like shit. Pushes Chloe to violence. Sneers at everything she loves. Spys on her and says its for her own good. That David Madsen. It was a start, but it wasn’t enough. As the yelling in the background began to turn to screaming, she ran through every interaction she herself had had with him, every time he had talked down to her, the few times he had called her “girl” and the one time he had called her “recruit” before she told him that she was not ‘cut out’ for the military. (Why’s that, he had asked. Don’t Ask Don’t Tell, she had responded with a wry smile, happy to remind him that his step daughter was her girlfriend and nothing he did could change that.)

It was about the time that she realized that a truly pissed off David was capable of more than calling the cops in this situation that she felt the heat begin to almost drip, almost ooze like a viscous liquid down the inside of her right arm. Just like last time, only more control. More control. She smelled the burning rubber before the fire actually started. To actually get a fire started, she thought it would take either a significant burst of heat or a longer time than she thought she had, but there was a very brief, small flame before the tire deflated with a magnificent pop. The pop was loud enough to draw very clear shouts of aggression and confusion from the men farther into the property, not to mention enough to make Rachel jerk back in surprise, gravel and dirt digging into her through the thick clothes.

The head did not leave her as she fought to her feet. She was in this shit now, and it was up to her to see it through. Think about Sera. Think about Max. Think about Chloe. Now think about how Frank saved all of them and David treated two of them like shit, like suspects, like monsters. When you think you’re the protagonist of your story but you’re actually a bigger asshole than a seedy fucking drug dealer, you’ve fucked up! David Madsen had fucked up, time and time again. Rachel planted both feet firmly under her and started toward the sound of the voices and the shine of David’s flashlight as he spun about, trying to source the loud pop he had just heard.

Some people never learn, Rachel told herself. Some people grab their moral compass and think it points to True North. The bright LED passed horribly close to her as Rachel turned and began to approach at something more like a diagonal. The shape of Frank’s RV was beginning to take shape. Like James. Like my father. He was right and everyone else had to be his kind of right. There was no end to the depths he would go to impose his definitions of right on everyone around him. He would kill. The grass was fairly long around her ankles. Frank did not care for this lawn. She absentmindedly wondered if the property was even his or just completely abandoned.

The RV was mostly unchanged, pale and a little filthy, even by the dim echoes of the light put off by David’s flashlight. The door was hanging wide open, but there was no sign of Pompidou. He was not even barking. If David had hurt that dog, she swore to fuck he was going to need something stronger than aloe vera before the night was done. David was willing to literally punch Chloe when her back was turned to him to express how right he was, to try to show that she couldn’t fight him. Some twenty feet behind the back end of the RV was something that fucking
terrified Rachel to see. At first glance it was nothing special, some pale mass.

The closer she got the clearer it was that, while David and Frank argued about whether David had any right to be on that property or whether Frank was worth the needle David thought should end his life, Damon Merrick lay feet away from them, wrapped in an off-white tarp. It was just long and wide enough to be a body and it looked to be stained with dirt. Rachel tried to keep low, to move slowly through the night as neither of them had yet noticed her approach. Looking around showed no sign of a freshly dug hole, but there was a shovel leaning up against the RV, positioned between the open door and a folding lawn chair which was aimed toward the remains of a fire.

A fire, she told herself. *Even if David’s figured out what’s in there, will it matter if there’s no evidence left?* Rachel shivered. It was just slight, but it was enough to concern her. She was cooling and it made little sense with the wind dying down unless it was a response to using the fire. *If I try that, I’m going to have to use a lot more fire.* She turned in the night to watch David’s face contorting with disgust as Frank told him for what she was sure wasn’t even the fifth time, to get off of his property. All Rachel could see, though, was Chloe’s face instead. Chloe’s devastation after leaving the house she’d grown up in. *Maybe that’s all I need to see,* Rachel told herself, seething. The heat began to boil somewhere around her heart.

She was no longer anything resembling cool.

“I will end you like the parasite you are if you do not surrender to a citizen’s arrest right now,” David promised the man. *Okay, we’ve escalated to death threats. Move now.* She hurried forward five or six steps, aware that she could easily attract David’s attention like this. She was not so sure about Frank: he spoke with an angry slur. If she had to guess, Frank was absolutely plastered. It did not bode well for him being able to run if she found a way to handle David. *Every black mark he’s ever left on every good day,* Rachel counseled herself, *all the times he must have been watching us, taking photos. The things he must have seen on that video feed, no matter what the point of it as. The total and complete disregard for basic human decency.*

Coaching her rage, Rachel focused. Just under a year ago, Rachel had taken a large buildup of anger, of rage and pushed it out of her body all at once. That night, the fire had not traveled along the veins of her arms into her hands, as she had felt just a minute or two ago. No, it was more like a pair of arms which she could not see had sprouted all at once from her chest, pulling hatred, panic and rage away from her heart all at once. The result had been immediate. That was what she needed now. She needed to do this all at once.

Even seething, chest straining against the clothing she wore as she drew in heavy breaths, Rachel could think clear enough to know the difference between that night and this one. She knew what she had to do but she was still capable of being scared enough to hate the idea of doing it. *Chloe, Max, you better have gotten that last message.* If this went to fuck, she wanted them to never forget that they mattered to her. Rachel turned on her heel, still picturing the tarp that she suspected
contained Damon Merrick’s year old corpse inside intently in her mind and, in a voice she had last used to try to scare David, she spoke. No, she yelled.

“You couldn’t listen to me,” she yelled across the twenty or thirty feet between them. Frank and David momentarily stopped arguing as David spun around, flashlight flaring in her eyes. Stop that, asshole. She was forcing breath from her chest almost as soon as it came in, inhaling just as rapidly. “You should have taken my advice, David. You should have stuck to your fucking job.” She liked to pretend that she could see David’s face crack in panic through the flashlight in her eyes but the honest truth is that she didn’t even notice that he was holding a gun in his other hand, much less him raising it.

In a second she would process impressions of a revolver, but in that moment all she knew was that a bullet had been fired and the person most likely to be shooting it was David. Rachel flung herself into the long grass (When was the last time someone mowed this, does anyone ever?) as Frank let out some kind of yell that was not all that far off from an animal’s roar. Rolling over, she saw the man charge and heard his fist connect solidly with David’s jaw. David dropped like a bag of bricks. It was all Rachel needed. Adrenaline surging from what she could only guess was a near miss with a bullet, Rachel pushed to her feet, turned and forced the fire out of her.

As last November there was no physical sensation of it leaving. It was simply heat, and rage and strength around her heart and then it was gone. Some fifteen feet from her the fire roared immediately into being. It bathed the RV and the scene in front of her in a pale orange light which Rachel used to further assess the situation. David was not unconscious, he was scrambling for his gun. Confused and enraged, Frank looked around twice, somehow missed her and then hurled himself a step or two forward.

Rachel told herself she did not hear bones crack when Frank slammed his foot down on David’s hand, the one closing around something that glinted as metal would in the dancing flames. Focus, Rachel told herself, focus. This fire isn’t hot enough and David knows you’re here. If he shot at you once he’ll do it again. She was loathe to look away as David cried out in pain but she did. Rachel’s attempts at disguising her voice vanished as she screamed at the fire. She didn’t yell some magic word. She didn’t even tell it to ‘hurry the fuck up’ she just screamed. It was the only non-violent expression of her desire, her panic, her fury that she could think of.

It flared brighter. That’s right. That night in May there was a fire already in the trash can. I got angry and I made it worse. I turned it from nothing into something, into one of the biggest forest fires Arcadia Bay has ever seen. If I can do that because I caught my father frenching a stranger, I can do this. I can do this for Chloe. I can do this for Max. I can do this for Sera. I can do this for me. I can do this for ME! Slowly but surely the flame changed from orange to almost white. Rachel pulled her gloves off when she raised them toward the fire and realized that they were beginning to smoke.
“Who the fuck are you?” Frank was screaming. She turned. The man was still standing on David’s hand with his left foot, but his right was pressing David’s windpipe. He’s going to kill him. I have to stop that. I have to stop all of this. Frank was looking at her. I wasn’t exactly invisible, was I? Rachel had to appeal to Frank’s emotions. He was all emotion in that moment and so was she. Higher logic was going to be beyond her for some time. Tomorrow morning was going to be spent in her dorm room, hurting, trying to understand.

“How do I do? God damn it Frank. Frank stumbled backward as a massive gust of wind blew across the property. Him stumbling was all that David needed to draw a gasping breath and grab for his gun. For a moment, Rachel wasn’t sure which of them David was going to shoot first. Frank was closest and carrying a weapon, but she wielded fire and surely David understood that by now. She was looking to Frank to see if he was going to recover and react in time when she realized that whatever David’s next move was, it did not matter.

Frank had recovered, alright. By the light of the fire behind Rachel she saw the man right himself and then, looking between them like a trapped animal, she watched him decide that he had no way out. Maybe it was the liquor in his system. Maybe it was the life he had lived or the life he had taken. Maybe, even this had always been coming and if she were smart enough she might have been able to see it in his face the twenty or so times she had seen him since that first day they met. Rachel did not know, and despite her best efforts she felt like she would wonder until she drew her last breath. The man dragged one hand up his filthy, dirt-and-beer-caked bare chest, a hand holding cold hard metal of his own. She knew what was going to happen too late to look away.

The flames grew bright with her fury and fear, with the wind feeding it unnaturally, with Rachel’s very will a constant line of fuel. She saw the splatter of blood and gore in unnatural, surreal clarity, emerging from the left side of Frank’s skull. Bone and something else, something thick, wet and not without obvious mass sprayed into the air and then dropped. Frank hit the ground less than a few seconds later.
She did not remember screaming his name but she did remember feeding every inch of that moment into the odd sense of connection she had with the blaring fire behind her. David, who for a moment looked horrified from his spot on the earth, his gun uselessly pointing at where Frank had just been, cried out. Rachel spun, her vocal cords straining as the flame in front of her changed to an unreal, unnatural bright hue of blue and even the grass around it began to singe.

Her lungs never seemed to empty, the scream was eternal, endless as the grave and deeper than the romantic darkness between stars. It was not pregnant with all that darkness’s potential but instead with every type of horror she had or would ever feel. The blue flame danced under the pressure of the sudden storm-like winds. The mask threatened to blow from her skull and she stayed upright only by sheer force of will. Whether the ground moved beneath her back or the wind pushed her to and from, Rachel did not care. She was not sure she would care again.

David had gotten to his knees and was speaking, gun shaking between his hands as she pointed it at her. She could see his lips moving but all she cared about was that this man dropped his weapon. His fault his fault his fault. The metal grew bright red in his grip almost instantly. She saw his anguish, she saw his lips part in a pained scream but nothing could be heard over her own voice. Why were her lungs not empty of air? Why was bright blue flame spreading across grass and toward the RV, and yet she felt as if someone had dipped her fully clothed into a pool and then locked her, soaking wet, into a freezer?

The gun began to smoke and David dropped it. She watched it turn pale white and heard a small pop. Rachel saw the weapon warp and the faux wood handle burn in inhuman detail and then knowing that her strength was about to give out, she turned and fled from the man still weeping over his injured hands. Almost all she could do was count one foot in front of the other. At some point her mouth shut and she began to draw breath in rapid-fire bursts, like a minigun going off more than a pair of lungs inflating and deflating. Her bare hand reached up to knock a thin branch from her way as she flew into the woods and it immediately lit up with flame.

If she had had the sanity, the sense of mind to turn back, she might have seen the flaming outlines of her footprints. This behavior continued for almost a minute, with any sort of contact between her body and the world around her leaving its mark and it did not stop until about the time she realized she was being followed. All at once the world grew quiet, the wind ceased to blow and all she heard was the sound of her footsteps and a set behind her, one which snapped every trick and trampled every crispy leaf. Faintly, a sign that she must have truly lost her mind, she heard a familiar sounded engine in the distance.

Rachel did not know which way she had run. She simply ran. Earth and stone, root and undergrowth, her still smoking boots rose and fell but at least she left behind no blackened handprints and no fire followed her. Far behind her, now in the distance, she expected that a roaring fire was at work. It will put the one last May to its shame, some part of her predicted. That voice was enough at least to bring her to her senses. Instantly the cold was worse than it had been a second before. Her limbs seemed to be moving only by sheer chance. Something was oozing down the front of her mask, along her shirt. She knew it was vomit but she wasn’t sure how she hadn’t
asphyxiated on it.

“Stop!” David called out from some distance behind her. Then, absurdly, she thought she heard him call her Chloe. *Makes no sense. No sense. Nothing makes sense. Why did he do it? Why do they do any of this? What is wrong with them? What is wrong with us? What is wrong with me?* David was still some ways off judging by the sound of his voice but Rachel stumbled and fell to her knees every few seconds. It did not help that what little night vision she had was beginning to fade. *Or you’re sleepy,* she told herself, trying to hold her mouth shut so chattering teeth could not give her away.

Her breath was beginning to slow, which would have made it easier to keep quiet if not for her feet snapping twigs and tripping over roots. *I’m gonna fall over and not get back up.* She wasn’t sure how many times she had fallen at that point. In fact she wasn’t entirely sure of where she was going, just that she was running from David and David was, no matter what else he was, a *bad* man. Like her dad. Bad man. If she did fall over, Rachel thought as she tried to make herself run, tried to make her legs work, it would be okay. Because really, why was she running?

It would all be okay.

If she just laid down, maybe she could sleep. People slept when they laid down right?

Maybe after a nap, it would be warm.

She could go for a nap. It was funny, funny enough that she laughed. Rachel always used to fight her mom about naps as a kid. *Nap time,* she thought.

Stumbling dumbly around a tree, she felt a hand reach out from behind her, pressing over her mouth.

Someone pulled her down, down for a nap. Something covered her, big and dark. The rest of the forest went dark.

There was a nice sound in her ear.

It sounded like the night between the stars.
*Interstella.*

She could go toward it.

That would be nice.

Chapter End Notes

What's that? Posting a day early due to potentially being unable to post tomorrow.

We've got a bit of a rocky road ahead for the next couple of chapters...

Next chapter is from a completely new Point of View.

I hope you enjoy.
Chapter Thirty-Four: Aeschylus

Chapter Notes

I can't think of many specific warnings that need given, so, instead, welcome to the introduction of the third and final PoV in this story. I've been waiting for what feels like forever to post this.

Disclaimer: Anything familiar to you, I don't own. This is a work of fanfiction for personal amusement, fulfillment and a bit of self-therapy. I make nothing from any of it.

Chapter Thirty-Four: Aeschylus

September 17th, 2011 11:48|6:45 PM

In one second, she struggled against the sensations around her, right hand outstretched. The buzzing of halogen lights in her ears, the sound of steady beeping, of voices calling for help, the smell of antiseptic and the sweat of the cop who was grabbing her by the wrist and the shoulder, these fell away. Her body was abandoned, left to the cop’s grasp on the hospital floor for the moment as what was left of her searched for just where to go and just when to take it. Hours and hours worth of sensation, sound, emotion and thought stretched out before her, pinpoints of being against a dark Khaos, a timescape both endless and limiting.

They rose one by one around her, not so much in front of or behind because those concepts did not work in the now and here. Sensing her way toward each of them, observing them in a way that was closer to sense, the essence of Max pushed onward, if such a thing can be said to exist. There was her elbow connecting with David’s stomach uselessly in the emergency room and there, Max’s frustration and anger and fear as Rachel passed out in the passenger seat of the Frankentruck again. None of this came in order, she found the conversation that lead to her struggle with Officer Barry not far at all from where she needed to go. The struggle with the cop tasted of weakness and sterile environments. Steph and Chloé’s porch was dirt, trees and a road unfolding ahead. Its taste was surprisingly not much sweeter.

She opened her eyes. Max Caulfield gripped thin air with her left hand, trying to pull an arm that was not there away from around her throat. Her right hand was raised in front of her. She was not standing in Arcadia Bay Medical Center's emergency room. No cop was trying to pull her away from a shut door which she knew contained the bed, the bed that held her handcuffed girlfriend. There were no nurses calling for security to help the cop against her struggling, no antiseptic in her
She heard a soft breeze through mostly leafless trees, smelled dirt and grass and decaying leaves and, unfortunately, herself. She saw Steph's front yard from where she sat on the porch, unbeknownst to those inside. \textit{Sixty-seven}. Max's arms dropped to her sides. She eased back on her hands and her body hung heavy. Max didn't even try to stop the blood that flowed from her nose. She was too busy resisting the urge to grasp at her skull. Max closed her eyes against the pain in her head, gritted her teeth and tried not to scream or cry until it passed. It still felt like a hot poker in her brain—or whatever she imagined that to feel like—but in time it did pass. She was not sure if it was in more or less time than the last few. This kind of pain made time matter even less than it had for the last sixty cycles. \textit{Sixty-seven. Eight where I stop David from seeing her but she passes out anyway and I have to take her to the hospital. Three where David shoots me. Five where I sleep all day. Fifty-one failures where you don't have any excuse. You've officially reached a new record of being a fuckup, Max Caulfield.}

“Ding ding ding! What do we have for her, Johnny?” Max asked the air as she opened her eyes. The pain was trying to ease out. The sun was going down but for a second it was still too bright for her to handle and she sibilated her answer as her left hand rose to block the light from her eyes. She was treated to the sight of not grass, but a dirt-and-ash-blackened hand. “We've got a brand new chance to fuck up.” \textit{Not to mention to piss off Chloe}. What the odds were that this was the day, this the moment when Chloe finally broke, Max wasn't sure. However, in the forty-eight attempts she had made to find some way to have the coming conversation with Chloe, they all ended with the girl enraged. Two of them had ended with, 'I love you, but I hate you sometimes,' and one had even, somehow resulted in Chloe refusing her request. \textit{Yet, none of them ended with Chloe telling you she was done with you}. Max shakily reached into the pocket on the front of her favorite grey sweatshirt.

She turned the old photo over and over inside of it as her breathing calmed and the phantom grip of Officer Berry's grasping hands started to fade. Technically speaking, the photo in her pocket, the one photo of the three of them at play practice which had come out of September the year prior, should have been inside of an old, beat-up time capsule which Chloe had buried somewhere between November and December. This was Chloe's promise to her, the one she had told Max was hidden at their secret spot. The one Max had dug up after packing Chloe's room up as best she could, and then rewound, keeping her secret prize with her.

This was the object that Max had looked at after each of those forty-eight arguments with Chloe. She knew that without a doubt that forty-nine was coming. It certainly helped promote the sensation that her body felt like stone or lead. Really, the door to the house Steph and Chloe shared was only four feet away. All she had to do was stand up and take two or three steps and knock on the thick, brown wooden door. Steph would come to answer it since Chloe was engaged with the show they were watching and still wasn’t comfortable answering it as if she lived there. Steph would be surprised and concerned and eventually let Max in. \textit{She's concerned because of Rachel's call, the one she isn't supposed to tell us about}. Standing up and crossing those four feet might as well have been tantamount to dragging her tired ass across the finish line of a marathon in her filthy, ragged jeans and sweatshirt. The jeans in particular were tearing from the bottom up, from...
running through the woods time and time again. Even clean of the filth caking them they would have been termed inappropriate for wear at Blackwell Academy.

Her converse were ruined and beginning to fall apart: when she walked it was clear that the back of the right shoe was completely disconnected with the sole. Max couldn't imagine how many hours she had existed without a shower. She looked more like a swamp thing or a street urchin than a student at Blackwell Academy. Now she was going to have to trek into Chloe and Steph's place and do this all again. When she realized that she was going to neither cry nor rage at the thought of Chloe's approaching ire, Max rose to her feet. It was a pointless gesture, but she still dusted off what was left of her favorite jeans. A large, thin chunk of mud fell to the floor of Steph's porch. The door stood still and strong, almost comfortingly beneath her pounding fist. The door was an old friend, a shield against the worst part of her early routine. For a moment it obscured the form approaching and then through the frosted glass window set into it, she spotted Steph's outline. Arcadia Bae.

The girl opened the door wearing a tee shirt she had stolen from Mikey before he left. Once, in an early cycle, Max had asked her if he knew she had it and, confused about Max bringing it up when she looked like hell, Steph had told her that she took the bright orange Arcadia Bae shirt right out from under Mikey's nose while he packed. It had made Max smile. She could not remember how many cycles ago that had been. She did not smile when Steph opened the door this time. Exhausted, she met the girl's eyes. As had been the case a few times before, Steph did not recognize her for almost three seconds and then, dark eyes widening, the girl stepped back.

"Max?" Steph asked her, quietly. "What the hell happened to you?"

"So much more than I can actually keep track of." That makes no sense.

"That makes no sense," Steph insisted as she pulled the door open and reached out, taking Max's filthy right hand and pulling her into the house. Get in here. "Get in here!" Steph was bluster and confidence, care and heart and Max was not sure how much heart she could spare to give the girl, but she let a bit of out. I'm getting Chloe, go to the kitchen. I'm getting Chloe. Go to the kitchen. Was that seventeen or eighteen times? Steph did not ask, yet, what was going on. That would come soon, in a voice that said she was not sure if she was welcome in the conversation Max was having with Chloe. Now, she ran off without Max, trusting her to do the Right Thing and do as she was told.

Max did, this time. As she sat down in the kitchen, Steph stood in the living room, recounting Max's sorry state in hurried tones too quiet to be audible from the wooden table she was gathered at. 'She looks like death warmed over. I think she's hurt or something. Her eyes look wrong. I don't know why.' It took only a second or two more for Chloe to come rushing into the room, stomping as if she were in her boots instead of bare feet. Chloe hadn't run around barefoot in years but she did now. She's comfortable, Max had told herself in cycle 0. Now she only hoped that was true.
What the fuck is going on?

“What the fuck is going on?” Chloe exclaimed from the doorway. Her passion was authentic, her surprise and care real. It was just like a bad dream to Max, one you woke from only to find yourself a part of again and again. She began to feel a little manic in the chair. An eager, unyielding energy built within her, demanding to be shown something it had not seen so many times before that it hurt to consider. She wanted the woods, to try again to carry Rachel to the truck before she passed out or David caught her. She wanted to try again to balance both keeping Rachel from passing out and still driving the huge truck whose handling and shifting had become rapidly familiar. She did not want to hear Chloe screaming at her. It was coming. Max, are you with me? “Max, are you with me?” Chloe knelt down just in front of her. Max was glad she did not have a mirrored surface around her.

“I'm here,” Max told her, lifting her head to match Chloe's eyes. In Chloe's gaze now were worry and fear and love. While two of those emotions were clearly not very nice, they were bright and alive and at least not anger, disgust, hurt, betrayal. Give it time, Caulfield. “I need help and there's not much time.” Her words were of speed, but even with the itching energy to move on, she heard them come out slowly, passionless. Need help with what? Did someone hurt you? What happened?

“Need help with what?” Chloe asked, pressing her hands into the knees of Max's filthy jeans. They had torn at her knee caps some time ago. Hah! Instead, Chloe's hands pressed down on warm, filthy skin. It had been twelve cycles since that caused any sort of feeling or emotional sensation in her. “Did someone hurt you?”

“What happened?” Steph queried, her voice soft.

“I need a favor,” Max told Chloe, not wanting to ignore Steph but knowing precisely how complicated things would get if she engaged with the brunette. “And it's kind of a biggie.” Of course. Within reason.

“Of course,” Chloe said, rubbing at her knee. “Within reason.” Max's eyes dragged between the two as she answered, watching the familiar emotions playing across their face, concern, disbelief, frustration.

“I need your truck.”

“Why?” Chloe asked, having clearly not expected this request.
“It's important. It's to help someone.” Max tried, she really tried to say it with as much emotion in her voice as normal. It was just that sometimes emotion was like a sponge: wring it out too much and you stopped getting anything from it. You had to let it soak for a bit. You're acting like something is really wrong, here. That's not going to be enough this time.

“You're acting like something is really wrong here,” Chloe responded, light blue eyes tensing, locking, fixated on her own. And I look like I bathed in the tar pit that killed Tasha Yar. “That's not going to be enough this time, hon.” Chloe was right. She was unwell. She had known that for several cycles. After her last sleeping cycle, she had not felt too well rested. She had not felt hopeful. She had barely felt anything but tired. Oh, that always changed in the heat of an argument or at the height of her attempts at rescuing Rachel, but here and now, before Chloe began to scream, it was so hard to have any sense of emotional stability. It's because I need her to yell at me, to tell me how much I've hurt her. I deserve it and she knows it and I know it and Rachel would know it too. Chloe was already reaching the edge of her own breakdown. Steph was going to become uncomfortable in the face of their coming conversation, but Max deserved it. When it was on, when she was the target of Chloe’s frustrations, she thought she could function again.

“I can't tell you what's going on, but it involves Rachel and she's in trouble.” Max had tried this angle four times, and two of those had involved the most spectacular argument she had ever experienced. Once, she had thought Chloe was going to spit at her. Now she stands up, gets her game face on and says she's coming. Chloe did as expected, bouncing to her feet. Almost imperceptibly, so slightly that Max had not noticed it, Chloe's face flared with some kind of pain. Max thought it was most likely emotional in nature.

“If she's involved, I'm coming with you.” Until these cycles began, she had never wanted to see Chloe the kind of mad at her that she was now one or two sentences away from bringing down on her head. Now she needed the words of accusation, telling her how she was lying and hurting and didn't seem to care what happened to Chloe or Rachel as a result. They were at least half right, but Max did care what happened to them. In fact, that was the only thing she cared about right now. The next five minutes played out in her head: she would tell Chloe no, that it was too dangerous, too dangerous even to know what was happening. They would fire back and forth and then Chloe would throw her keys, they would hit Max in the chest if she was too tired to catch them because Chloe could not read her exhaustion through the girl's own anger. Chloe would tell her that she was hurt, that Max had hurt her, that the lies, the lack of care, it was all too much. Then, Max would leave the building, with or without apologizing to Steph or Chloe. She would get into the truck and drive off.

And suddenly it all felt a little too much. There was no end to what she would let happen to herself to protect Chloe and Rachel from everything she was or everything she might or might not be. That being said, and maybe it was the exhaustion speaking, she was tired of watching Chloe hurt. Two of the precepts by which she lived her life began to duke it out somewhere in her very heart and Max froze. When she could move again, a moment later, the fight was over. The loss was accepted and she knew that if this worked, she was going to lose Chloe and Rachel both in a few hours. The good outcome of this gambit was that she ended up alone, but Rachel was safe and warm in Chloe’s arms. Max inhaled and for the first time in ten or eleven cycles, went entirely off script.
“If you give me your keys,” she started, pleadingly, “if you just give me your keys and let me save Rachel, then the next time we talk I'll tell you everything. What's going on right now connects to everything. Everything you want to know. Everything Rachel wants to know. Fuck it, I'll even tell it all to you,” she turned her head to look pleadingly at Steph. The girl took a step or two back, confused. Max did not blame her. “This is me telling you that I give up, just let me help Rachel.” Emptiness and silence was pierced by a sharp blade: her eyes watered and she blinked this away. “You just have to give me the keys.” Chloe Price did not reach into the pocket of her skinny jeans and fish out a set of keys, the set of keys Max knew damn well rested in the left front pocket. Instead she turned and began to walk toward the hallway.

“What are you doing?” Max called at her back in genuine surprise.

“My boots,” Chloe shot back. Across the room, Steph's face was contorted with pity, concern and for the first time since Max was brought into her house as a complete stranger last year, the smallest amount of distrust. That sharp blade stung deep into the silence but Max kept her composure as she tried to think. Chloe was going for her boots. She was going to demand to go with Max. She did not understand. This would mean giving part of it away now, starting to open the door to the monster. She's gone. You're here. She was never here. The tired argument sounded weak in the back of her mind. Perhaps this was one of those days when she did not particularly believe it. This day had lasted for almost twenty-two days, as best as Max could figure.

“I'm just-” Max stuttered. “I'm just trying to help,” she told Steph. “I'm trying to protect them both.” Just once, slowly, the brunette with the killer eyes and sometimes obviously manufactured confidence nodded.

“You're always trying to protect people,” Steph told her, her voice as slow as that nod. Max wondered if it was not her power acting up, slowing time. Or she's trying to talk to me like I'm a small child, trying to make me hear her. “Don't think no one notices your guardian angel routine: Kate, Stella, Chloe, Rachel, Victoria, Taylor, even me that time you thought Nathan was following us around campus? You never try to protect yourself but the way you do it... it- no one understands how and why you're doing it except that it puts you on some kind of pedestal above us. You're out of our reach.” Max shook her head in denial. No, wrong. Wrong.

“Not above you,” Max tried to tell her, tried to make her understand. “Never above. Just-I can't have anyone else hurt. I know I can do this without getting hurt but if I don't, then it's okay. If someone else gets hurt, well, if someone else dies, there's nothing I can do.” Steph shook her head, again, slow as an encroaching glacier. Where was Chloe? What was she doing? Max needed her keys. I need to go. I need to move.

“What if you were to die?” Max's hands rose in the air, she wasn't sure what gesture she was trying
to make, how she was trying to show that Steph didn't understand. She couldn't find the words to make her see that if someone else died it wasn't okay. It wasn't okay if Chloe got hurt. It wasn't okay if Rachel ended up in prison or worse. It wasn't okay if either of them died. It wasn't okay if Victoria lashed out about her self-esteem issues by causing Kate or Stella pain. It wasn't okay if Steph fell under Nathan's gaze, if Taylor cried alone in a corner of the TV lounge at three in the morning because the only person she thought still loved her was being vicious and cruel and dismissive. It's not okay how much everyone else is hurting and if I don't fix it I am that monster.

Instead Max exhaled a shaky breath and turned wordless to watch Chloe stomp into the room, booted up and ready to go. The keys, valuable as gold, hung from Chloe's left hand. She was trying to gesture at Max, encouraging her to get up, to come with her. Max opened her mouth, trying to find her words, to tell Chloe to give her the keys and go watch TV, stay here safe and sound and that Max wouldn't stop until Rachel was safely back with her. This wasn't the reaction Chloe wanted. The girl's face split into an ugly frown and, angry, Chloe spat a line whose source Max had almost forgotten, whose source was dead in less than an hour. Oh god, less than an hour, she realized.

"You don't have a damn sense of self-preservation," Chloe called at her from the doorway. Max stood, a fire lighting in her gut. It dimmed almost as soon as she thought of yelling back, of demanding the keys. This had all spiraled out of control. Maybe it was best just to rewind and find somewhere to sleep for a cycle or two. Her mind felt all kinds of twisted up and that did not bode well for saving Rachel. Sick to my stomach, Max mused at the churning feeling. She could not shake the year old argument of who she was and more, the image of Frank, brains splattered across the grass in those few moments before his body and home were consumed by unnaturally hot flames. Max thought that if she really was the woman from Los Angeles, she wished she could capture that feeling, that primal acceptance of doing what must be done for the ones you loved. If she could, this would be no problem. Rachel would be safe in Chloe's arms and Max would be halfway across the country hiding herself away from the human beings around her.

Every second I waste is another second I can't be getting ready for Rachel. Chloe wanted them to match eyes and have some moment of understanding but it was impossible. It was impossible to fathom the meeting of eyes. Max stared at the ground. People were used to that from her. People left her alone when she did that. People, people not Chloe Price. People not Rachel Amber. People not Steph Gingrich. Others. Chloe's hand cupped her chin and forcefully lifted her head. She was going to meet Chloe's eyes no matter what she wanted. Surety rose in her, the idea that she would come unraveled, be unmade if she did.

She was not. Light blue eyes swam with hurt and panic, anger and love. The love and the panic were not all for Rachel. They were for her too. The anger, the hurt, those Max held alone. I'm not a monster, she told herself, fists clenching, nails digging into her palms. I am not a monster. I am not a monster.

"This isn't about me or who or what I am," she said aloud and though she was looking at Chloe, Max was talking to herself. Or maybe she was talking to anything otherworldly that might exist to
hear it. She was praying and she did not know who to. “This is about Rachel. Rachel Amber. The girl who saved me from Nathan. The girl who would burn down the world to protect Chloe. This is about her. If I am a monster, then I'll swallow that pill.” Chloe's hard face did not change in response to her words. Max wasn't sure how loudly or softly she had spoken them.

“I'm coming with you,” Chloe said, still angry, still hurt. In the grip of surrender, Max nodded and shot one apologetic and sheepish look toward Steph who stood with arms folded across her chest by the refrigerator. “Max Caulfield,” Chloe called to her, loudly, jerking Max’s head back around toward her. “Rachel is in trouble. Let's go.”

Internally she was at the height of panic, shaking limbs and screaming instincts as she climbed into the passenger seat of the truck. If I think, I can find a way to stall tonight before I explain. I can choose between losing them today and losing them tomorrow. I want it to be tomorrow. One more night. All three of us. One more night. The truck was loud in her ears, louder than she remembered. It was crazy how it seemed worse in the passenger seat than in the driver's seat. She did not buckle up as Chloe backed them out of the driveway.

Rachel.

For the next few minutes Max did her best to direct Chloe and ignore the mental image of the one time she had gotten a look at Rachel in her hospital gown: pale, weak and cuffed to the railing, wearing a look of defeat so wrong as to violate a natural law of the universe.

“Where are we going?” Chloe asked for the fifth time as they began to approach the edge of city limits. Max did not have a real name for where they were going. Names beyond those of her friends and her girlfriends had been pointless to even consider for a rather long time. If anything, she was want to call it a trail and name it after herself, considering what the trail was made up of.

“We're going to park in the middle of nowhere, we're going to go into the woods and we're going to sit and wait in the dark.” Chloe's head twisted around briefly. The last of the businesses lining this road of Arcadia Bay passed by them out of the window.

“How in the name of hell does that help Rachel? What's happening to her?”

“Right now Rachel is completely fine and completely safe. In about fifteen minutes she's going to be scared and angry. Five minutes after that, she's going to be not fine. Not safe.”
“How do you know any of that? This isn't making sense Max,” Chloe chided. “This isn't what I signed up for. I need to know shit.”

“I know all of that because I've seen it, time and time again.”

“What does that mean?” Max shook her head. Thoughts and figures, timing, down to the second were battling against the fear, the certainty that she was going to tomorrow night alone, whether they saved Rachel or not.

“Rachel is going to be in trouble and we're going to save her and everything else, all the answers and everything come next.”

“What?” Max repeated herself.

“Rachel is going to be in trouble and we’re going to save her and e-”

“God damn it, Max. This would be so much easier if you just dropped this mysterious fucking act.” Chloe's foot pressed down harder on the gas. They were blowing past the speed limit now, and Chloe was doing her best to stay focused but terror and frustration were making her look shaky. Max did not worry about it. If a crash began to happen she would just rewind and damn the pain in her head. This got so far out of control.

“It wouldn't help,” Max promised her. “This moment right here might make sense, but the minute I explain everything ends and I'm not risking fucking up rescuing Rachel again.” Chloe started to speak but Max struck out, taking her frustration out on the truck's dash for the first time in her life. She regretted it instantly. This was a trusty vehicle, she loved it, she owed it. It did not deserve her anger any more than Chloe deserved to be hurt by her. “No,” Max yelled, turning to make sure she was heard clearly. “No! I will not fuck up saving Rachel. Not again. Jefferson doesn't get to take her from us.” Max's eyes slammed shut. FUCK! “And neither does anyone else. Not the police. Not David. Not Frank. Not the fire. Not anyone. If she dies, if she goes to prison, if she gets grabbed up by some fucking alphabet soup agency for study, everything is pointless.”

Max turned back toward the windshield and resisted the urge to childishly scoot toward the far door, as far away from Chloe as she could. She wasn't mad at the girl, she just felt vulnerable. She wanted the space between them because Chloe could very easily make her change her mind. Max knew it. That mind was fragile at the moment and if her will broke she wasn't sure Rachel was ever getting out of this situation.
“Who is Jefferson?” Chloe asked her, trying a sudden change of subject that almost worked to throw Max off her game. “You were saying that name last year, while trying to fight the drugs off. You said it in your dreams at least twice that night. I just thought you were out of your head because of the meds. Who is he, Max?” Outside the world was going dark. Max tried desperately to look into that dark, away from the headlights until Chloe got to the turn they needed. She felt the now familiar sensation of them passing to gravel from asphalt. Chloe was going too fast. An odd wind that Max thought was related to Rachel's first growing bout of nerves was starting. *It's not long now. We need to get into place. Twenty minutes until she gets there, if that.*

“He's not important right now,” Max told her. “Speed up and keep your eye out for the next left. Dirt road. Turn down it.” Chloe nodded and Max continued as the determination pushed devastation from her heart. “You'll find out who he is too soon. Way too soon. Drewer set her retirement for the end of the year, but she's only gonna make it until Christmas Break. She'll die on New Years Eve, three minutes before the ball drops and her replacement will be around to start his career here in a couple of weeks.” Chloe stared at her for almost a full second, eyes off the road, before Max realized she had continued talking. *In for a life alone, in for a pound,* she told herself.

“What in the name of *fuck* are you on? ” Chloe asked her, no longer mad or scared but purely accusatory.

“Mrs. Drewer has cancer that has metastasized. She hasn't told the school yet. It's getting bad. In a week or two she'll let on how bad it is.” An idea began to grow in Max and she seized it, tightly. When Chloe saw that she was cognizant and watching her, the girl turned back to the road but Max continued yet again. “Chloe, her replacement is a monster. Famous but falling out of vogue. He walks like a gentleman, looks like a playboy and he is a way more intelligent, more dangerous Nathan Prescott. No matter what happens tomorrow, never ever let him near you or Rachel. Do whatever it takes.” Chloe shook her head hard, beginning to panic again. Max knew she was getting to the girl but the cat was out of the bag, the storm was loose. “Promise me, Chloe.”

“What, where do you think you're going tomorrow?” Chloe pressed.

“I don't have plans to leave you. But you might both leave me after you hear everything and I will not stay here after that.” Chloe shook her head again, this time so hard that the wheel shook beneath her hands. “Calm down,” Max told her.

“I'm not leaving you,” Chloe insisted.

“Listen, just do whatever it takes to keep Drewer's replacement away from you. Do not trust him.”
“Whatever it takes? Does that involve a baseball bat and Frank?” Max clenched her eyes shut. Chloe had some kind of soft spot for the man. She had no idea. *Chloe, damn it.* “What?” Chloe asked her, clearly engulfed in some fresh wave of panic.

“That’s not an option anymore.” Max leaned down and pulled the thick and dirty brown blanket Chloe kept on the passenger floorboard up and into her lap. Chloe did not ask about the blanket. *This should be big enough for all three of us. I just have to keep Rachel from moving around too much.*

They spilled out of the cab less than two minutes later. Max told her to keep the truck running and the heat on high but had not answered or given Chloe anymore ominous predictions of the future. Max wasn’t sure if Chloe hesitated or not before following her, but it didn’t matter. The soft glow of her flashlight lit up the ground in front of Max. She found a path, a path she had made by trudging through the dirt and mud forty-three times before. Her footprints, footprints of timelines past, remained etched into the dirt. That was the downside of breaking the laws of time and space simultaneously: while she kept things she needed like Frank Bower’s flashlight or the photograph in her sweatshirt, she also kept all of the mud, ash and gore attached to her. There was a reason her sweatshirt had a blood-stained hole in the back of it.

“What is this?” Chloe asked. Max made a ‘quiet down’ gesture.

“They’re all my footprints. I’ve been making them for... almost fifteen days now.”

“That makes no sense.”

“It will,” Max said, gesturing into the dark woods. “Now keep your voice down, I need to hear shit.” A gust of wind caught Max unaware and she stumbled backward even as she attempted to do the opposite. “Stay close to me, follow me as close as you can and you shouldn't trip over anything.” With that, she pushed into the woods. The minute they crossed the line into the forest their only light was Frank’s dying flashlight. The stars were gone, the moon low and equally muted by the dying canopy overhead and their eyes had not yet adapted to the darkness enough to make use of the low ambient light. Chloe was mercifully quiet, save for her footfalls only a few inches behind Max’s. It gave her time to think.

“You need to know how amazing the last few months have been,” Max told the girl. “Like, I've been down and sad and sometimes I'll hide but the last year has been amazing, even setting aside Nathan Prescott.” Still no tears, though there was the occasional watering of her eyes. She did not want to think about Nathan. Saying his name made her shiver, made her wonder about time which she could not remember, and was not sure she wanted to. God, she was too tired to be rendered useless by the feelings beating around inside her. *Keep it together.* She was nonetheless, glad to have those feelings back. “The time with you was the greatest I think I could have ever imagined. I
don't think it was or would have been any better the other way. Probably couldn't have been.” Oh sure, there would have been more photos, but less worth photographing. Less worth living. No tabletop, no relationship, no tromping through the woods or singing Christmas carols until Chloe's eyes roll so hard they hurt. No warm quiet nights beside Rachel, no none of it. If this is how it all goes down the toilet, then 'fucking worth!'

“Stop talking like you're saying goodbye,” Chloe hissed. “I refuse to accept that.” That will change, Max understood. A few hours at the least, a day at the most, either way, she'll wonder why I really came back. After a moment Max realized that the bends of some of the trees in front of her were beginning to get extra familiar. The familiar outlines of footsteps were beginning to not exactly thin out but become more and more focused, showing how, over time she got better and better at finding the tree in question without having to backtrack.

“We're almost there,” Max declared beneath her breath. The quiet night was pierced by a sudden explosion. Hurry! She picked up the pace. “Come on, come on.”

“What the hell?” Chloe asked as Max rushed toward the tree, the tree with fifty-two branches that Max could make out, the tree with moss around base and three mushrooms growing on its south side. Honey, I'm home.

“Put yourself on this side of this tree and do not step away from it until I say. We stay here now.” Max watched Chloe, barely visible under the flashlight's pale, ghostly glow, approach the tree. Her pale, lanky body stretched a hand toward the tree and pressed against it. Chloe looked at her, demanding an explanation for the explosion, the woods around them, the unusual things that Max had been saying. Max wished her eyes were truly cameras so that she could save this moment for eternity: not Chloe's panic, but her beauty out here, her beauty in passion. It was always Chloe's heart that was the most attractive feature about her, though there were certainly plenty of things Max could mark down as coming in at a close second.

“I want answers,” Chloe hissed. This sounded like pleading. Yes, you want answers. You always want answers. You're about to get them and they'll change everything, don't you fucking get it?

“If you wait eight, maybe nine minutes, we'll have Rachel in our arms and everything will be okay.” That was the important answer and if Chloe couldn't see it, that was alright. Her nerves were clouding her judgment. Max's nerves had lost the ability to cloud this scene a long time ago.

“That's not good enough,” Chloe demanded as Max crouched behind a tree just a few feet from her, and again gestured for Chloe to go quiet. Maybe this is for the best, Max thought. Rachel's car was always going to be left at the site and get caught in the fire if I came alone. This way, it survives. I just convince Chloe to take us to it and then I get in it and drive it back to Steph's house behind them... I mean, if I can fix Rachel in time. This is my best chance. This is the new 'save point,' Max
borrowed the term from Mikey's descriptions of his favorite video game. "Just tell me what's happening," Chloe pleaded, at something barely above a whisper. "I'm so scared for you and Rachel and me. I just want to know what's happening." Max knew Chloe was too busy talking to hear the gunshot which took Frank's life, but, focusing, she could hear it on the edge of her comprehension. Frank Bowers was dead, again.

“I promise you'll know everything after today. The truth is going to have to come out.” Max exhaled as a second explosion, louder and more insistent went off. Chloe's voice fell silent as for half a second the woods was lit with a bright and almost indescribable blue light. The azure flame of Arcadia Bay, Max thought to herself. Beautiful and terrible as the dawn. Rachel was their Galadriel and this was the moment she failed the test, unlike the woman of the fiction. The blue faded from the trees, the leaves, the undergrowth and the dirt. It returned to where it consumed what Max could only assume was Damon Merrick's corpse. When people like us fail our tests, there is a price to pay.

“That's Rachel who did that,” Max promised as the light faded away, lingering unnaturally until it died as Frank had mere moments before. “She is not dead, here. Frank is. He killed himself and I think he did it so that he did not have to shoot David. That's all I can say right now. Stay quiet, stay low.” The finer details of Chloe's confusion passed from the reach of Max's senses at the light of the flashlight died in her hand. This time, Max dropped it to the earth. She would not need it again. David's voice slowly reached her ears. He screamed for Chloe. Max was still unsure why.

“What?” Chloe hissed. In the distance, Max saw small flares of fire, flashes of orange as tree and leaf and even earth burned. She knew she could trace them back to Rachel, barreling half blind through the woods, mind fading away. When she reached them, Rachel would be losing consciousness at such a pace that they might have one, two, at the most three minutes to get her to the truck and get her warmed up, woken up. Everything had to be perfect and Max had let things get so out of hand she had very little control over the conditions.

“He doesn't actually know you're here. He does this every time. I don't know what it's about but it's not important right now. Stay low, stay quiet. Someone is coming. When they get here, help me bring them down, get on the ground beside me and stay fucking still.” Max readied the blanket retrieved from Chloe's truck, the one Chloe kept in there on the off chance that she had to sleep in it, as she had needed many times before last summer. Chloe deserves so much better than sleeping in a truck. The sound of at least one set of footsteps became audible over David's hysterical screaming of the wrong name. Why? Why does he think it's Chloe? Is he just so fixated on her? Max reached across the gap between them, the one Rachel was about to run through, and tapped Chloe on the shoulder. When she was sure that the girl was looking, she pointed. By the dim light still filtering through the canopy, Max made out the blur of the first form moving toward them. David sounded to be twenty or thirty feet behind it.

“I don’’” Max shushed her. It was hard to make Rachel out in her all-black outfit, smoke rising from her body, trees and branches helping to make her erratic, weaving path hard to follow. She did not walk in a way that made sense, stumbling, falling and rising again. Max began to unfold the
blanket in her hands, letting it drag the ground. Rachel became clearer still, enough that Chloe's breath hitched beside Max. As before, Rachel was coming right toward them.

“Now,” Max hissed, pressing tight against the tree in front of her. Three. Two. One. The outline of Rachel's obscured face came into immediate view and, clueless, Rachel Amber walked right by her girlfriends. Max leapt, her left hand slamming tight around Rachel's mouth, her right hand spreading the blanket up and out around them. She threw her weight against Rachel, pushing her into Chloe, who reached out instinctively. Together, they collapsed one atop the other to the ground and Max hastily used her free hand to arrange the blanket overtop their bodies. Rachel was babbling something about the stars, again, as she had been the last time.

“It's okay,” Max whispered in Rachel's ear. “It's okay. We're here. Chloe and I are here.” She did not move her hand from the girl's mouth, though she felt something warm on it that she knew to be dried and burnt vomit. The air under the blanket was smokey, mostly because parts of Rachel's clothing had burned. Chloe must have had the air knocked out of her because she was silent. David's calling grew louder still and she counted. Ten-Nine-Eight...

Outside David was getting confused, convincing himself he had not seen her come this way, that she had gone east. Seven-Six-Five.

David was turning, taking one last look in the darkness, swinging his flashlight around. It lit the blanket but his panicked mind must have been searching for a standing form, not an odd bit of filth and dirty that seemed lumpy and might have moved. Four-Three-Two.

Chloe's stepfather turned east and hurried away. The light faded from Max and Chloe's view. One.

Max leaped to her feet, discarding the blanket and pulling Rachel up. The obscured girl's feet found purchase beneath her legs. Chloe rose with them, confused, gasping. Rachel's left arm went over Max's shoulder and after a moment Chloe pushed herself under her right. How many minutes? Two? Three? I have to move fast. Rachel followed where Max led, over familiar ground damaged, dented with footprints of versions of Max which never were, many of which should have been lined by footprints belonging to Rachel herself. They were not.

Chloe was asking questions in a half helpless tone as Max hurried them back toward the truck. In seven minutes, she knew, David would return to his car and drive it, busted tire and all, away from the fire, until the rim was bent and he saw no reason to go further. After that, Max's understanding of what he was going to do in this situation was spotty, closer to nonexistent. Even as she tried to walk, Rachel shivered, her body jerked in their arms. Cursing, Max picked up the pace, which was risky in the near-total darkness they found themselves in. A bit more light began to flood in. Feeling returned to her body, detail and emotion to her mind. She was no longer the mechanics of her situation, she was Max again.
The headlights, the fucking headlights! If Max had been thinking clearly when she and Chloe stumbled into the woods, she would have told the girl to turn the headlights off. Now the faint golden glow was beautiful and promising, it was warmer than any sunrise had ever been, more beautiful than the Golden Hour that she and Rachel appreciated for vastly different reasons, both aesthetic in nature. It was amazing. Between them Rachel gathered up most of the remaining strength she must have had and sleepily spoke.

“I'm tryna' sleep, you two. Go to Max's room.” Chloe's look of relief was almost comical. It inspired the same feeling, however mutedly, in Max. If I can just warm her up in time, we're home free. Chloe ran ahead of them to the driver's side of the truck and hurried in. Max had some difficulty getting Rachel's weakly, meekly protesting form inside, she kept trying to stop Max from pushing her in and asking where they were going. At least her eyes are opening, Max thought, smiling despite one of Rachel's nails cutting a gash in her filthy, dirt encrusted cheek. Whatever it takes, Max told herself. With one last, heaving shove, Max overpowered Rachel. The girl fell unceremoniously onto the seat and Max had to shove her again, complaining about being 'manhandled' so that Max could get in.

“Turn this truck around, hit the main road and turn left,” Max told Chloe as the door slammed shut behind her.

“Left?” she asked, confused but sounding a little more at ease, a little pleased. Who could blame her? Max was pleased herself, but it was artificial and temporary, more adrenaline than reason. She needed Rachel to wake up, she needed to get Rachel's vehicle clear of this and then she was going to have to face the music. She was going to have to- Oh shut the fuck up, she told herself. Feel sorry for your dumb ass later.

“Just fucking do it,” Max answered turning Rachel around. Rachel tried to push her away and struggled with some panic as Max pulled the mask away. Rachel continued to breathe slowly, but raggedly. Max pulled the puke-caked bandana away and discarded it. She used the top of the filthy ski mask cleaned Rachel’s face as best as she could with the girl’s hands rising to make the process harder, flailing at Max's arm. “Rachel's car is ahead on the right. Keep an eye out and gun it. We need to get to it before David gets back to his car.”

“Fine, let's do this shit,” Chloe called, sounding more eager than ever before. Max nodded and turned toward Rachel. They were running out of time. The truck began to move as Chloe tried to get back onto the road and turned around. Max was, in the meantime, trying to pull Rachel's attention. The girl was staring at her now, confused, lost. She did not know where she was and Max understood that. She just hoped the girl could hear her.

“Rachel, Rachel sweetie, I need you to tell me how to warm you up, fast. I don't know how,” Max
was lying slightly. She had ideas but they were all problematic for one reason or another. The cab of the truck was actually sweltering but she had tried this before and it was not going to be enough. The rise in body temperature needed to keep Rachel from flat out passing out was significant. Too sharp and sudden for anything natural to do it in time. They would have to take her to the hospital if they weren't fast and if they did that they wouldn't be able to stop David from seeing her car when he, in his frenzied state, drove the wrong direction.

“What?” Rachel asked her, voice barely audible as she looked once or twice around the cab. “Where we goin’?”

“Rachel,” Max insisted. “I need to warm you up. A lot. All at once. How do I do that?”

“I've got a few ideas,” Rachel mumbled before, giggling softly. *She's in fucking lala land. “More than a few.”* The girl's head began to dip. *No, not yet.* Max squeezed her eyes shut, reached back with her right hand and whispered an apology. The sound of the resulting slap across Rachel's cheek rang out like nothing Max had ever heard before. She opened her eyes in time to see a heartbreaking look of hurt in Rachel's eyes, to hear Chloe scream to ask what in the hell she was doing before the girl fell limp. *God damn it!*

Max held her right hand out, toward the windshield and closed her eyes. It took a surprising amount of willpower to block out Chloe's screaming but she momentarily felt her way back through time. It was a type of movement like any other, it just did not require her to move her body. It was more like her mind going on a little walk about. She sensed thoughts and feelings of her own, felt words spoken and when things tasted right, she stopped moving.

“Fine, let's do this shit,” Chloe declared with some bombast as the truck lurched forward. Max kept her eyes open through the agonizing pain in her skull. She felt the wet of blood oozing down her lips and chin. With her head still feeling ready to split open, she left Chloe to handle the driving and shook Rachel twice, hard. Rachel was already watching her, but she began to protest in a half-hearted whisper.

“Rachel, I have to warm you up all at once, super fast.” It was not the ideal situation for this, not hygienically, aesthetically or even ethically, but Max leaned forward all at once and pressed her lip against the shivering girl's. She was hoping for some reaction, something that would start the fire she knew could be inside. Rachel did try, to be fair, her left hand rising and even pressing briefly against Max's neck. It still didn't work. Kissing her felt like what she feared kissing a corpse would be like. She was cold, her lips blue in the pale light of Chloe's cab.

“The fuck?” Chloe queried, the question succinct enough.
“It was a gamble,” Max hissed at her. In front of Max, Rachel was trying to speak. Her voice was nothing under the roar of the engine, though and as Chloe pulled toward the turnoff onto the gravel road, the girl slumped forward, her weight all coming to rest on Max's shoulder. “God damn it.” Max eased the girl back against her seat, spat on the floorboard once and gave an apologetic shrug to Chloe, who was watching her, helplessly. “Sorry, love. Be right back.” Max raised a filthy, bloody right hand and extended it forward again, feeling a little like a marionette being made to dance a dance for an audience of nothing and no one.

The act of pushing herself back to the past, only a few seconds prior, was slower than the time before. She was sure that each marker in the timescape was faded, hazy. Their kiss, the sensation of Rachel's cold lips passed her by, barely clear enough to feel. In the distance of the ethereal timescape, there was Max speaking to Rachel and there if she focused, must have been the jolt her body felt as the truck began to move. Max gasped, readied herself to hurt and, as if her mind was as heavy here as her body was in the physical world, tripped forward back into time.

“Fine, let's do this shit,” Chloe called, again for the first time. The truck jumped forward and Max turned her head to match eyes with Rachel. She had no choice. The only thing I can think to do is piss her off. Fast. Max was going to tell herself that it was okay, that Rachel would understand and forgive her, but she realized that in a few hours it wouldn't matter if she did or not. There were only two options left that she could think of to bring that fire out and this was bound to be the most immediate. The other was rather unthinkable.

“I know you can hear me, Rachel, so it's time you listen. There's some shit you've needed to hear for a while.” I don't wanna do this, Max screamed inside. Chloe turned her head around to stare at her, at the tone of her voice. Rachel locked eyes with her. Somewhere, somewhere deep in those eyes was a degree of awareness. She had to speak to that buried awareness in simple, hurtful words. “Your dad did nothing wrong. Sera was in the wrong. Sera should have stayed away from you. She would have gotten what she deserved after what she did to you.” Confusion split across Rachel's face. Chloe called her name in anger. “You fucked up today and Frank died. There's probably going to be another forest fire. That's on you, Rachel. Rachel Amber did that. Rachel Amber killed Frank Bowers tonight.” The sound emitting from Rachel's mouth was a wail, and it began almost as quietly as anything else to come from it. After a moment, as Max tried to find something else, any other lie to tell to enrage her, the wail became louder. Rachel's upper lip curled. Max grabbed at either side of her head as she tried to turn away.

“You took Nathan's fucking eye. Do you have any idea what you've done to him? All of the pain you caused him? All of the hurt?”

“What in the fuck are you doing?” Chloe screamed at her as she pulled up to the turn off. It's working. She's still conscious. Oh god, it's finally gonna happen.

“Saving her,” Max shot at Chloe. “Saving her the only way I know how, by showing her she has
the power to save herself.” Her eyes locked with Rachel's. She could swear she felt more strength in the girl's neck as Rachel tried to jerk away from her. The thespian's face began to blur and Max knew the fault there was in her watering eyes. “Oh don't think you're done yet, Rachel fucking Amber. Miss fucking perfect. So better, so holier than thou. This isn't the first forest you've set on fire, is it? Can you imagine how many people lost their homes, their livelihoods, everything they owned and loved and even the beds they slept in?” She could not make out the fine details but it looked like Rachel's face was turning red. *Color, color in her cheeks again.*

Max had not been entirely sure she would ever see that again.

“Who else has to get hurt? Frank is dead because you fucked up, just like Damon's dead because I fucked up.” Max's hands were thrown wide as Rachel, reached up with both of her own and pushed Max off of her. When the girl could move her head she swung it around harshly once or twice to take in where she was and then turned back to Max, who had had time to blink the wetness from her eyes. In Rachel's eyes was hurt like Max could have seen in Chloe's even a few minutes ago, but also rage, fire. Her cheeks were rosy, in fact she was red from the nose down. *Yes! Yes!*

“No!” Tears came in earnest and a sob choked Max's throat as Rachel yelled back at her, fist curling in her lap, head shaking harshly side to side. Chloe gasped and swerved the truck as Rachel bumped it into her by accident, clearly trying to get space between herself and Max. The gravel road was beneath their feet. In seconds, Rachel's car was going to show up. *It's working. It's fucking working.* “No that's bullshit! That's all bullshit,” Rachel told her, insistent, indignant, angry, hurt. *Alive and awake and warm, so fucking warm.* Sitting this close to Rachel, Max felt like her very skin could burn and crisp. She pushed closer. “Frank shot himself, James is where he needs to be and Nathan is a sack of shit who deserved more than I gave him. I did the right thing! I did the right... thing.” Rachel's voice was trailing, she was calming, realization was literally dawning, rising across her face like the morning sun. If Max hadn't jerked around to stare out of the windshield looking for her car, she could have fucking sung. “You know this. You know it. Why did you say it?”

“Because you needed to know it,” Max told her. “You needed to know that not everything is your fault and it's not up to you to fix it.” *Raging hypocrite!* “And it pissed you off and now look at you, you're breathing heavy, you're warm, so fucking warm. You know why I said that shit.”

“To make me warm,” Rachel asked her, both demanding and pleading that she answer. Something up ahead on the right side of the road drew Max's attention. It was the gleam of, she was sure, Rachel's car.

“To make you warm,” Max promised her. “Your keys are in the back of the driver's seat?” Rachel nodded, dumbfounded and sat up. Despite her confusion, her obvious discomfort and the slight shaking that Max thought had to be from adrenaline, she looked at her not like the half-conscious unaware being she had been moments ago, but as Rachel Amber: fierce, proud. *A lioness.* My
Chloe pulled to a sudden stop and as Max moved to throw the door open, fingers curled tightly into her hair, causing her to turn around suddenly. She was an inch from Rachel's face and though a kiss was going to be less than pleasant for a few reasons, the girl leaned in. Rachel's forehead pressing against hers burned as if she had a horrible fever. Her eyes were hotter, alive with the power inside her. They glowed very literally, a pale golden shine. Rachel’s look did not say all was well, it said that the world was ending and they should steal pleasure and passion like thieves in the night. That, more than anything, sealed the deal. *I’m going to have them for one more night.* Max broke free of her and rolled out of the truck onto the pavement.

“I'll meet you at Steph's,” she lied. “Go!” For the first time, lying to them felt good on her lips. It felt like heaven for the devil. Max pulled open the door to Rachel’s car, reached behind the front seat and freed the keys from the pouch at the back. One of several times she had carried Rachel from the woods, Rachel had mentioned the detail about her keys. She was glad that was not nonsense pulled from an addled mind. Glancing back she saw Rachel and Chloe together, safely, outlined by the edge of the windshield. They shared one concerned look no doubt at Max's expensive and then the truck began to turn around.

Rachel’s car started under Max’s hand and she found as she turned that vehicle around that driving it was *nothing* compared to the *literal* crash course she had taken to learning how to drive stick with the Frankentruck. *Normal girls learn to drive in their parents’ car. You practiced in your girlfriend’s truck in a fucking time loop.* Laughing bitterly to herself, Max eased the car back into drive and pulled away before David could return to his car and pop out. Him getting turned around and trying to drive the wrong way at first would be such a relief.

Max pulled her phone from her pocket as she made toward Arcadia Bay. She had to be careful about this, she was not particularly comfortable with texting while driving. The phone flared to life with a 48% charge and she pulled up a message screen.

*Me*

*Joyce I thought about what you said and I wanted to tell you, again, that Chloe is safe. I just left the place she’s staying and she’s sitting there drinking hot chocolate and watching TV. No matter what, it’s better that you know she’s safe.*

Max did not go to Steph’s house. Maybe at one point she would have. This was not that one point. After a trip of watching building after building, business after business go by with a wonder she could not have imagined feeling for Arcadia Bay ever again, Rachel Amber’s car came to a stop in its usual place in the Blackwell Academy parking lot, thirty minutes before curfew. *I couldn’t have planned it better if I tried,* Max thought, shutting the car off and climbing from it. There was no one around as far as the eye could see.
She walked casually, intent on shutting herself into her room, answering texts only with, ‘I am at school, I will talk to you tomorrow.’ With that kind of weight off of her mind, she enjoyed the sight of Blackwell Academy. It was actually a fairly attractive looking place when not seen through eyes of guilt and regret. Max knew that by this time tomorrow, she would have spilled everything to Chloe and Rachel and, for good measure, Steph. If they were thinking clearly at all, they would send her packing within a few hours. She wasn’t sure how many more chances she was going to have to look at Blackwell. It was okay to enjoy it.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket. As Max approached the dormitory building, caked in mud and blood and ash, she saw Samuel in the distance. Distracted by his work, he did not see her. She would not have cared if he had. Inside the building she climbed to the second floor, her sore limbs lighter than they should have been, her lips curled up in a small smile. The door to the showers opened beneath her key and Max piled her clothes to the side of one of the stalls.

Chloe

We’re safe. Are you almost here?

Reasonably they had to allow her a little time to catch up, so Max thought she had a few to respond. Obscuring her phone in the middle of her filthy clothes, Max stepped under a stream of hot water and drew a pale curtain across the entrance to her shower stall. It was excellent, she had to admit, amazing to feel the warmth of a shower trace down her body. By her guess it might have been ten days for her, even though here in this timeline it was more a matter of a handful of hours.

“They’re both safe and I’m alive,” Max told herself as she scrubbed at the filth on her skin with her hands. It took her a little longer than she wanted to look more like a human than some kind of uruk-hai, but when she shut the water off and stepped out to admire herself in the mirror, there was, at least, no trace of blood and she looked less like she had gone swimming in Arcadia Bay’s biggest mud puddle and more as if she might have been doing yard work. Max pulled her ruined shirt and the scraps of denim that were once pants back on temporarily, grabbed the rest of it and strolled at a casual pace to her bedroom.

The door was shut behind her before she freed her phone and sat it on the edge of the bed where it would lay forgotten. Max stripped away the filthy clothes, found underwear, a pair of pants and a tee and revelled in her momentary victory as clean, untorn cloth settled warmly on her frame, despite sticking a bit to the water on her skin. It’s over and Rachel’s okay. It’s over and Chloe’s okay. It’s over and I’ll be okay. This last bit sounded like a lie even to herself, but Max repeated the mantra a time or two as she kicked her ruined converse against one wall of the dorm room.

Turning, Max was starting to wonder how to celebrate. Vodka sounds like a lovely option, vodka and Deep Space Nine... what’s the appropriate Sisko toast here then? Is it ‘So I will learn to live
with it, because I can live with it’ or is it ‘To Manufactured Triumph!’? Personally I think both work, but I’m in the mood for Pale Moonlight. Max’s tired eyes landed on her laptop and all joviality faded, she stopped dead in her tracks. Her stomach dropped. Even her enjoyment of her manufactured triumph seemed to slip away at the face staring back at her from her laptop.

On the screen was a woman, a woman who Max had been seeing hanging around her since at least January, never approaching and never talking to her. It was a woman she had seen bump into Chloe in the nightclub in Portland. It was, she was given to imagine, though a few years older, very clearly Max Caulfield. It was some version of herself and it seemed she had left her younger counterpart a video. *Oh this day just never fucking ends, does it? Fuck you very much, Future (question mark?) Max.*

Max took two long strides across the room and pressed the spacebar on her laptop. She tried to absentmindedly rearrange her hair, to get that wind-swept look she loved, but clearly a shower without shampoo or soap had been less than successful in cleaning everything from her hair: it did not want to untangle, and she thought she felt a bit of mud in it. The screen brightened. The video had been recorded in that very room, from the laptop’s webcam and judging by the lighting of the room it had not been very long ago. *Asshole probably left while I was in the shower. I really have to work on my social niceties before I’m her. If I’m her.* On the screen an older version of herself with long braided hair settled into the computer chair. Two stripes of color ran down the unbraided portion of hair. One was a familiar blue, the other a bright orange. *I’d have to be fucking stupid to miss the implication.* Max didn’t think she was stupid. On the screen the woman began to speak. The video’s timer read as two minutes long.

“Hello, Max.”

“Hello, person trying to be ironic and funny,” she shot back, unwilling to let go of the small smile on her lips. She wanted her manufactured triumph back, *damn* it. This was *not* the future Max who had stabbed a man in a parking lot, who had broken every bone in his hands, she saw. Max was mildly confused that this did not crush her. If the woman on the screen *had* been that Max, wouldn’t that answer the big questions?

“It’s been a long road for you and I don’t think it’s over yet, but I know you’re exhausted. I’d give you time to rest if I could.”

“Oh I just fucking bet,” Max told the woman on the screen, turning toward her fridge and reaching down to dig the grey-green bottle within out. Almost as soon as the familiar steel touched her hand she knew it was empty. Max pushed it back and shut the door. *No toasts tonight, unless I want the warm shit.*

“Under your laptop is about two hundred dollars, a bus ticket and a plane ticket. The bus ticket
will get you to Portland. From there, you’ll be getting on a plane at Portland International to Los Angeles.”

“Are you sure about that?” she queried someone she knew couldn’t hear her. She still dug the tickets and money from beneath the laptop. According to the top ticket, the bus was leaving in forty-five minutes. “What, no ‘Sorry for your time, Max?’ We both know you could come see me if you wanted to.” Then again, a voice in the back of her head said. It would mean answers and it would mean holding off on telling Chloe and Rachel. A reprieve was not precisely fair to them, but it was appealing to her. Also, answers. The woman on the screen finally spoke again. Max was glad she hadn’t watched the woman’s silence.

“So, here’s what’s going to happen. It’s going to be rough for you, but you’re going to go to the building that one time might have been called Arcadia Studio.” The name set off a signal in the back of her head, a memory of a memory, the echo of an alarm someone else had pulled. “Six in the morning,” the woman instructed, making a movement with her arms that Max thought looked familiar: Chloe’s knuckle cracking. “It shouldn’t be hard for you to make it in time. I know you don’t think you want this, but it’s going to be worth it.” For some reason this woman wanted to bring her to this site, the site of value to another Max entirely.

Or is it actually another Max?

“You’re starting to realize this is it, this is your chance for an answer, aren’t you? This is your chance to find out if you can accept who you really are.” For reasons Max would never be able to explain to anyone else who asked, she nodded at the video as if it was interactive or a live feed. “Then come. Leave the laptop, leave everything. Bring your money, bring your ID, your real one and bring the tickets, just come. I will be waiting on you.” The room around her was not quite as near and dear to her the one last year had been. Still, as she heard the suggestion to abandon it, to leave Max couldn’t help but wonder if that was what she really wanted. I mean, you were going to have to leave anyway, weren’t you? In a couple of days?

I could do it, Max thought, watching the screen freeze, watching the video end. I could totally make it to the bus station in time. This is what I want, right? Max blinked at the screen, looking hazily, exhaustedly about her room one last time. This is what I want. Right?

“Come find out who you are.”

Her ragged, sole-weary sneakers, still covered in mud and ash, beckoned to her.
Chapter Thirty-Five: The Hero’s Journey... Again

Sept 17th, 2011, 10:02 PM

“It was fucking scary,” Chloe told her. Perhaps this was the fiftieth or sixtieth time she used that particular sentence to describe the couple of hours she had spent in Max’s company but she was having a bit of difficulty parsing through the event. “She was talking about everything she knew, and it’s a lot of it. A lot of disturbing, scary shit.” They had just climbed the stairs from Blackwell’s parking lot and, though Chloe was fairly certain she was not supposed to be there, they hurried side-by-side across the familiar, and empty, campus.

“Like what?” Rachel queried. She was trying to be the voice of reason, but Chloe had trouble seeing her that way. Just a couple of hours ago, Rachel had been flopping half-conscious around the cab of Chloe’s truck, wearing clothing that filled the cab with smoke. Add to that that she had had the pallor of a corpse when Chloe and Max finally got her into the lit cab and the girl who was now hurrying beside her, trying to reassure her, might as well have been a zombie risen from the depths of hell during their escape from that forest. The forest which is burning, now. It’s like the park all over again.

“She said Mrs. Drewer has cancer and has been keeping it a secret, that she was going to die in a few months and that her replacement was some sort of like, monster, some guy named Jefferson.” Rachel, who was clearly struggling to hurry alongside Chloe as they rounded the side of the school building, perked up suddenly. Yeah, she remembers that night, too. Chloe realized she probably ought to lower her voice to match Rachel’s. This was not exactly the kind of thing one talked about loudly. “And it was like she knew everything that was happening with you, or she said she did. Rachel, is it true that Frank, you know….”

“He’s dead,” Rachel confirmed, her voice quiet. “But how would Max have known that if she was with you?” That is the million dollar question.

“She said she’d been there before, that she’d seen it.” Chloe shook her head. “Honestly, I thought
she was on something until the forest turned blue.” Rachel slowed beneath the light of a street lamp and swallowed. At first, Chloe thought it was in memory of the state she had been in after creating the blue flash of flame. Then she was considering that maybe Rachel was beginning to feel ill again when the girl pulled to a stop and rested a hand on her stomach, overtop a shirt “borrowed” from Chloe. *Never mind that it was hers to begin with.*

As she watched, Rachel did not double over as if about to be ill, but only paused, staring. Chloe turned, expecting that maybe one of the security crew was walking by or maybe Samuel was working late. *Well, I was almost right.* They were not alone on the paths to the dormitories. *Oh I don’t have time for this.* Max, who had promised to meet them at Steph’s house had instead driven Rachel’s car to the school and, since then, had not answered texts, phone calls, or Kate knocking on her door. After the evening they had just been through, Chloe’s number one concern was Max and her number two was Rachel, who beyond being understandably numb was acting as one might expect from the night.

She did not expect or even desire to see her stepfather standing by the gate to the dormitories. Chloe took one sideways look at Rachel and decided then and there that if there was a fight to be had it would be between her and David. As far as Chloe was concerned, David firing a bullet at her meant Rachel had done her part in the war effort for the night. If Chloe turned away from him, she would see the light from the vicious forest fire spreading east of town. If she turned away from him, though, there was no telling what was going to happen. *Do this closer to the dorms, more people to hear you scream if he pulls a gun. Also stay calm, he doesn’t know it was her, not for sure.*

Chloe strode past Rachel, not bothering to see if she followed. In fact, she would have been happy had she not. Mud still clung to the bottom of her boots as she slowly approached her stepfather. He was recognizable by his outline, his broad shoulders and his moustache. The majority of his facial features were hard to make out at first, but as she got closer he was looking at her with the rejected lovechild of relief and awe on his face. She did not care to try to understand the look. Chloe set her jaw and waited, giving him a once over to see a distinct lack of a firearm on him.

“How terrible,” the man started and this time she heard more awe than anything else. “I thought I lost you out there.”

“You thought you what me where?” she asked, sinking every drop of hostility in her body into the question. *Fucker’s probably drunk again. Honestly I wish I could be, too.*

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry I pulled the trigger I-I-I just, I wasn’t thinking. Then I realized, right? I want you to know I was never- I never wanted to hurt you.”

“You’re not drunk, you’re high old man. What in the name of hell are you talking about? Never
wanted to hurt me?” She hefted her arm up. There was still a clear, dark bruise around her wrist. It had not yet faded away. “You hurt anything that doesn’t lick your polished boots. Now, I’m walking Rachel back to the dorms and you’re not supposed to be on campus. So whatever you shot up with, take it elsewhere.” No sooner had she dismissed the man and watched confusion and self-doubt creep into his face then it hit her. David, for whatever reason, had thought that the person in the mask, the one who was trying to convince him to mind his own business, the one who made fire appear from thin air… was her.

“Out there, on Bowers’ parents property, what you had to see tonight….” He was trying to hold onto this faulty assumption, not to mention his delusion of himself as some chivalrous knight. If it had been her out there, he would have shot at her. Big fucking hero. “And that fire, Chloe how in the name of hell…?”

“Are you saying you started that wildfire? I think the police would be really interested in that.” She was doing everything she could think of to steer the subject away from his encounter with Rachel, from Frank Bowers. It’s not gonna work. He still thinks you dealt drugs for Frank. Deal with this now and find out if Max is okay. “Honestly? Fuck that, I don’t care if you’re a serial arsonist or not, you’re a skeevy fuck and if you don’t walk away right now and keep your mouth shut, I’m reporting the spycam in my bedroom.” The look of wonder, of relief at her presence faded. What was left was an echo of the confused, lost manchild she had last seen staring up at her from behind the broken bannister at the top of the stairs. It whet Chloe’s appetite more than a little for confrontation.

“You wouldn’t dare,” he said.

“You spied on me in my room, where I change, where I do other things that are none of your business. Now you’ve gone somewhere, tweaked out on who knows what and made up some kind of story about me being there when you started a wildfire and now you’re stalking me. Again. You think I won’t call the cops if you don’t fuck off now?” Where the fuck is security? How did none of them report him for just standing here? Who knows how long he’s been here. Rachel must have heard the anger rising in Chloe’s throat after a long night of being jerked around and given half of the information she needed, wanted, deserved. The blonde, her hair hanging loose and still damp in the night air, stepped up beside Chloe. Rachel’s left hand rested firmly between Chloe’s shoulder blades. Normally it would have cause some shiver at the contact, but right now all Chloe wanted was this thing out of her way and Max to answer her door.

Chloe did not try to ‘listen in’ on the conversation that passed between Rachel and David through looks, through silent stares and two people refusing to blink. Whatever was communicated—if anything—seemed to convince David it was time to go. The man, who Chloe could now see was wearing pants drenched in mud and ash, dropped his hands to his sides and took one long step to his right as if to clear the path for them. Chloe was about to make another shot at David when Rachel did it for her.
“There’s at least a decent chance you’re a predator and even if not you and I both know you don’t belong around teenagers and children. If you’re still here when Chloe comes out, I’m calling the cops.” Chloe didn’t bother to try to see David’s reaction, she merely beamed a smile at the back of Rachel’s head as the blonde pulled her along toward the front door to the dormitory. If there weren’t a pit in her stomach the size of her own head about the idea that Max had not answered phone call, text or even Kate’s pleas, Chloe would have hummed. As it was, they climbed the stairs in quiet. Someone had the television on in the lounge on the bottom floor but whoever it was sat in relative silence. They climbed the steps to the second floor and, much to their surprise, found that Kate and Dana were waiting on them.

Dana was still dressed for her day, for the most part. Her hooped earrings had been replaced by studs and she was in her socks, but was otherwise still clearly awake. On the other hand, sitting beside her with their backs to the wall on either side of Max’s door, was Kate. Kate, apparently feeling uncomfortable with ever letting her hair down, bore a ponytail which was the most relaxed Chloe had ever seen her hair looking. Buns have to be bad for it, Chloe thought as she approached the two. Otherwise, Kate was dressed in the pyjamas that Chloe figured she was wearing when Rachel called half an hour ago, desperate for someone to go check on Max. What had brought Dana out, Chloe couldn’t say. The look of determination on the put-together girl’s face when Chloe and Rachel came to a comfortable distance for talking made Chloe want to thank whatever it was. Maybe she heard Kate knocking.

“Hey, guys,” Chloe greeted.

“Max hasn’t so much as made a peep,” Dana told her, her face still hardened. “Look, I know this is shitty to say but, are you prepared for what you might find in there?”

“Prepared for what?” Kate asked Dana as Chloe pulled to a stop in front of them. Chloe knew damn well what the actress meant and so did Rachel. Judging by the uncomfortable way that Kate wrapped her arms around her middle, she did too. She wants Dana to be wrong. So do I.

“Max wouldn’t,” Rachel chimed in. Rachel looked a little uncomfortable wearing no shoes or socks. She shuffled her feet on the old carpet and looked first from Chloe to Kate, the latter of which did not look up. This caused Rachel to take a step toward Kate and then kneel down. If David had been in a more observant mood he might have asked questions about the lack of shoes, because Kate certainly seemed to, looking up at Rachel curiously. Only two steps away, Max’s door waited for the unexpected foursome to knock again, or worse. “It’s not gonna happen, Kate, do you know why?” The dirty-blonde shook her head but she met Rachel’s eyes and Chloe felt her heart sinking as she and Kate, together, fought the idea. “It’s not going to happen because Max is the strongest mother fucker in this school and you can take that check to the bank.” Who uses checks anymore, Rachel? Sound like an old lady.

“Rachel.” The truth was that the minute Dana planted the idea in Chloe’s head there was a part of
her that was sure there was a body waiting on them. “Max is scared we’re leaving her. She’s scared that when she finally tells us the truth, the whole truth, we’ll leave her. I told you that.”

“She’s scared, fine,” Rachel shot back. “We’ve all been scared. Remember the junkyard after the play last year? I was so scared that I almost ran away from you instead of talk to you.” Chloe shook her head. In their present company, which was openly listening to them as each of the other girls rose to their feet, Chloe had to choose her words carefully.

“Max said that after she explained how she knows the things she does, we Would leave her. Capital W, already decided, Would. I know that’s bullshit, you know that’s bullshit, but to her she was telling me the absolute truth for the first time since she came back to Arcadia Bay. Maybe not all of it, but everything she said was completely true.” Chloe ignored Kate and Dana as they shared a look between each other. Yes, this was getting to be complicated and perhaps even awkward to them but Chloe was watching what she said. Rachel could do the same. “And last time Max went full on isolationist, the whole floor heard her, right?” Dana nodded when Chloe turned to look at her. Rachel didn’t speak.

None of this is because Max doesn’t care. I’ll never be stupid enough to think that again. Not after tonight. Max had been, other than filthy and bloody, passionate, loving and above all dedicated to Rachel’s rescue. She had also stood and walked and spoken like a ghost which was withering away into the ether. Nothing, and Chloe meant nothing, was out of the realm of possibility. She took a step past them all to knock on the door and Dana reached out to stop her. The girl’s hand rested just behind the bruise on Chloe’s wrist and she pulled it back as soon as she realized how close it had come to pressing on it.

“Don’t tell anyone about this,” Dana asked the three of them, and then turned to place herself between Chloe and the door. “This is for Max. She spends all of her time looking out for everyone else. We have to look out for her.” What is it that Max gets up to when I’m not looking? Is she running around playing hero to the entire school? Doesn’t that tear her up inside? Dana spoke with what almost sounded like loyalty. Something small and flat, rectangular flashed briefly in the girl’s hand as she reached toward the door. A credit card, holy shit, go Dana. Frankly, Chloe wasn’t sure that actually worked. She was, then, happily surprised when the doorknob turned and open half an inch before Dana pulled back and stepped away from the door. “Come on Kate,” Dana announced suddenly. “I’ve got tea in my room. Let’s have a little before bed.”

Chloe turned back as Rachel took Dana’s place in front of the door. Kate was looking between Rachel and Chloe and Dana with confliction. The taller of their two companions paused a few steps down the hall and glanced back. Chloe understood that Kate wanted to know what was behind door number one, but if Dana’s worst case scenario was, indeed, reality, wouldn’t it be better if Kate didn’t see it? Chloe thought so. When their more reserved friend was a step or two away, Rachel pushed the door open all at once.
Chloe had to hurry up not to get shut outside behind her.

The room was dark and other than the filthy outfit Max had been wearing out in the woods lying discarded on the floor, there was very little evidence that anything was particularly amiss in the room. Max’s phone and Rachel’s keys sat at the foot of the bed which was still made from that morning. The messenger bag she carried everything around in rested right inside the door to Max’s room which was not too unusual. Rachel anxiously moved past to check Max’s closet. It was a completely valid thing to check: Chloe had once seen Max retreat into the closet mid conversation. When she turned back with a shrug, Chloe realized that for some reason they could see even with the light off. She was even able to spot some dirt leading from the right side of the room back to the door. Max left in those fucked up converse of hers. Without her phone.

The light, it turned out, was coming from the computer desk. The laptop’s screen was dim and tilted far enough up that it was hard to make out the image on it but once Rachel crossed the room dressed in her old clothes, those long stolen by Chloe and pressed a button while shifting the screen, it came to life. A video file began to play. Okay, please don’t let this be some sort of recorded suicide note? Apparently Dana’s macabre theory as to Max’s silence had gotten to Chloe more than she thought. Can you blame me? I’ve seen Max broken. She kept breaking over and over again. No, there was more to it. The way Max had talked about how much she appreciated the time they had had together, it wasn’t an attempt to garner pity or worry. It was surrender. Chloe hated surrender. As far as she was concerned you had to fight until the bitter end. And if Max thinks this is her bitter end?

On the screen, the room stood mostly as it was, except that someone moved behind the computer chair which Chloe was settling into as Rachel looked over her shoulder. I need to keep an eye on Rachel, too. A young woman dropped into the chair on the camera, one with familiar eyes and familiar freckles, with a soft, sad smile that Chloe knew like the back of her hand. Rachel squinted at the screen beside Chloe but when Chloe looked her over she knew the girl was having the same thought. The person on the screen was too old to be their girlfriend and she wore her hair long, colored with a pair of stripes, one of which was not at all different than the color of hair Chloe currently and most commonly wore.

The woman staring out at them from the screen, by almost every measure, was Max Caulfield.

“Hello, Max.” This woman greeted her in a soft voice but with clarity, as if speaking to someone treasured and respected and then brushed her hair behind her left ear, revealing in the process several braids. “It’s been a long road for you and I don’t think it’s over yet, but I know you’re exhausted. I’d give you time to rest if I could.” Transfixed on the screen, Chloe tried to read the woman’s face. Oh, she spoke with some emphasis and even once gestured with her hands in a familiar way, but all in all her voice was very serene.

It was that hand gesture, a soft wave of her left hand that accompanied an apologetic tone that ran
through Chloe’s mind when the pieces began to fall into place. In the document which Chloe had found on Max’s hard drive, Max talked about seeing a woman everywhere she went, watching her, a woman whom Chloe had bumped into in Portland. Chloe had bumped into a woman in Portland, alright, at a nightclub after one of the longest days of her life. For a split second, she had even mistaken this woman for Max’s mother. *I think she was even wearing this fucking shirt and jacket,* Chloe muttered. Something about the jacket bothered her.

“That’s Max,” Chloe said. “Not our Max, but it’s Max.”

“How do you mean?” Rachel asked.

“Our girlfriend knows the future. She’s always just where someone needs her to be when they need her. She always shows up for major events and stops people from getting hurt or killed. She was talking about having watched tonight over and over again.”

“Under your laptop is about two hundred dollars, a bus ticket and a plane ticket. The bus ticket will get you to Portland. From there, you’ll be getting on a plane at Portland International to Los Angeles.” Chloe immediately lifted the computer up and found nothing that had just been described in the video. Oh god, she’s gone. “So, here’s what’s going to happen. It’s going to be rough for you, but you’re going to go to the building that one time might have been called Arcadia Studio.” The woman on the screen cracked her knuckles quickly, as if to signify things were getting serious. She looked to be in her mid-twenties if Chloe had to guess. Either Max had a secret twin sister with some kind of mysterious disease that made her age faster or….

“It shouldn’t be hard for you to make it in time. I know you don’t think you want this, but it’s going to be worth it.”

Rachel was beginning to understand what Chloe understood. She could see it in the way the blonde’s mouth hung open, the way she gripped Chloe’s shoulder and the computer desk in front of her tight enough to make her knuckles pale. Chloe could hear it in the sudden gust of wind pushing past her and rattling the window which, somehow, came from inside the room, from Rachel herself. Puzzle pieces settled into place and Chloe found her right hand covering her mouth as she became more and more sure.

“You’re starting to realize this is it, this is your chance for an answer, aren’t you? This is your chance to find out if you can accept who you really are. Then come. Leave the laptop, leave everything. Bring your money, bring your ID, your real one and bring the tickets, just come. I will be waiting on you.” Chloe pushed herself out of her seat. Get to the bus station. If you hurry, maybe you can still catch her.

“Our girl’s a fucking time traveler,” Rachel said, left hand rising from the desk to rest in her own hair. The thespian was still in enough shock that she almost fell over when Chloe knocked the computer chair aside. It was a very close thing. Chloe was about to tell her to hurry, to follow her,
when she turned toward the door and found that the way out was blocked.

“Yes, yes she is.” Rachel spun about quickly. The woman from the video was leaning with her back to the dorm room door. As soon as she was sure she had their attention, she reached over and flicked the light switch. As the light filled the room, Chloe was able to do more than see this woman. She could feel her. Some people simply emitted a presence when you were in the room with them and Max had always been one of them. Whatever else was going on, the woman crossing her arms and smiling smugly down at them was Max fucking Caulfield. “Your girl is one hell of a time traveler, by now. I still know a few tricks and tips she doesn’t, but that’s all about experience.” That cheeky Max Caulfield ‘I’m Just Teasing’ grin split the woman’s face and it was disorienting to watch, precisely because of how natural it looked there. Max. Max, from the future. “Jesus Christ, I forgot how young and hurt you two looked.” Chloe raised an eyebrow at her.

“Come find out who you are,” the woman finished on the screen behind them. Chloe stretched out a hand toward the one opposite of her. From the corner of her eyes, Rachel was watching her in curiosity, if not trepidation. This older Max took Chloe’s outstretched hand, squeezed it once and spun it around to pat her hand as she clenched it. It was a comforting gesture that their Max didn’t particularly do but for some reason it made Chloe feel a little weaker on the inside. As exhausted as Max had looked or Rachel must secretly be, Chloe realized that she was weary. It seemed the older Max Caulfield, who was still wearing the outfit she had been the night Chloe first saw her, realized it too. The piece of that outfit that gave Chloe the most pause was the very familiar leather jacket slung across her shoulders. If she was right it was awfully similar to one she knew to be thrown across Rachel’s bed right now.

“I know you want to find your girlfriend and help her right now,” the brunette woman with the braids told them. Chloe found herself glancing at the woman’s eyes. They were the same deep dark blue of Max’s but there was some extra depth there, a depth she wasn’t sure that she wanted to plumb. The woman sighed and looked away from her, toward Rachel. Her words were comforting but there was some difficulty behind them, some discomfort of her own. “Right now the girl you love is on her way to Los Angeles where she and I are going to meet up in the morning.” And how is that? “It’s a place which doesn’t hold any real personal meaning for her. She thinks it does. I’m hoping that she’ll realize she’s wrong. She’s trying to figure out right now whether she is breaking or she is healing.”

“And which is it?” Rachel asked, projecting her voice, projecting her confidence. “Breaking or healing?”

“You’re smarter than that,” the woman admonished. “You know it all comes down to her. In this case, it comes down to whether she can accept reality.” This time, she reached out a hand to Rachel, who did not move, did not take it.

“What does that mean?” The older Max Caulfield simply held her hand aloft, asking for Rachel to
take it. When the thespian stayed where she was, arms at her side, the woman stuck that hand into her jacket, instead. Chloe thought it was simply to have something to do with her hand while she spoke, but instead the woman freed a long, white envelope.

“In here is three hundred dollars, two bus tickets to Portland and two round trip tickets to LA.” The envelope was thrust forward, toward Rachel. “Go get your girl. Give Dana a hundred to make sure Max and your names get on the curfew check sheet. She is trying to save up money to help a sick friend and she will do it, happy to be able to help the three of you. Get Rachel’s ID and anything else she needs from her room. Take the rest of the cash and get to LA, get to the Hotel Du Sommeil on Crestfall Avenue by 7:30 in the morning.” There was a fair amount of time built into that, as long as nothing went horribly wrong that caused a delay. It did, however, mean that they were going to be taking a red eye there and possibly even back.

“Where are you getting the money?” Chloe asked, unable to shake her curiosity for this frankly unimportant question.

“Your girlfriend’s stash,” the brunette answered immediately, gesturing toward Max’s mattress. “Keeps it next to the cheap shit vodka which you guys should start hiding every time she buys for a while. Actually, I took that, too. I’d say ‘shh, it’s our little secret’ but frankly, I don’t think she’ll mind. And hey, if she’s gonna get pissed at me for stealing it’s probably going to take her a while to develop her powers to the point where she can come chase me down for compensation, if it ever happens.” The woman looked amused at the idea and Chloe understood this to be Max Humor. Max Humor was often out of place and could have been used to cover up her awkwardness or maybe she simply had a need to make an uncomfortable situation funny. It didn’t matter. “And before you ask where she’s getting it, figuring it out is on you.”

Chloe intended to.

“We’ll have to take a cab when we get to Portland but we can probably make it there in time,” Rachel mused, opening the envelope.

“I’ll make sure that you’ll have time to finally get the answers you need. Everything you wanted to know.” Then the woman blinked and laughed. “Not everything, actually. That would take a hella long time, but enough for a start. Enough to understand what your girl’s so scared about, what’s hurting her. The rest is gonna have to be on you three.” The whole situation was just absurd enough that for a moment, Chloe closed her eyes and tried to feel for the edges of a dream somewhere in the distance. Frankly, she didn’t even have the good graces to feel embarrassed when she opened them without finding any. Okay, I’m definitely awake. Max is a fucking time traveler. Holy ballsacks. The woman rested a hand in either jacket pocket and glanced once or twice around the room, as if wistful.
“Are you, you know, our Max from the future?”

“Yes,” the woman replied, bluntly. “But I’m pretty damn close. Things didn’t play out exactly the same though.”

“How close?” Rachel pushed. If she was letting this conversation go on, Chloe was sure they had plenty of time to get to the bus station. My truck, we’re taking my truck. I’ll text Steph when we get there.

“Close enough that I also walked in on a Rachel and Chloe making out during a rewatch of The Phantom Menace. How you—how those fuckers could make out with Jar Jar on screen—I had nightmares.” Rachel snorted despite herself and Chloe couldn’t help but feel her lips curling up into a smile. This is Max, alright “Some big differences though. That one’s kinda on me, but that’s neither here nor there. All you need to know is I’m not your girlfriend traveling from the future and speaking of traveling, I need to get moving.”

“How are you going to beat our Max there?” Chloe asked. She had no idea how long ago their brunette had left the school but unless this Max had stolen enough money from theirs to have a private jet waiting in the area (and oh, we’re so going to be talking about that later, young lady) it seemed unlikely she would be there waiting on the girl.

“Your girlfriend or not, I’m still Max Caulfield and that means one thing which is very, very important and I want you both to promise never to forget.” The woman cracked the knuckles of her right hand and smiled down at them as if they were the most welcome sight in the world, a tall glass of water after wandering the desert, a fluffy pillow after a long day.

“And that is?” Rachel prompted.

“Time and space are my bitches.” She sounded rather like Rachel in that second, Chloe thought. One moment the woman was there in front of them, acting like a cosmic badass with a secret and the next the doorway was clear and unobstructed. Chloe gaped at the empty space and rubbed at her eyes. It was still empty when she moved her hands away. She was a little dumbfounded when Rachel pressed something into her hand, not having missed a beat. The blonde hurried toward the door, then gestured to the bag lying beside it.

“Get Max’s camera, go drop off Dana’s bribe and meet me outside the dorm in two minutes.” Two minutes was not a lot of time and since neither of them had badass time travel abilities (abilities which scare the ever loving shit out of our Max for some reason) that meant that they were time and space’s bitches. Chloe dug down into the bag and eventually found the camera she had been
instructed to bring. *I’ll bring it with me, we’ll look like fucking tourists… tourists without bags.* Shit.

Chloe tried not to laugh as she walked toward Dana’s room. She was going to have to sell Dana on the idea of covering for them and Kate was probably still in there: it had only been somewhere around eight minutes. Both of them would have questions she would need to be quick to come up with an answer to. Our girl’s a fucking time traveler. Chloe had to admit that for all the fear Max treated this fact with, she was having trouble seeing the downside to time travel. Shit, all night makes total sense, now. She’d gone through all of that over and over trying to save Rachel, right? I wonder what we did this time that actually worked.

She had a fair idea. Perhaps the other times Max had tried, she hadn’t let Chloe come along. Whatever, Chloe thought as she knocked lightly on Dana’s door and heard eager shuffling from within. I’m gonna drag Timecop Caulfield kicking and screaming back to Arcadia Bay if it kills me. When she tells me everything she’s been hiding, I’m gonna annoy the shit out of her until she understands she’s not getting rid of me.
Chapter Thirty-Six: The Pythia Speaks

If she was honest, Max’s first thought as she came to a stop outside of the old brick building was not about anything personally significant or important. Her first thought was to wonder how anyone lived in a city where it was already ticking steadily toward 80 degrees at six in the morning in early September. When the sun was high overhead, she quite hoped she was inside somewhere, preferably somewhere with an air conditioner. If it was somewhere with an air conditioner and someone who didn’t look too closely at IDs she was going to leave a very, very large tip. Except that someone forgot to raid their stash before they left, genius!

Eventually she stopped complaining. Eventually she let her eyes come to rest on the brick edifice before her. Perhaps edifice was not the right word: it was not exceptionally tall, only two stories and, truth told, it was not exactly wide or bulky. It was still, if she thought about it much, a little imposing. Nothing special was contained within its walls, neither in what looked to have been an abandoned tea shop down below or the studio apartment she knew to be up above. It was the idea of the building that was imposing. The more she looked at it, the less power that idea held.

Having long since laid her chucks to rest in a trash can somewhere and picked up a new shirt, to boot Max stood in her overpriced flip flops alone on the cement sidewalk for longer than she wanted or expected to. The name of the business that had occupied the lower floor had already peeled away. Faded but still present was a depiction of a steaming cup of tea. Max almost laughed to herself. Whoever thought that opening a business which sold hot beverages in a city that sweltered like this in the fall was a good idea needed a reality check. Short of the sweet relief of caffeine flooding the system in the form of a big cup of coffee she couldn’t imagine drinking anything that wasn’t ice cold if she lived here. Especially if I’m going to be walking around somewhere. Caffeine didn’t sound horrible.

The truth was that she was exhausted. She felt like it had been a couple of days since her last sleep cycle, something which she was relieved to recognize was over. Though she had gotten a short amount of sleep on the crowded, tiny plane between Portland and LA, what she really wanted that
morning was a bed. Unfortunately, sleep weighed against the prospect of hard and fast answers left little question what her choice was going to be. Her stomach growled for the first time in a long time. \textit{I mean, I already don't feel hungry as often as I should and I've kind of not been operating in normal time-space, so this isn't too surprising.} The problem was that her limited funds on hand were running out and she wanted to save money for a cab from Portland International to the bus station so that, if she chose, she could actually go back to Arcadia Bay.

As much as Max hated to admit it, whether she returned or not might be influenced heavily by the conversation that was coming. \textit{Where the fuck is she, come to think of it? What kind of a time traveler is late to a meeting with themselves?} Whether by coincidence or by design, the woman who Max had been waiting for for what was now approaching fifteen minutes finally came into view at the top of the wooden stairs leading up to the second floor. Max couldn’t remember if she had heard the door open and shut. \textit{However she got there, she’s here.}

Max had glimpsed this woman either head on or from the corner of her eye time and time again for nearly the last year. If she paired that with her suspicion about missing time, she was beginning to think that, in front of her, was someone who had taken a very serious interest in her life. The first question that needed to be answered was \textit{why}. She waited in silence as the brunette woman, the one who reminded Max almost more of her mother than herself, looked her up and down and then smiled, as if satisfied. For Max’s part, she was dubious. Not about the identity of the woman descending the stairs, no, that was almost reasonable for someone who traveled in time. She was dubious about the thick leather jacket stretched across the woman’s shoulders. She also wondered why and how the older Max Caulfield had it. What would have made Rachel give it up?

\textit{“I stand transfixed and transfigured by the mirror. It doesn’t show me what I am but what I could have been if not for the turn of the tides in that bloodiest of wars, fate versus will.”} The words were pretty but they meant nothing special to Max. Still the woman looked at her as if to see if she was impressed by them or affected by them as she hit the bottom step and paused five or six feet from Max. \textit{“It’s a line from a larger poem, free form. It probably won’t get written in this world, but it’s always been important to me. It feels pretty fucking poignant right now, though.”} A sort of serenity was beginning to settle into her voice, as if she was calming herself down so as not to disturb Max.

Max thought she was already pretty disturbed, all things considered.

\textit{“Hello, Max,”} the woman said. \textit{“I’ve been talking to the landlady for about half an hour. Told her I wanted to show the place to my little sister and asked her if she would be able to let us in.”} The elder Caulfield gestured up the stairs toward the door at the top of the stairs. \textit{“Don’t you want to come up and see it?”}

\textit{“Why would I?”} Max asked her, feeling unimpressed, if a little uneasy. She was here for \textit{answers}, not checking out shitty apartments. She remembered the place in enough detail to know it was a \textit{shitty, shitty} apartment.
“Why indeed,” the woman echoed, and then she smiled. *What is so fucking funny?* “Well, Max. I made a date for us to grab breakfast in an hour or so. Let’s go for a walk.”

“A walk to where?”

“The bus stop, of course. It’s not like I’ve got a car here. Besides, no one drives in this city.” Max nodded. She had heard that a time or two. When she gestured for the woman to lead the way, the elder Caulfield turned right in front of the building and held out her left hand toward Max. Max blinked once or twice at it before understanding that the woman was asking her to take her hand.

“That’s not going to cause any sort of universal unraveling, right?”

“You watch too much Doctor Who,” the woman told her. “Makes you feel like you’re cheating on Star Trek. Don’t worry, Roddenberry would’ve understood.” Max smiled at herself despite herself. It did not completely banish the urge to scream at this woman that she had been promised answers, though. *Nothing but answers is going to do that.* Hesitantly, Max took the woman’s hand and began to walk beside her. She felt for a moment like a small child being lead by their mother and then after a second considered whether it was not more like one sister with another. *Only child, wouldn’t know.* “You know, Max, your girls are going to give you all kinds of shit for that shirt.” Half-absent, Max looked down at the brand new tee.

“What was I supposed to do, walk around LA with a cartoon cat on my chest?” she asked the woman. The tie dye was bound to attract less attention than the shirt wrapped up in the plastic bag hanging from her left hand, right? The woman was nonetheless right. It had been almost two months since Chloe had bumped her on the shoulder and called her a filthy hippie. It was only a matter of time. *I mean, if I go back.*

“And what’s wrong with cartoon cats?” the woman asked. It was not just hot out, it was humid. Their walk toward the end of the road and what she thought was a bus stop a block or two away was taken at a leisurely pace but it did not stop Max from quickly feeling warmer than she wanted to. Arcadia Bay was in the 60s as a high lately, which probably contributed more to her issues with the heat. As it happened, Max did not answer the woman’s question. She was waiting, waiting for answers of her own. “Oh, Max,” the woman sighed a few moments later.

“Yes, Max?” Max answered almost immediately. *If I have to annoy her into talking, then I’ll annoy her into talking.*
“Don’t be a brat, this is difficult.”

“I know you are, but what am I?” When the woman snorted instead of growing frustrated, Max tried to relax. This did not look like it had to be adversarial. Maybe it was up to her to start.

“Do you know who I am?” Max asked her.

“You know who you are,” the brunette beside her responded. “It’s just about accepting it.” That is maddeningly unhelpful, thank you. “Not the answer you wanted to hear?” Max rather thought she must have been scowling to draw the woman’s attention, but she received a soft squeeze of the hand as they continued onward. “Why didn’t you want to go into the apartment? Surely a chance to see your old home-”

“Is it my old home?” Max queried, again jumping on the opening as soon as it appeared. They were beginning to get toward a more crowded portion of the street. Five or six early birds were a few steps ahead of them, marching, no doubt, toward the bus stop.

“Is it? Does it hold meaning for you? Did you feel nostalgic when you saw it?” Max shook her head. “Curious isn’t it? If it was your old home, where you lived with the woman you were going to marry and cleaned and fought and sang and danced and drank, cooked, fucked, went to sleep at night and woke up each morning, why wouldn’t it matter to you?” Max fell silent. She had had this part of the conversation with herself long ago. When she first realized that she was no longer missing Blair and her extended family or that thinking about the Chloe who had lain dying on a small road slightly further on the edge of LA no longer made her sick to her stomach.

“I wonder about that, but then, it doesn’t necessarily mean anything does it?” The small overhang of the bus stop came into view in the distance. It was only another five minutes or so away at the slow strolling pace the older Max seemed determined to maintain.

“Does it?” Stop answering every one of my questions with a question! Max’s free hand (or at least the one that was not holding the woman’s) closed tight. This was rapidly becoming infuriating. Last night she had been promised answers. All she was getting was questions and riddles. Well, she had asked all of these questions of herself before, damn it, a hundred times, a thousand times, a million.

“I was… she was, whatever it is, that person, whether she was me- ugh, that Max is fucking nuts, isn’t she? Aren’t I?” The woman only sighed and again squeezed her hand.
“This is about you coming to terms with the answers you already have, Max. That’s why I’m here.”

“Why are you here?” The woman did not answer immediately and Max did not push. She allowed her eyes to travel across buildings in various states of disrepair. The businesses around here made do with what they had, when it came to aesthetics. It was not the brightest part of Los Angeles County. Every once in awhile someone would come ambling down the steps of a small apartment building and step in line with the small group that had formed in front of Max and- and herself. They reached the stop before either a response or a bus showed itself.

“I am here because, in part, you’re my fault. It’s a small part, but I still played a role.” Max gestured for the woman to continue as they stood just to the side of the stop. No one was listening in. No one here cared. Six men and eight women gathered by the stop, just waiting for their long days to begin. A couple looked as tired as Max felt and stood hunched forward, bone-weary. “The biggest difference between you and me, is me.”

“I’m gonna need more to go on,” Max told her. She hated the biting tone in her voice but she felt like she was starting to reach the edge of some great precipice and falling was starting to sound good.

“I knew how you were going to be affected by all of this and I just wanted to make things better. I couldn’t, of course, because that’s not how time works. All I could do was make another timeline, and it wasn’t necessarily better. Though, in some ways, it has its benefits.” Max shook her head. The woman was not, apparently, in the mood to speak plainly. “All of that and more when we get settled in for breakfast, alright? I’ve got a habit. If I don’t have breakfast in front of me before eight in the morning, it’s going to be a shitty day.” Exasperated, Max thought about asking her what in the hell eight in the morning really meant to people like the two of them. She also thought about freeing her hand from the woman’s and crossing her arms across her chest.

She resisted both.

The bus was crowded and unpleasant to be on, if Max was honest. No one seemed to give a damn about personal space and everyone was all elbows and knees. A man twice her size fell into her at one point, and it was only her older counterpart’s steady arms that spared her a trip to the floor of the bus. Max would remember later the sneer a lady sitting a step or two away from them had given her when she straightened herself back up, as if some stranger losing his balance was her fault or any of the old lady’s business. It took Max several minutes to realize where the bus was talking them. None of the buildings stood out as familiar to her as they passed, but the farther and farther they went from the center of the city, the less likely there was any other destination.

By the time they stopped, Max was fairly sure she could guess where breakfast was going to be
had. The time displayed on the bus’s ticker declared that it was past seven in the morning already. They were only about three blocks from the hotel. On the way, Max slowed as she passed an alley with old, peeling white paint on the outside of one of the buildings lining it and her companion slowed down, too, to accommodate her. The wall was clear of graffiti, but Max had flashes of it as it had been in another world, covered in Chloe’s handiwork.

As for the Hotel Du Sommeil, weakly named as it was, the building was smaller than it usually seemed in her nightmares, on those off times she saw it at all. For reasons that Max didn’t quite understand, she was led farther down the street until they stood aligned with the far end of the lot, separated only by one road which had been unexpectedly free of traffic for the most part. They did not cross immediately when they got there. She glanced over to the woman to find out what was happening and saw that her dark blue eyes were fixed on Max. What is she waiting for?

They were halfway across the street with Max leading her elder counterpart when she realized their feet had just stepped across the very spot where, in another world’s June of 2014, a Chloe Price had been left to expire in the street after being the victim of a hit and run. Max shivered and, despite feeling no special angst, did feel as if her stomach had twisted slightly. She focused on the cracks in the pavement of the parking lot when they crossed to it. Somewhere about twenty feet ahead of them, the man who had chased that Chloe into the road, in that other world, in the future, had met or would have met an unfortunate fate at the hands of a woman half his size.

Max did not want to consider the images of plunging knives and flailing limbs or any version of Chloe Price crumpled dead on the pavement, so she did not. She was not devastated as they entered the restaurant attached to the hotel, but to say that her mood had improved any would have been a lie. Max wanted the woman beside her to talk. She wanted answers, she wanted to know who she was and she wanted to sleep. Her eyes hurt each time she blinked her heavy eyelids. The world could be poised to end and she would still want to sleep. Doesn’t she understand how tired I am?

Merciful air conditioning struck them both in the face the moment they stepped over the threshold. The door shut behind Max as her elder counterpart released her hand and approached a pale-haired woman behind a podium. The woman looked tired, herself, though perhaps only as if her feet were sore. Max did not bother to pay attention to the brief discussion the two had, she only waited until she was told to move and did as told. They passed tables and booths with fine white table cloths and two or three other parties dining, over a hardwood floor that might have been actual wood, if Max thought about it. As if by special request, the woman who was waiting to seat them did so in the booth farthest from the door. It was not too terribly far off from pale metal double doors leading to the kitchen.

Max slid into the seat that her companion was not occupying and ordered a water without really meeting the waitress’ eyes. Her companion ordered a coke. As soon as they were alone, it was apparently time to talk. That being said, if she had any delusions that air conditioning and imminent cold drinks were going to pry the older Max Caulfield’s lips open and bring her secrets all spilling out at once, they faded when she was given a food recommendation. Max’s toes curled and uncurled and frustration kept fists clenched where they sat on the table.
“I’m given to understand they do pretty good eggs here,” the woman informed. “I’d order that when the waiter comes.” Max nodded but she was not really agreeing to the suggestion. It was more like she wanted the conversation to progress to the meat and potatoes portion of the meal. The restaurant around them was rather nice, all told. Its walls were lined by paintings that were clearly reprints and photos of famous people who had eaten there. In many cases, the people were still eating when the photo was taken. Max thought that was rather uncouth of the photographer. “I guess we’ll start with the difference between you and me.”

“You said the difference was you,” Max told her. “What does that mean?”

“It means,” the woman started, leaning back, “that for the most part, I have lived a life a lot like yours. Except that I interfered in yours. I mean, I interfered in hers too.”

“Her who?” Behind Max, the waitress was seating someone else at the table. After a few seconds of receiving only a confused grunt when asked what they wanted to drink, the woman suggested she bring out some water and give them some time to think. The people at the table must have not been morning people because they said nothing in response. Max was going to shoot a curious glance over her shoulder when quite suddenly her older self reached across the table and placed her right hand over Max’s left.

“You know who,” she insisted, squeezing it briefly. Max forgot about the random strangers behind her. She felt the warmth of hope begin to kindle in her stomach. Max shook her head. She thought she knew who, certainly, but she was never particularly sure. “All her blackouts? All the times she lost her mind? The time she found her studio messed up? A photo missing? A knife missing? That was me, trying to protect her from herself. Don’t understand? Then, fine,” the woman told her. “Let’s get our orders taken and then I’ll tell you a story. If you think you’ve heard this one before, you’ll have to bear with me.” More stalling, more waiting.

“The blackouts, all the blackouts she had to deal with, that was you wasn’t it?”

“It was.”

Eventually a young man in his mid twenties walked up to them. There was something familiar in his dark eyes and chestnut brown hair but Max was now so far from caring about anything that did not get the fucking questions and self-doubt to quiet down that she did not look at him for long as she ordered eggs over easy and enough bacon to sink a ship. He laughed and told her that was his breakfast of choice, too, in a thick english accent. To Max’s credit, she managed to smile up at the man, politely, as he took their untouched menus and left. What the older Max ordered, she didn’t even know. Max didn’t care.
“Right,” the woman told her. “The story. I was fourteen years old, living in an apartment in east Seattle. I did little things like go around town taking photos on my spare time, hanging out with the couple of people who showed any interest in hanging out with the ‘geek girl’ who had moved up a couple grades. I really really loved to go to the Chase Space on the weekends and dream about having my photos there. My father and I would go to hockey games in the area and I always usually enjoyed myself.” Max swallowed. She could definitely guess where this was going. “Mom and I were closer than we’d ever been. Life was quiet, but it was okay. I had my regrets, like anyone else. I didn’t know how to reach out to my best friend. I felt guilty for not talking to her in so long and every time I picked up the phone to fix it, I thought, ‘damn, why would she even want to hear from you after you ditched her?’”

“Please get on with it,” Max finally said, voicing both her impatience and her discomfort with the line the discussion was taking.

“I’m getting there,” the woman promised her. “Anyway, one day, I was sitting in my bedroom.” Okay, here it goes. “I was watching a movie on my laptop when I noticed a gorgeous bird on the windowsill.” Then I, you, she decided I wanted a photo of it. “Really, it was just a pigeon with pretty coloring but I figured I’d take a picture. I hadn’t snapped anything in about a week. I was feeling pretty down. So I lined up the shot, snapped a picture and bam, the world changed forever.”

Max closed her eyes. She felt as if perhaps she was breathing a little too heavily.

“So I take this picture of this bird and when I open my eyes my head is aching and I’m lying on my floor, holding it. Nothing makes much sense, because I wasn’t supposed to be in Seattle, I was supposed to be here, in LA, right? Then shit started to come back. Dead Chloe. Calvin choking on his own blood. Three hard months of practicing with my powers, running back to Chloe’s funeral over and over again. Burying her a hundred times. At least now I knew why I couldn’t remember her funeral the first time, right?” The woman laughed and Max’s stomach sank. So I am her? “But I had a plan, a plan Blair and I had worked on tirelessly for a full month and I kicked it into action within seconds. Once my headache stopped me from seeing straight I grabbed my English notebook and started to write what I would later call the Master List.” Max reached down and pulled her Master List from her pocket. It went with her wherever she went, no matter that she had not looked at it in a year.

“When I thought I’d gotten it all down in that weird, looping shorthand, when everything made sense, I set my plan into motion. Two days later I was in Arcadia Bay. I watched Chloe and Rachel on stage. They were cute with each other. I’d forgotten how vulnerable Chloe could be and Rachel Amber? Jesus, she was like nothing I’d ever seen.” True, all true. “She moved from one side to another of that stage and read her lines as if she were casually hanging out in her bedroom, didn’t give a shit about the crowd watching. But see, by that point, things had started to go wrong already. I tried to hold a conversation with the Ambers in the crowd, but I was stumbling all over my words. I felt like a stupid child being judged by my elders. It only got worse when Chloe saw me at the end of the play. Oh, man,” the woman began to laugh. “Honestly thought I was going to shit myself running away. Didn’t even know Joyce saw me, even though I was the one who made sure she came to the play to begin with. That was my first step, to push Chloe back toward her
mother. I mean, shit, it was Joyce, right?"

“I didn’t know,” Max told her. “I didn’t know how bad Joyce could be about David.” The woman shook her head and squeezed Max’s hand again, though this time she let it go. “I remember how scared I was to get away though. I fucking ran. That night was the first time I started to lose my shit around cars, too. I was an absolute wreck by the time I texted Chloe.” This time the older Max nodded.

“I’m glad that the issue about being around the road, being around cars faded. But you know what’s really weird about it?” the woman asked. Max shook her head. “I, that is to say the person who I thought I was at the time? She had never blamed the car that took Chloe’s life. It wasn’t the driver she chased down. It wasn’t the driver’s hands she shattered. It wasn’t the driver she stabbed with a kitchen knife. It wasn’t the driver whose hospital room she visited. It wasn’t the driver she threatened to come back for if he ever spoke about what she’d done.” That’s right. I never blamed the driver. I blamed him. Why would I be afraid of cars? “Quite weird that here I was in Arcadia Bay, freaking out about being around cars, squealing brakes and honking horns. If I needed an absurd fear, why not get scared of waiters?”

“That’s stupid,” Max challenged her. “And you’re deflecting.”

“Or you’re the one deflecting. Or fuck it, maybe we both are, but the point is that that’s the majority of what you and I share in common. The thing is, it took me a long time, a lot longer than I want it to take for you, to realize that you and the woman who committed those crimes may talk the same, look the same, sound the same, but are not the same person.” Max’s breath caught in her chest. A lump began to form. She shook her head.

“How do I know?” she wheezed. “Why do I still have bits and pieces of her memories? Why do I have dreams about the night I realized that I either had to let Nathan shoot Chloe or I had to kill everyone in Arcadia Bay. Why do I remember the day I chose to kill an entire town?”

“Think of it like this,” the older Max told her, not reaching out to comfort her, staying calm, hard-faced. “When we first developed our powers, we transferred our consciousnesses from our current bodies to our past ones. That’s the majority of what you still know how to do. It’s like sticking a hard drive from one computer into another that is otherwise identical to it. There is functionally no difference when the procedure is done.” Max nodded. The metaphor worked well enough, but it supported her fears, not what the woman was saying. “What the other Max did, what she discovered accidentally while playing with her photo-time travel—yes, that’s what I call it—don’t look at me like that—wasn’t a hard drive being swapped out.” I wasn’t looking at her like anything, Max thought, her hands coming to rest on the edge of the table, squeezing at the wood. She could hear her heartbeat in her ears: it was beginning to beat unnaturally quickly. “It was more like a data transfer. She sent you files, Max. That’s all. Will and Ways, Memories and Emotions but they weren’t yours and outside of their host they deteriorated pretty fast.”
“Yes,” Max admitted. “By September I could only really see most of those memories in my nightmares. But doesn’t that mean they’re buried in my subconscious somewhere?” At this the woman fell silent. The waiter from before, with the familiar face and eyes returned with their drinks. Max hadn’t even thought about them since ordering them, but she quickly grabbed her water and took a long drink. If she’s saying that that woman isn’t me, I need proof. I need to be sure. “I mean, if they’re in there doesn’t that mean I’m at least partially her? Doesn’t it mean I’m the one who chose Chloe over Arcadia Bay? Doesn’t it mean that I brought that storm on them? Doesn’t it mean they’re all on me?”

If Max was going to have to live with a piece of that woman inside of her for the rest of her life, she thought she could deal with it. She thought she could deal with it as long as the woman in front of her answered this question, as long as she found some way to be sure that she was not a twenty-something year old woman taking advantage of Rachel and Chloe, as long as she was sure she was not the person who nearly killed a man by the name of Calvin, as long as she was sure she was not the girl who had chosen someone she loved to live, while an entire town was left to die. Am I always going to carry around the psycho who killed Arcadia Bay?

“You’re not her, Max. She’s not in there. Not at all.” The woman’s voice rose, both in volume and frequency. She was trying desperately to make Max believe her but not giving her any reason.

“Damn it, how are you so sure? That’s all I need,” Max told her, speaking up herself. The glass of water slammed against the table so hard that even in its half-empty state, some splashed up and over the side of the glass and down her hand. “No more games, no more riddles, no following me around and watching me, no stories. Just fucking tell me how you’re so sure because sometimes I still remember the knife in my hand.

Max knew she was speaking too loudly. She felt someone in the seat behind hers bump into the back of theirs, as if turning to look at her. The quiet people at the other table must have overheard this last bit. Probably think I’m nuts.

“Because that woman, that Max would never have given her order to or taken a drink from a glass of water given to her by Calvin Matthews. She never would have looked him in the face and not recognized him, certainly not with only a couple of years between the man he is now and the man he was then.” Max’s head swung around hard, looking, searching for the man who had just handed her the drink. He was passing through the kitchen doors, into the back. Nothing registered when she looked at him. That same sense of vague recognition was there but nothing more. No rage, no hatred, no fear, no agonizing defeat, no urge to kill, to beat, to maim. She wanted to hurt Nathan Prescott and David Madsen more than this man before her and as far as she was concerned they had gotten their just deserts already. Max leaned forward, forearms sliding against the table and, when she felt her vision begin to blur and eyes start to burn, she crossed her arms and laid her head atop them, eyes closing. She drew as slow and deep of a breath as she could.

“I think it’s all up to you two now, girls.” Though she could not seem to clear the moisture from her eyes, Max looked up at her counterpart, to find the woman staring over her shoulder. She didn’t
need to turn around to understand what was happening. The realization hit her well before she saw, through watering eyes, the bright blue of Chloe Price’s hair or the long, thick mass that was Rachel Amber’s. No other defining characteristics stood out to her in her current state but the realization, the idea that they had been there the whole time, that they knew it, all of it, drew out every feeling Max had been swallowing since well before she and the woman from another future began to talk.

She did not feel too kindly toward herself as those emotions came on all at once, but she could not bury her head again. Max blinked, trying to clear her vision as she felt the bench shift against her back and Rachel rose from her seat. Across their table, Chloe did the same. What was supposed to be an exhale turned into a strangled sob. The minute that Rachel settled onto the edge of Max’s booth seat and pushed against Max’s shoulder for her to scoot over and let Rachel in, the floodgates opened. They’re not running. They’re not running. They don’t know it all but they know enough to run and they’re not running. Max felt helpless as she watched Chloe approach her older counterpart and demand the woman scoot over to let her in. Instead the older Max rose to her feet.

“I don’t have anymore parts in this play,” the woman said. “Besides, you three are better actresses than I’ll ever be.” Chloe paused, not sitting down as the woman took a step or two forward. “Oh and Max?” she turned her burning eyes on the other Max Caulfield, helpless and pathetic against grief and relief, against the shackles cut away from her arms and legs. “Always take the shot, kid. Always take the shot.” With that, the elder Max walked away. “Take care of her for me.”

“Wait,” Chloe called as Rachel’s arms connected, her hands meeting on the other side of Max’s shoulders as Max fought hard not to sob again, not to cry anymore. Not for this. Not for this thing she’d wasted a year and change fearing that she was. Max only knew that the woman paused in her quick exit because Chloe spoke. “I want to talk to you.” The tall, thin girl stopped, reached past Rachel and pressed a hand into Max’s cheek. “I’m coming back in just a second, do you understand that, Max?”

“Yes,” Max confessed, feeling awe and embarrassment. “You’re not leaving.”

“No,” Chloe told her. “And I told you that yesterday.”

“Yesterday was so long, and it was so long ago.” Max shifted in her seat as Chloe pulled her hand back and, without shame, buried her face against Rachel’s jacket. How the hell is she wearing that in this fucking heat? As Max tried to regain control, she breathed in the scent of her girlfriend and did not complain at the arms tightening around her. In fact she soaked up that pain and listened when Rachel spoke.

“Max, you’re no Prometheus, but you’ve put yourself up on the mountainside. There’s no one here to punish you but yourself. It’s time to break the chains and come down here. Live with us mortals who are allowed to fuck up, okay?” Max nodded and with a great effort she shifted her hands
enough that they could grab into Rachel’s shirt, gathered together just above her stomach. Just more connection was all she wanted. More. “Come down off the mountain.”

Chloe returned after about two or three minutes to tell Max that her older self was gone, vanished into thin air in broad daylight. Max laughed once, remembering a dozen potential confrontations that had been cut off by that very thing happening.

“Yeah,” she said, sniffling. “She does that.”

“Now what in the name of fuck are you wearing, you dirty god damned hippie?” This time, Max laughed and did not try to stop it. Rachel, who had yet to move her arms from Max’s shoulders, finally did so, but she seemed to do so only to reach into her right pocket. Max watched the girl deposit twenty bucks on the table. I guess she was right about the shirt, Max told herself, glancing down once. The sandals don’t help, either. If she was right about that, maybe she’s right about the rest of it too. Rachel did not hurry them to leave and after a moment of running her hand through Max’s hair, Chloe sat down opposite of them.

They were on the plane from Los Angeles to Portland when one of them finally began to broach the whole subject of what they had heard. Max was, as her ticket dictated, planted firmly in between Chloe and Rachel both. This was just one of the cheeky minor miracles her counterpart had worked, but then, when you had all the time in the world to do it, Max rather thought it looked less impressive. Rachel started the conversation out by going right to one of the most painful subjects, which Max considered akin to ripping off a bandaid. Half exhausted herself, Chloe’s eyes only half-opened when the discussion began.

“I understand now, why sometimes Blackwell fucks you up,” Rachel told her. “If you just kept thinking the whole time about being responsible for some sort of disaster in Arcadia Bay, it would get to you fast.”

“It’s going to take me time to stop thinking like that,” Max told her honestly, then shifted her glance to Chloe, who watched with narrowing, curious eyes. “But I need to know how angry you guys are at me for keeping all of this from you. I need to know what to be ready for.”

“I’m fucking pissed,” Chloe told her, voice low and even. The girl looked uncomfortable in her seat. It probably had to do with how low the ceiling was right beside the window and Chloe’s stubborn insistence to deal with it. As far as the bluenette was concerned, it was a general affront to peoples’ health and safety that they didn’t make the ceilings higher, a matter of principal. If that’s the hill she wants to die on, Max thought, smiling ruefully despite Chloe’s admission. “But I’ll get over it, as long as we don’t go back to pretending nothing ever happened. I won’t. I can’t do it anymore.” Max nodded.
“Ditto,” Rachel told her. Despite the admission of anger, the girl reached across their shared arm rest and took Max’s hand. She was comforted when Chloe did the same. “I want to understand what’s been happening since I met you. I think so much of this has to do with the two of us, too, that it’s only fair.” Max nodded again and then, with a slowness that came from a place of being unsure what words to use to convey an idea, she spoke.

“It’s going to take me a little bit of time to find the words to tell the story, but I’ll do my best when we get back home. There’s someone else I want to include in all of that.”

“Steph, still?” Chloe asked. Max nodded. “That would involve her knowing about the two of us and what we can do, too.”

“I know, which is why it’s your guys’ decision. I’ve made too many decisions for you both already. Especially when I first came to town.”

“Like what?” Rachel queried.

“Like when I stopped you from getting stabbed in the junkyard by Damon Merrick,” Max admitted. “And I know that sounds like a good thing to stop, especially because you almost died, but I didn’t know you then and that action had consequences.” Please don’t ask me what they were. It’s going to hurt us both if you do.

“Like what?” Rachel was turning more toward her, more awake than before. The plane jostled slightly at a bit of turbulence, enough to make Max’s breath catch in her chest. If this fucker starts going down, I’m rewinding so hard my head spins and we’re missing our flight. “Max, if it involves me, like what?”

“Who cares,” Chloe asked suddenly. “What happened to other people isn’t what happened to us. They’re not us.” Max listened in silence as the two debated across her for a moment, her cheeks heating, her stomach dropping out. Then, quietly, Rachel seemed to come around to Chloe’s side. “Besides, we’re gonna talk about plenty tomorrow, when we sit down with Steph.” Max nodded, slowly. She had missed when the other two agreed to include Steph in their airing out. “I want to know what was on the piece of paper you left on the table at the restaurant.”

“It’s the Master List. I wrote it all out just after I got all of that lady’s memories and feelings. It was a kind of a cheat sheet to the people in Arcadia Bay and most of it is bullshit,” Max released their hands and, much as the other two, shifted to try to be comfortable in the tiny, cramped seat.
“Because that woman was fucking crazy. I got rid of it, but I don’t know if I can ever get rid what I still know.”

“We’ll have to deal with that as it comes,” Rachel assured her.

“Do you think that you can accept that you’re, you know, you and not this other Max?”

“I think so. I’m going to try. I’ll need your help for that.” Chloe only gave her a nod and then smiled briefly for the first time in several minutes, leaning back in her chair as best she could. There really was no getting comfortable on the plane. *At least it’s only a two and a half hour flight,* Max thought with false enthusiasm.

“On second thought, maybe I don’t want to know everything about the other timeline,” Rachel muttered. Max wondered if Rachel was remembering the moment of desperation last year, the one that had caused Max, in an altered state, to beg Rachel to stop Jefferson, to take the weight off of her shoulders, to help her feel like a normal girl again if just for a few minutes. In retrospect, with the idea that she truly wasn’t the woman she feared she was, Max no longer felt as embarrassed by this sign of weakness. It wasn’t even a sign of weakness, she told herself. It was a normal human response to being stressed to the edge and then *drugged* on top of it.

“There are things I never want to think about again,” Max told her. Chloe did not open her eyes, but she was not done with her part in the conversation.

“How much is going to be relevant, the stuff that was on that sheet?”

“A lot of it was useful information but the conclusions about people that I wrote down… they were nonsense. Also…”

“Also?” Chloe asked, opening one eye.

“The results of almost every major sporting event between 2010 and mid 2013? It was all in that shorthand Blair taught her, but it’s there and I know it’s worked out.”

“Ever use any of it?” Now Chloe was asking with some cheeky eagerness in her voice. It was enough to give Max some serious pause. That being said, she had just made a commitment to honesty, to telling them everything that concerned them and maybe even the useful bits that didn’t.
Technically, technically this concerned them.

“I sort of made a chunk of cash off of the Superbowl last year. Frank hooked me up with a bookie.” When the mere mention of the man’s name did not send Rachel into an obvious tailspin, Max glanced at Chloe who was watching her in some awe. “I had some saved up from- oh never mind.”

“You’ve got to tell me who wins the next one,” Chloe suddenly called, sitting straight up quickly enough that she banged her head. Score one for karma. “Whatever,” Chloe said when Rachel began to cackle quietly in her seat. “Whatever. That’s the way to use time travel,” Chloe insisted.

While the two of them joked about what they might do with the ability to travel through time, not understanding all of the things that Max understood (at least, not yet), Max rested her eyes. Los Angeles had always danced around the back of her mind as a sort of goal to aim toward. Now she rather thought she was done with LA for a while. Leaving it behind was relieving. It meant very little to her but what little it meant was unpleasant. If I come back, I want it to be with Chloe and Rachel and on my own terms. Our terms.

It was easy, with the voices of her loved ones, to drift off into sleep. She was not going to wake up magically cured, but Max thought as she felt herself beginning to fade, at least she was not going to wake up to Rachel in trouble and Chloe enraged. If there was ever a version of Max Caulfield she was happy to be, it was this one. She had hours ahead of her traveling with Chloe and Rachel by her side. They came all the way to LA for me. And whatever happens tonight, that’s not nothing.

Chapter End Notes

Man, I’ve never actually been nervous to upload a chapter of a fanfic before. So, we’ve come to the halfway point of Part 3 and the moment where the story switches gears one last time and gets us on our final track for the story. I'm happy to say that I have the detailed outlining of the remainder of the story complete as of yesterday, including the epilogue. Some things I’ve been setting up and hinting at for ages, almost as long as the information revealed in THIS chapter, will come to fruition in parts three and four, and I am very excited about that. However, with the end of this chapter it's worth me explaining that this is not a standalone fic. In fact, it is, in a way, very connected to my other Life is Strange fic, Fools of us All. Namely, that the woman the two Maxs are discussing in this chapter, is essentially the Max in Fools of us All, at least up until the end of Chapter 10, where the story's timeline diverges from that Max’s.

Bit of a mess without, say, a diagram to explain it, but the long and short of it is that you don't need to read Fools of us All to understand this story, but it might be enjoyable. I will note that that story is not as well written as this one, because while it is mostly a first draft, like this one, it had two other disadvantages. I had no one to even semi-betaread as I occasionally get with Kaukasos' chapters, and the entirety of the other story was pumped out in something around 20 days. So I don't consider it my best work, though hopefully an entertaining story. Regardless of whether one reads
Fools of us All or not, I hope you continue to enjoy Kaukasos. For me, I know there is still a short ways to go before you all catch up with where I am, by which time I'd like to hope most of Part Four is done. Still, completing the outline has made me rather emotional, so I just really want to thank those who've come along for the ride. See y'all next time.
Chapter Thirty-Seven: Theseus at Aegeus’ Feast

Disclaimer: Anything familiar to you, I don't own. This is a work of fanfiction for personal amusement, fulfillment and a bit of self-therapy. I make nothing from any of it.

Chapter Thirty-Seven: Theseus at Aegeus’ Feast

September 18th, 2011 3:24 PM

Chloe turned bleary eyes on the westernmost hall of Blackwell Academy. Something jumped out at her as wrong the moment she did, but it was hard to place just what that was. There certainly wasn't anyone around. Given that lockers stretched most of the hallway, it was usually the most bustling spot in the building. Unless everyone's in class, Chloe realized. What class am I supposed to be in right now? When Chloe thought about it, no answer came up. Guilt bubbled up in her: she had been shirking school so often and so badly that she didn't even remember what class she was supposed to be in and when? Her father was going to be disappointed. She glanced about once, twice for the nearest classroom, but found no doors waiting for her along the side of the halls. Instead, blue and red and orange, the lockers simply stretched on forever. The only door was one at the far end of the hallway. Thick and wooden, she recognized it immediately as the door to the art room, only that stretch of wall should have held a pair of glass double doors which led outside. Not right, Chloe thought. Not right at all. Then again, none of this was right. Only a few minutes ago, it seemed, she was extracting a promise from Rachel that she would stay up and shake Chloe and Max awake before they made it back to Arcadia Bay. Chloe hadn't been looking forward to stumbling back home half asleep with the prospect of telling Steph everything still ahead of them. You're asleep. You're dreaming, genius.

Chloe took a moment to glance down at herself. Satisfied that this was not one of those ‘showed up to school in my underwear’ dreams she was so fond of having before tests, Chloe decided to have fun with things. If she was going to be the flavor of nerd who had dreams about being in school, she should at least make full use of it. The hallway was laid out wrong and far too dim for her liking. Looking up showed the expected lights lining the ceiling. It's also quiet, too quiet. Chloe exhaled and then, with little more than a hitch in her breath, told herself that the lights were on, the hall was full of students.
Usually, when Chloe found herself in a dream, it was that simple. Today it was not. The hall stayed eerily quiet and dark. *That's weird,* she told herself as she made for the door at the end of the hall. *That only usually happens when- ah, right.* Chloe noticed right off the bat that something felt strange about the floor beneath her feet but it became evident only seconds later that she was not getting any closer to the tall, thick wooden door waiting for her, teasing her. *Of course. The art room.* Chloe sighed. This was not going to take simple lucid dreaming.

She understood why the floor moved beneath the soles of her boots or her arms ached when she tried to lift them in slow motion. She understood why the lights did not come up or the hall populate spontaneously with people. Chloe closed her eyes against the rest of the hallway, the familiar cool tile floor and rows and rows of lockers. Sure enough, coming from the direction of that door, she could hear a girl's voice. This was not her dream. Oh no. The thing was, her dream or not, dream physics could still be bent her way or at least ignored completely. It was just a different trick.

When she opened her eyes again, the hall looked different. It was still dark, certainly but less hued as well. From there Chloe did not walk so much as glide. It was less the floating of a ghost from a shitty cartoon and more like sliding across ice. This was part of moving through dreams, to dreams, from dreams. This was not her world so she did not need to be part of it. The girl on the other side of the classroom door became more and more audible as Chloe approached, practically skating down Blackwell's hall. Max, it sounded like, was becoming more and more distressed by the second. *Max's dream.* Chloe looked around the dark, elongated hallway missing many of its doors. *Max's nightmare.* Eventually, Chloe could reach out to the door. When she tried to turn the knob it did not want to give. She would have been lying if she had told someone she hadn't been expecting that. She watched her pale-blue nails pass first through the wood, then fingers which seemed longer than normal, distended in this form, this echo of Chloe Price. Far sooner than expected she was on the other side of the barrier, feeling as if perhaps she had walked through a stream of water pouring down around her, and it was *cold* water. Max was calling out for people as Chloe righted herself, shivering.

“*Hayden? Kate? Juliet?*” the girl gave one quick jerk as she glanced about the room, pressing herself into one corner of the room. Then, as if desperate, “*Victoria? Anyone?*” *She's looking for people who would be in class with her?* Chloe asked herself, turning to take in the room. Max was staring at the front with wide, unblinking blue eyes that somehow in the darkness of the room were vibrant and live with her fear. That was where Chloe started and how she realized Max had not been alone in this strange, distorted mirror of the art classroom.

Sitting behind Mrs. Drewer's desk was a man who looked to be in his mid to late thirties. This man was dressed in a dark brown suit, the blazer hanging open casually to reveal an absurdly pristine, almost hospital-light-white dress shirt beneath. He was watching Max in total silence from behind thick black rimmed glasses through eyes Chloe couldn't make the color of out. *Is this Jefferson?* He did have a certain good look to him, sharp features and a fairly nice looking dark goatee. He
was not quite the playboy Max had made him out to be, by the looks of things, but handsome. *Should I be here?* Chloe asked herself.

The last time she had stumbled into one of Max's dreams by accident, Max had been less than pleased. *She won't notice me until I want her to,* Chloe thought. It was just that, as Chloe traced her eyes across the darkened classroom, Max was fucking terrified. She was rooted to the spot, pressing herself as far back into the corner as possible, as if she would have loved to melt into the wall and never be seen again. *Should I get out of here incase this violates her privacy or should I just end the dream?* That was well within her powers, after all. Chloe hadn't thought of the repercussions, but she could *end* someone else's dream almost on a whim.

*Or just show yourself. Last time she was pissed because I turned up in the middle of shit she was trying to keep secret. This Jefferson guy isn't a secret anymore.* Up at the front of the room the man sat silent, his face a little querying, eyebrows slightly raised and hands folded atop the desk. It looked, for all the absurdities of the world around her and Max's fear, as if he had asked her a question and was waiting patiently for an answer. She heard some shuffling from the back and turned toward Max. The brunette was dressed in the grey sweatshirt that was probably ruined beyond all hope of repair, judging by the state it had been in last time Chloe had seen her wear it. It was from *this* that she pulled her cell and began to press at the screen. Even with Max forced to look away, Jefferson remained unmoving, calm, patient. It was starting to become disturbing, surreal.

“Why is there never any signal?” Max exclaimed all of the sudden. “Rachel, Chloe, are you there?” She was not yelling into the phone. It lay discarded at her feet, apparently nonfunctional. “Steph? Kate? Taylor? Victoria? Anyone?” *No, fuck this,* Chloe decided and reached out. She was not reaching for Max, she was reaching *up* for the surface. The dream was like a pond and she had taken herself from the top down to the bottom so that she could move as she pleased through this fucked up mirror of her school. Now, she needed to breach that surface yet again. It happened all at once, really. One moment Chloe was watching the scene unfold with some confliction on what was ethical and the very next her feet hit the ground with a louder than average thump, her arms weighed a million pounds and she *felt* Max's exhaustion and even her fear as if it was her own.

Jefferson didn't even seem to notice her but the noise was loud enough that Max's head swung around. Chloe held up both hands to calm her. For a moment, Max felt relief. Chloe knew this because she felt it, too. This was the unfortunate side effect of this ability of hers. What Max felt, she felt, and often times they shared thoughts, ideas, sensations. Right now, Jefferson was waiting for Max to *turn in a photo.*

“So this is Jefferson?” Chloe asked her, when she was sure Max was paying enough attention to hear her. Max nodded, either eagerly or dismissively and started to motion Chloe over to her. *She wants to protect me from him.*
“Yes, get away from him. Like you promised me.” Instead, Chloe watched the man behind the desk. He still hadn't turned to face her, to regard her at all. She played by the rules of the dream, but she was not part of it. There was nothing she could do to change that. “Chloe, please, get away from him.”

“Max,” Chloe said, as assertively as possible. “Listen to me.” She took one long stride toward the front of the room and felt Max's anxiety tick up a notch. Chloe had hesitated too long, this had gone on too long. “Listen, you're having a nightmare.” For a moment, she was met with skepticism, even outright doubt and suspicion. Then, slowly, Max's face changed to meet a new rush of emotions: comprehension, relief, sadness. “You understand? You're dreaming.” Chloe glanced away from the girl even as she approached, checking the walls and ceiling of the room. They began to almost shimmer as Chloe reached Max. Slowly, the dark veil over the room faded to a light grey and began to drop like a fog, one sharp enough to obscure Jefferson before he vanished entirely. Either the dream's breaking down or Max has been practicing this 'lucid dreaming' thing herself. Still, it's nothing like what I can do.

“I'm dreaming,” Max finally repeated to her and then reached out for Chloe. “Are you... you know, real?”

“I think so,” Chloe told her, honestly. It was a rather disturbing thought that she might not be sure whether she was Chloe passing into Max's dream, or a Chloe belonging into Max's dream. Yeah, no, not in the mood for any existential shit today. Rachel and Max have had enough of that, as it is.

“You're in my dream, right?” Chloe tried to hold onto the mental image of Jefferson's face, at least until she could wake up and look him up on the internet, but it was possible she only had a short time before Max began to wake. Lots of people were forced awake when they realized they were dreaming. Though, if she has been practicing lucid dreaming, she might be good at it by now. Chloe reached out and when Max nodded her consent, wrapped her right arm around Max's shoulders. This apparently felt real enough to the brunette that she sagged slightly against Chloe. “We're on the bus, right?”

“Yes,” Chloe told her in as calming of a voice as she could. The slow way with which Max spoke was something like computer lag, Chloe thought. Getting jarred out of your idea of what was real and what was not is disturbing. A few extra seconds of processing time to hold a conversation was more than reasonable. She tightened her arm around Max. “We're going home and this is just a shitty dream.”

“For now,” Max whispered, and began to steer the both of them toward a table. The pale, foggy room was at least stable around them, impressively enough. What a difference a year makes, Chloe thought. “But he's coming.”
“I understand,” Chloe lied. The truth was that she didn't entirely. Jefferson was a boogeyman from another world but he was coming to theirs and unfortunately the only one who really knew what that meant was Max, who was staring at her hands as if trying to convince herself that she wasn't really there instead of on a bus bound for Arcadia Bay from Portland. I should kill this dream. If I leave and a dream takes over, she might end up in a nightmare again.

“No,” Max said, quickly. “No, please. Just a minute or two more, please.” Chloe did not even blink at the transference of knowledge from her mind to Max's. Then again, when she spoke in here, wasn't that basically what she was doing, anyway? “I want to go home, Chloe.”

“I definitely understand that,” Chloe promised and sat on the table beside her, scooting close.

“I want you to try this again sometime, when I'm not... you know, having a nightmare?” Chloe blinked. “Coming into my dream, I mean.”

“I didn't mean to come, it was an accident.”

“It's okay,” Max whispered to her. “Try it again some time... when we're home.” Max turned more directly to Chloe, shifting beneath her arm. “I can’t believe it, but it isn’t just being with you and Rachel that makes it home. Blackwell fucks with me, but it’s home. Is that crazy?”

“No.” I think it's time to wake up. “Hey Max?”

“Yeah?”

“I'll see you on the other side, okay?”

The other side, as it turned out, was a surprisingly quiet Arcadia Bay. As Chloe settled onto the inter-city bus that would eventually take them as close as possible to Steph’s house, she couldn’t help but note the smell of smoke that still hung in the air, or the way that the roads were abandoned. If she had to guess there was some sort of warning in effect suggesting that everyone remain indoors, with the wind bringing smoke from a fresh wildfire to the city. In the last four decades the area around Arcadia Bay had seen two wildfires and they had had the same source each time. It was no surprise that the town’s residents might be particularly stringent about staying out of the smoke.
In fact, as Chloe and her girls got off this second bus in relative silence, she wondered if classes had been canceled that day. It was certainly unlikely but not impossible. The smoke was truly thick in the air and parents bitching about the risk to Little Johnny’s health might have been able to convince the school to take a day off and hope the wind changed direction. Chloe wasn’t sure what the patterns were for the area, never having paid much attention but she also wasn’t convinced that the prevailing winds were so easily influenced. Unless there’s a storm rolling in, or something.

Me

Honey, we’re home!

Steph

Had to hide the beer because reasons, but I’ve got coke, get in here.

Me

You mean the brown drink, right?

Right?

Steph

:-)

Me

NO EMOJI!

Steph’s house (my house, too, right?) came into view a minute or two later. Her phone had not ceased to vibrate every few seconds since the last message, which led her to believe it was currently being spammed with emoji. Chloe decided it was better for them all if she did not check. Instead, she turned and, walking backwards, examined her girls. They still walked like the living dead. Humorously, the silence between the three was not stress or distance, even though if they had ever had a couple of more stressful or emotional days in a row, Chloe could not place them. No, they were just tired. That’s not right, she told herself. I’m tired. They’re beat to hell.

Less than twenty-four hours ago, still, Max had come into the house, drenched in mud and fuck knew what else, asking Chloe for the keys to her truck. Chloe turned away from the girls. Said truck came into view and she made for it, not feeling at all asinine that she wished to greet it before she went inside. Her phone continued to buzz every few seconds. Asshole’s spamming me. She felt a little like a different person than she had been. Maybe I’m a smarter person. Nah, still a dumbass. Just the way I like it.
The girls behind her woke enough that Max mumbled something about her being a drama queen when she stopped behind the tailgate of her truck and gave it a soft pat. They were both still at the end of the driveway, though, so what did they know? Tracing her hand along its side, she came to a stop and paused at the driver’s side door. Leading down from the handle were a couple of muddy streaks that looked too consistent to be random flecks of dirt that had just run down it.

“What’s that?” Max asked. Chloe turned, surprised to find that the both of them had managed to sneak up behind her without her notice.

“I don’t actually know,” Chloe told her. Max had barely spoken since waking, saying just enough for Chloe to know that she was alright or at least, she wasn’t angry. “It almost looks like pawprints?” Shaking her head Chloe ran her eyes over first Max’s face and then Rachel’s. As before, both looked ready to drop. “We don’t actually have to do this tonight. I can take you back to the dorm and we can all talk tomorrow.”

“There’s a lot we need to get taken care of,” Rachel disagreed. “We should at least start here.” Why do I have the feeling they’ve been plotting something behind my back?

“Fine,” Chloe answered as Max gave a nod of agreement. “Steph’s been blowing up my phone with emoji ever since I told her we were back in town. I need to get inside before she starts back up.” That, at least, earned a small, half-hearted smile from the blonde in front of her.

By the time that Chloe pushed the door open and made to announce herself, she could instantly tell that something was different. She was allowed only half of a second to guess at what that was before Rachel pushed her forward softly and she was forced to let the two in behind her. A loud noise met her ears that her brain registered as a dog barking from the kitchen. Rapid, light tapping, something small and hard against the hardwood floor followed next. Dog? Chloe thought, thickly. She glanced behind herself to see Max reaching back for the already shut door behind her. Definitely a dog, Chloe told herself as something squat and brown shot into the hallway.

“We’ve got a visitor,” Steph called from the kitchen, her voice a little bit playful. “And I think he knows you.” The brown blur was quicker than Chloe’s thoughts in the moment but when it came to a stop, crouched and jumped she still recoiled into Rachel, who had to reach out to steady her. The dog in question was not lunging at her, but trying to reach up to her shoulders for the sake of, she realized, trying to lick her face. Oh holy shit. One loud bark sounded from an inch away from maybe her stomach before the dog landed and Chloe took a step toward him, giving Rachel and Max some room to breathe.

The dark brown shepherd-pit mix dropped immediately down onto all fours, as if looking to play.
The fuck is Pompidou doing at our place? When Chloe reached for him, he pushed himself sideways, practically slamming into the wall. It didn’t seem to matter to the dog, slim tail thumping against the wall with a powerful, rapid beat.

“Holy shit is that who I think it is?” Max asked. When Chloe glanced back, the photographer was easing past Rachel as Chloe trudged forward, trying to get the dog to back up and give them all a little more room. “Hey there, you little shit. I’ve been looking for you for a long, long time.” Chloe stepped aside and let Max kneel down to his level which most dogs would’ve taken as an immediate sign that someone wanted to play. This fucking hound rolled onto his back and immediately bared his stomach, a sure sign that Max was what Frank had called a habitual offender when it came to spoiling the dog.

“I haven’t seen him since he was a baby,” Rachel told them both, sounding a little more alive if not quite as delighted as Chloe and Max. She certainly sounded relieved. Chloe was relieved too, come to think of it.

“I have,” Chloe said. “Every time I came by.”

“Same,” Max replied, and then briefly began to rub the dog’s bared stomach. “He’s a fucking attention hound, aren’t you, you little shit?” No matter the language she was tossing playfully at the dog, there was an absurd amount of joy in Max’s voice. Chloe wanted to laugh, but the laughter felt a little unhinged where it gathered in the back of her throat, so she swallowed it.

The only question is why he’s here. For one absurd moment, she thought that if she took the few steps toward where Steph was waiting on them in the kitchen, she might see Frank waiting with some sort of smartass comment about Rachel owing him a new house. That’s not going to happen. Frank’s dead. Her stomach knotted up, but when Max stood and the dog rose to follow suit, Chloe made for the kitchen. She heard Pompidou circling in front of Max and Rachel, blocking them in his excitement, but only whistled to call him along. As much as the three of them had decided they owed Steph an explanation, it was possible that Steph had one for them, too.

Pompidou nearly knocked her from her feet as he bolted past her and into the kitchen. Chloe rounded the corner and despite the stupidity of it all, looked once for a tall man in a dark jacket and a baseball cap before her eyes landed on Steph, instead. Steph had just sat down at a table set for four, at least, set with a can of coke. Life giving caffeine, Chloe thought to herself. My hero. The young dog paused in front of Steph and sniffed at her offered hand for a moment before plopping onto the floor beside her. Chloe couldn’t help but notice the dog’s head turning back and forth between Steph and Chloe, but she let eye contact drop when Rachel and Max rounded the corner as well. She hoped they were awake enough to get through this talk. And whatever else they’re planning. Before anyone else could speak, Steph took one look at Max in the fresh tie dye and faded brown sandals.
“Did you run off to join some sort of hippie commune?” Steph asked the brunette. “Because that’s totally you, and I can respect that.” The comment broke ice that Chloe hadn’t particularly noticed in her vague sense of disturbed wonder and she watched first Max, then Rachel pass her to settle around the table with Steph, greeting her with great strain evident in their voices. “Damn, you two look like shit frozen over, warmed back up and then left out on the lawn.” Poetic, Steph. Chloe stopped a couple steps from the table.

“The fuck is Pompidou doing here?”

“Is that his name?” Steph asked her, gesturing for Chloe to sit the hell down. Chloe heard the pop of three different soda cans opening but she wasn’t sure if it was that noise or the dog’s name that made his ears perk up. It was, however, endearing. “What does that even mean?”

“I don’t know, it’s French or some shit,” Chloe said, which was always the answer Frank gave if anyone asked. Frank, she considered, stopping yet again to stare down at the dog, who seemed blissfully unaware of her train of thought. “What in the hell is he doing here, though?” Despite herself, she laughed as the dog put his nose up and sniffed toward the table. She wondered if the soda left a particularly strong scent in the air.

“He just showed up last night after you left, I found him trying to fit into that deck chair you like so much. Didn’t go so well for him.” Steph kind of shrugged. “I told him to go home, but he didn’t listen. Just kind of sat there and looked pathetic, and the smoke was kind of thick in the air and it was getting late, so I guess he wore me down. I figured you knew him because when I gave up and let him in he went right upstairs and went to sleep on your bed.” Steph’s a fucking softy, big surprise. Always taking in strays. Wait, my bed?

“He what?” Chloe asked. It actually made some sense that Pompidou might look for a familiar scent and come to that, given that there was probably a wall of fire between him and the RV. At that thought, Chloe was wildly relieved that the dog didn’t get himself hurt. Not to mention that David didn’t hurt him. “Did you sleep over here last night boy?” Chloe finally settled into a chair. Pompidou shifted on the ground between her own seat and Steph’s, but he was clearly watching Chloe with a wagging tail. The pit-shepherd mix was not big but he was damn powerful and Chloe could hear it in the sound of tail against floor.

“Yep. I picked him some food up before I went to sleep. I don’t know whose he is, but I left him and a bowl of kibbles out back this morning. He’s scary well behaved.” Chloe nodded. Frank was not necessarily what you might consider a good guy but he was not the monster some made him out to be. Pompidou was well behaved and generally kind. He just didn’t seem to care for trespassers or threatening voices. Frankly, neither did Chloe.
“His owner died yesterday,” Rachel said, a pronouncement that took the relatively amiable air away from the table. “He um, he killed himself, and then he got caught in that wildfire. I’m so glad Pompidou got away.” Chloe would have reached for Rachel but she was sitting on the far side of the table from her. All the bluenette could do was hope that Max was aware enough to hear the tension and conflict in the blonde’s voice. I could always say ‘fuck this whole “tell all” thing’ and make them both go to sleep for a few hours.

“You lost your owner boy?” Steph asked him. Of course, Pompidou was a dog. He did not respond. Chloe was thankful for that. It had been a crazy fucking day already and a talking dog would be enough to make her wonder how much of it had been imagined. Max is a time traveler, she reminded herself. Feeling just a bit more blank than a moment before, she reached down and offered the dog her hand. He sniffed it one or twice and gave it quick lick before flopping onto his side and demanding a belly rub. “Well, he seems to be all about you, Chloe and I like him. What do you think? Should we have a dog?” Chloe would much rather have seen Pompidou with them than wandering the streets, that much was for sure. Besides, she wouldn’t admit this out loud but the idea of a dog that would react to people lurking around the house was comforting.

“What will your parents say?” Steph’s face changed instantly, but not in the ‘I’d rather not talk about it’ way that it usually did whenever her parents were brought up. This was more like, ‘I have something to tell you, so hold onto your ass.’

“About that,” she started, “Dad’s gonna be home in a few. Probably only for a few days.” Chloe had met him once but at that point it had just been a “sleepover” and she had left a few hours after meeting him. This time things were going to be different.

“Oh,” Chloe said. “Oh shit.”

“He won’t care about the dog and I sort of told him about you already.”

“Does your mom know I’m living here?”

“Mom hasn’t called me in a month,” she said in response. “She didn’t ask, I didn’t tell. It’s really dad’s house, at this point and he’s almost never here.”

“Guess I gotta meet the landlord,” Chloe said uneasily. At this she turned her eyes on Max and Rachel. They were still holding it together though neither had spoken in a few seconds. Max, in particular, had been especially quiet. The girl was looking down at her hands and something about the gesture told Chloe they needed to move on, and fast. How about before her dad gets here?
“Yep,” Steph mused, “now about Pompidou?” The dog perked up at hearing his name. He had just stopped receiving the belly rubs he was asking for.

“Better here than the pound. Though, Frank kept him around to scare people who got too close to the RV.”

“Frank? The dealer? He’s dead?”

“Yes,” Rachel said. Max still looked down at her hands. They’re both exhausted. Half-lidded eyes and slouching postures gave that away.

“Damn, wait, the big ass dog barking in the back of the RV was you, little guy?” Steph leaned down toward him as if to examine him and laughed, pulling back all at once a moment later when his response was to accidentally stick his nose in her face. “Alright, that seals it. A dog who will bark when anyone skeevy or weird comes in the house sounds fine by me. But, fair warning.”

“What?” Chloe asked.

“He slept on your bed last night, remember? Dog hair.”

“Little shit,” Chloe responded and then leaned back in her seat. Max hadn’t looked up in some time but Rachel met her eyes when Chloe went searching and nodded her encouragement. Okay, so this is like the whole asking Max out thing all over again, she thought, we have something big to say, so it’s up to me to start it. Chloe spared a second to figure out precisely what form her revenge was going to take and then just started. “So, Steph are you busy?”

“Not super, got an essay to outline later.” The air changed immediately. Max looked up, Steph grew quiet and Rachel folded her hands in front of her. Pompidou didn’t notice this, though. Instead he got to his feet and began to idly sniff around the table. Chloe noticed that Rachel was watching him not out of concern but out of curiosity. The blonde reached down for him when he came near and the dog spent an inordinate amount of time smelling her.

“We kind of want to tell you some things,” Max said, surprising Chloe that not everything was going to be her responsibility on that front. I mean, I still don’t quite grok the time travel thing completely myself. Chloe let loose a sigh of relief.
“Yeah, I got that, actually,” Steph shot back, leaning forward with her hands resting around her mostly untouched can of coke. Chloe looked down and realized she had not yet opened her own. It pierced the sudden, thick silence. “You said you would tell Chloe and I ‘everything’.”

“Yes,” Max agreed. “But it’s more than that. All three of us are going to tell you pretty much everything, but um, you might not believe some of it.”

“What, are you secretly the returned Jesus Christ or something?”

“No,” Max said, making sure to emphasize her lack of amusement. It wasn’t particularly great if Max was starting to find herself in a bad mood. That was typically a defense mechanism, as Chloe knew all too well. *Maybe I will take over.* For the moment Chloe rested her left hand against the dark wood table and used the right to drain half of the can of its sweet, sweet caffeine.

“But Chloe can spy on peoples’ dreams and I can kind of, mess with wind, rain and fire,” Rachel shot. Chloe rolled her eyes at Steph’s dubious response. *Yeah, and I’m the King of France.*

“Sure, and I rode the first flying pig in existence to east Asia last night,” was Steph’s off the cuff response. *Never mind, that’s better.* Chloe glanced between Max and Rachel once. The brunette took the lead again. Chloe decided she wasn’t going to feel bad about it: sure, Max was tired but she was also the one who had suggested they tell Steph about all of this, just after returning home from one of the more stressful days of her life, of all the times. Chloe quite suddenly wished she could drag Max off to a quiet room and talk to her about how well she was holding together. The elder Max Caulfield had made it clear to Chloe that Max was probably going to be “a bit broken” for a while, needing time to think and put the pieces together, but her silence on, well, many things but especially the issue of her mental state was disturbing.

“When I first came to Arcadia Bay,” Max started, “I thought I was a different person.”

“What does that mean, exactly?” Steph asked her. “I mean, I’ve heard snippets of all of this for a while now, but I don’t know what you mean.”

“We didn’t either, until this morning,” Rachel reassured the girl. “Just listen.”

Steph promised she would and, frankly, as Chloe listened, she came to understand even more about
Max than she had while sitting in that shitty hotel restaurant, listening to Max struggling with trying to get an answer out of her older self, an answer that the older Caulfield simply kept telling her she already knew. That had been about the big revelations, the generalities. This time, when Max opened up, Chloe began to put together one hell of a picture of just who her girlfriend thought she was when she came back to Arcadia Bay.

Max’s early time at Blackwell had been spent constantly “rewinding,” constantly trying not to say something to upset anyone, constantly trying to make friends with Victoria and her crew, Nathan, even other members of the Vortex Club, always and forever, over and over. It sounded completely exhausting to Chloe’s ears and she felt like, if she heard it in any greater detail than Max told the story to Steph, then Chloe might want to go lock herself in her room for a couple of days, too. By Max’s figuring her first month in Arcadia Bay lasted almost three. This was a concept that Chloe knew Steph had trouble grappling with but, if anything, it put a piece or two about the last couple of days firmly into place.

All that bullshit, three months worth of work to try to fit in, try not to bring any trouble down on herself and to help people who needed it and Max had still gotten Nathan two months later. Chloe wondered what attracted Nathan to Max and couldn’t help but think that maybe it was just her obvious vulnerability at the time. Nathan seems like a sick enough fucker. Maybe, though, it was her trying to reach out to him. Either way, listening to Max’s description of losing the memories and feelings of her other self, or atleast experiencing them as they died down could have been the narrative of someone’s descent into madness. Steph spent most of her time nodding to acknowledge Max or looking with concern at the other two. Max had just gotten to their return flight from LA when Steph shifted in her seat and the photographer’s voice rose a notch. At the same time, Max lowered her head and winced a little, as if pained.

“And yes, Steph this is the part where you ask for proof, so I’ll tell you something you’ve never told anyone.” Half a second of silence later, without the expression on her face changing from that same one suggestive of a massive headache, Max spoke. “You’ve only kissed one boy to see if you were into them and it was hella awkward because he was your b—”

“That’s enough,” Steph called all at once, eyes widening. Her left hand rose to pull at the neck of her shirt in an exaggerated, cartoonish gesture of discomfort. “I believe you, I believe you.” Max shut her mouth and, looking as if the pain was fading, relaxed. A small smirk rose to the photographer’s face, enough that Chloe very nearly reached across the table to shake her, to make her finish that thought. Steph looked between Rachel, who had yet to sit back up, and Chloe. Rachel’s not going to last much longer at this rate. “And you believe all of this, right? I’m not losing my mind?” Well, Chloe thought, I did hear you watching The Next Generation yesterday before school. Still, when it came down to, it, she thought this called for a serious response.

“Last week before that test on chapter eight of Slaughterhouse Five, you had a nightmare about working in a slaughterhouse,” Chloe told Steph, shifting in her chair to face her directly. The movement was quick enough to draw Pompidou’s attention from where he sat between Rachel and Steph. “Only all the pigs were alive on the hooks.” Steph blanched a little, and Chloe felt guilty for
bringing it up. “I ended up in it by accident. Decided it was getting too bad and did my best to kind of, well, kind of break the dream.”

“I woke up after that and couldn’t get back to sleep for half an hour,” Steph told her. “I know I didn’t tell anyone about that.” Now Steph turned her attention on Rachel. Chloe shook her head but Rachel only held up her hands.

“Trust me,” she said, “You do not want me to show the shit I can do in your kitchen.” Steph’s mouth dropped open. And, she believes us. Max seemed to realize this too as the brunette huffed once and then drained what was left of her soda. “But for the most part Chloe’s told you about all that comes up about her power: she can go through peoples dreams and learn things, talk to them, help them out of nightmares, that kind of thing. It’s actually really cool and sometimes feels,” Rachel both perked up and started to turn a little red at this but finished, “sometimes it feels really special. But I’ve used mine for kind of uh, messy things.”

“Like the wildfire that they can’t get put out?” Can we stop with the verbal dramatic stings? Rachel was finally sitting up straighter, but it was not due to any kind of positive energy, Chloe thought.

“It was an accident,” Rachel promised. “Mostly, I mean. I meant to start a fire but it got too hot, spread too fast.”

“I thought it was weird we’d have a fire this time of year. It’s so wet and cold. Like that last one.” Rachel lowered her head again as Steph figured it out.

“I didn’t know that I could do things, back then,” Rachel promises her. “That one was an accident that I don’t think I can entirely be blamed for, but this one’s my fault.” Chloe wanted to argue with her. The truth was that there was some blame to go around for all of them. There was silence in the kitchen (beyond the sound of Pompidou panting, lazily) until Chloe asked if Steph had any questions.

“I do, actually.” Of course you do. Chloe was starting to feel as if the day was never going to end, but the thought made her feel guilty, herself. Compared to the brunette and blonde beside her, did she really have any right to complain? They had both been through some serious shit.

“Go on,” Chloe told her. She looked down at herself, the light overshirt, pale tee, ragged jeans. Strangely enough, Chloe wasn’t sure if this was what she was wearing the night before or not. Okay, time’s starting to get a little confusing for me and I’m not the time traveler. We need to wrap this up, hard.
“Do you go to peoples’ dreams by choice?”

“Sometimes,” Chloe admitted, feeling her face heat up a little. “If it’s Rachel, who gave me permission, I do. Otherwise, I could be be in my own dream and accidentally just, slip into another or “wake up” in someone else’s dream while asleep.” Usually Chloe just immediately exited the scene whenever that happened. It had become surprisingly simple to just slip out of someone’s mind and into nothing. All of that being said, if things were really bad in a dream she found her way into, she had trouble leaving people suffering. “As for my own dreams, I usually just use them to try to work out problems. It’s scary useful when you can just talk to your own brain.” I wonder if any of them are going to be able to get that.

“And you don’t just naturally set things on fire?” Steph asked Rachel, as if Chloe’s answer was sufficient. Oh, thank God. I need a power nap.

“It only happens when I am very, very angry and then most of the time, that’s just accidental.”

“Really, really angry like last November?” Steph queried her.

“Yes,” Rachel shot back, her voice hard as if to say that she was not ashamed, not ashamed of that at all. Chloe watched the two girls share a knowing look. Max, on the other hand, was looking pointedly down at Pompidou who now had his head in her lap, demanding attention. Max itched between the dog’s ears. He always gets it, the hound.

“As for you,” Steph rounded on Max all at once, causing the girl to lift her head a little higher, “have you ever used her powers to, I don’t know, mess with me?”

“The first two sessions of your D&D game, that first one? I used my power then.” Steph was looking at her, open mouthed and incredulous. It took Chloe a second to figure out why. Max almost laughed as it hit her, too. “Not for the game, but to make sure that I didn’t fuck up and upset someone with something I said. I feel guilty about it now but back then it seemed so important.”

“And that’s the only time?” Steph pushed.

“I mean, I’ve probably done it about five or six times since then to stop you from some minor accident, and then once when you almost ran into Nathan throwing a fit early the first week of school.” Steph looked pensive for a second.
“This explains why you’re always wherever anyone needs you to be, always there when something goes wrong for them. God damned superhero.” That doesn’t sound like another question.

“Max,” Chloe started, “Rachel, you two are going to want to take like, a half hour nap or something.”

“Why?” Max asked. “I mean beyond being fucking tired?”

“Because I’m fucking tired.”

“Pompidou’s bed isn’t big enough for all three of you,” Steph declared and then rose to her feet. “Someone’s gonna have to take the couch and the other can have my bed. As for Chloe, there’s a floor or she can fight the dog for it.” Yeah, sounds good.

“Fight the what for who?” This last voice came from a tall man of obvious Mediterranean descent, his dark hair slicked back as if to distract from the fact that it was beginning to thin. Even if Chloe had not met George once before, she would have recognized him as Steph’s father in an instant. As if realizing he had somehow missed the sound of the front door opening and admitting the man, Pompidou leapt to his feet, barking and sped across the room to check out this new person and see if he liked them. Oh god, this day never ends.
“George was nice,” Rachel tried. This was about her fifth attempt to get a response out of Chloe that was more complex than, 'Yeah, sure.' This had been a rollercoaster of a day, one which had started in Los Angeles and, frankly, which felt like little more than an extension of the one before it. Even still, if after everything that all three of them had gone through, if even after she and Max were fit to drop they still thought that this was the best idea, the best way for the three of them to spend their time, Chloe really should have been able to pull it together and consider the idea without this attitude. She's just tired, Rachel told herself. We're all tired. If you weren't you'd understand why she's so pissy about the idea. David and Joyce Madsen's house appeared just on the edge of Rachel's vision. She rubbed at her eyes hard, mostly to try to give herself a chance to focus on the building and search for a sign that David's vehicle was outside of it.

“Look,” Max said, when Chloe didn't respond. “Chloe, you're not happy. I get it, but this is the smart choice.”

“I'm barely fucking thinking straight,” Chloe told them. “I don't like walking the two of you into that house and I never wanted to go back there again.”

“Again,” Rachel shot back, “are there things in your old bedroom you still want?” Chloe's response was a lone grunt and then to lean forward slightly, hunching over the wheel. “Then think of this like tearing off a bandaid. It's hanging on by one or two hairs now and it really sucks. Just pull it off.”

“You know,” Chloe replied, turning right into the driveway. “When you put it that way-” she blew a raspberry at them. Rachel threw up her hands in surrender.
“You'll thank us some day,” she said.

“Probably tomorrow when I don't feel like slamming my head against the windshield until I pass out,” Chloe quipped. “Really,” the truck ceased to rumble as Chloe turned the key. “I get it, I get what you mean and why you said all of that, I just don't get why you two think we should do it today?”

“Because we've all been hanging onto pieces of bullshit that aren't our fault,” Rachel told her. Max had gone back to relative silence and that was unsurprising. It had definitely been a year since the brunette was as quiet as she had been since they boarded the plane from L.A. Ahead of them the half-painted Madsen house did not look imposing so much as tedious. As far as Rachel was concerned it was a roadblock. “I know you want to get home to George and listen to him go on and on about swanky parties and all, but he'll be there for a few days.”

“God,” Chloe sighed, leaning against the steering wheel completely. “I really want to like George.”

“But he leaves Steph all on her own while her mother's off in Tahiti or wherever?” Chloe nodded, but did not lift her head from where it pressed against the wheel. Max shifted quietly beside Rachel, as if to say that they should get going. Rachel got it, Max was exhausted. Probably more so than Rachel, herself, but there was nothing for it but to ease Chloe into this. Playfully, Rachel mimicked the harried George Gingrich's voice. “'Ho-ly shit. When did we get a dog? Did we get a dog or am I hallucinating from the overpriced party drugs that I have to take just to get up in the morning?’” Unpracticed observers of Chloe Price would have missed the slight quirk of her lips. Not Rachel. She nudged the bluenette and Chloe started to open the driver's side door.

“You guys, I know I have to go in but if you want to wait out here, I totally get it.”

“No fucking chance,” Max finally said.

When they reached the front door, Rachel watched as Chloe tried the knob and found it locked. The girl was shifting through the keys on her keyring when Rachel began to notice something odd. The doorknob in question was the same style, same shape as before but it was shiny and new. David changed the locks, Rachel thought. For a moment she considered letting Chloe figure it out on her own, but that seemed unnecessarily cruel. The keys jingled between Chloe's tired, uncoordinated fingers until such time as Rachel pressed her left hand down on top of them and shook her head.

“I don't think your key's going to work, hon.” Chloe blinked in confusion and then glanced from Rachel's concern, to Max's half-awake frustration and finally to the doorknob itself.
“Oh,” Chloe said. As if some great conversation had been concluded, Rachel watched the artist turn on a dime and try to walk back toward the truck, her face not changing. *God damn it,* she thought, reaching out and taking hold of Chloe's hand to keep her nearby. The sound of Max's insistent, no, angry pounding on the old door was enough to wake the dead. No one inside of the house was going to mistake that they were there. If it was David, he was outnumbered three to one. If it was Joyce, she was, *too.* Chloe turned about with a groan as she seemed to realize she was not getting away, but pulled her arm free. The girl looked to be a kind of anxious that was not quite ‘something good or bad might happen’ but closer to ‘something bad is happening and I can't get away.’ Joyce Madsen pulled open the front door to her home as Chloe was just starting to try to pull Rachel and Max from the doorstep. All Rachel could do was return her hand to Chloe's arm and try to calm the girl down as mother and daughter matched eyes. Max, who had been the one knocking, did not speak, so Rachel followed suit.

“Why um, why don't you all come in?” was Joyce's substitute for 'hello.' She was still dressed for work and looked, to Rachel, as if she might understand the urge to drop for a nap. Stealing about twenty minutes on Steph's couch, comfortable as it might be, was a poor substitute for actual sleep and the momentary jolt of energy had begun to fade.

“Changed the locks, huh?” Chloe asked. It did not sound accusing, it looked like she was reaching for a topic of discussion. Joyce stepped aside.

“It's not you I locked the house against,” Joyce told her. “It's David. I wanted him to understand he wasn't coming back in at the moment and he's going to have to get comfortable at this hotel.”

“Think the two of you will work it out?”

“I just don't know.” Rachel could see the thought in Chloe's eyes, that this was tantamount to a yes. Chloe did, however, step past her mother. Rachel let Max come in next and for once the brunette didn't even try to match Joyce's eyes. *I'm impressed she can hold her head up.* “Come on through and sit down.” *I'm impressed I can hold my head up.* Her eyes ached each time she closed them, begging for the sweet release of sleep.

“We just wanted to look through my closet once more, to make sure I have everything I need. A-as long as it hasn't been thrown out, that is.” The woman shook her head once and then told them that it had not been.

“Just come sit down for a few minutes,” was the blonde woman's insistent cry. She was positioned roughly between them and the stairs. It would have been easy to just push past her and get up there but technically speaking they were guests in her house. As soon as it became clear they were not
going to be let upstairs without giving into the woman's 'please, poor me' eyes (which had just begun watering, by the way), Max took hold of Chloe's hand and began to lead her down the hall. For a moment, Rachel had the urge to demand Joyce walk in front of her, as if having her at her back was dangerous. If she wasn't acting like a snake in the grass.... Instead, Rachel placed each hand on one of Chloe's shoulders and followed her back through the hall into the open dining room. For the most part the house was unchanged, except that most every sign of David downstairs was missing, if one discounted the photo of the Madsens at their wedding reception. Hey, at least the cake was good and I totally copped someone's whiskey from the bar.

Max was the first of them to take a seat and Chloe, looking reluctant as she removed her overshirt and tossed it across one shoulder, had not managed to follow suit before Joyce turned on the guilt trip. Frankly, Rachel was proud of the artist for not immediately stepping away from her seat and saying 'Fuck this!' Rachel would not have blamed her: as far as she was concerned Chloe was trying and Joyce had been a pain in the ass from the moment the door opened. Oh god, she thought as the woman opened her mouth. Here we go.

“Chloe, are you sure you won't come home now?” The girl shifted uncomfortably, her hands on the back of the chair in front of her. While Joyce walked around them, Rachel paused only a step behind Chloe and waited for her to decide whether she was going to stick around or not. Her discomfort was so obvious that even in her hazy state Max was watching Chloe sharply.

“I'm already home, where I'm living now.” Joyce settled into a chair and made a big show of looking put out, looking hurt. Oh god, I was right about you, wasn't I? Rachel thought, recalling the time she had accused the woman of manipulating peoples' emotions. She really had hoped to be proven wrong. I don't like the idea that she might be able to do this shit to Chloe and Max right now. Even as Chloe lowered herself into a chair beside Max, Rachel hovered behind her, resting a hand on the girl's shoulder. This was my idea, and I swear to god if she starts fucking with Chloe's head, I'll put an end to it. Briefly, Rachel wondered if she was not feeling a little extra defensive because she was tired. “I mean, as much as I hate David, I don't trust you. He wasn't the one I was supposed to be able to trust. You were and,” Chloe's voice dropped slightly. “Well, that bit me in the ass, didn't it?” For the most part the bruising around Chloe's wrist had faded, but Rachel caught her turning that hand palm up as if examining it while she spoke.

“Oh, Chloe,” the consummate victim sighed, leaning on her elbows at the table as if to talk 'down' to Chloe's level. Never mind that Chloe's taller than all three of us in this room. “What would I have to do to earn that trust back?” Manipulative, childish, buck passing, blame-shifting bullshit. Rachel felt the moment Chloe shifted from humoring all three of them in this situation to angry. Her shoulder shook beneath Rachel’s left hand and even when Max took Chloe's right, it did not stop. She couldn't see the artist's face but was rather happy Max did not have her camera to take a photo of it. I don't think I want to see it.

“What would you say if you were me?” she asked. “What would you say after a couple of years of being told you’re shit, you’re scum, after being stalked by him, him stalking your friends and making accusations about us that have no basis in reality, after your mother backs him up this
whole time, a man who threatened you and pushed you around, and everyone else, too, what would it take to earn back YOUR trust?’”

“I don’t know,” Joyce replied in a small, almost childish voice and looked down toward the table. There, she began to press her nails against it, as if testing how well they held up under pressure, anything to avoid looking at Chloe. If looks could kill, huh?

“Well if you don’t know, why the fuck should I? This was a mistake. I’ll try this again another day. Or maybe nothing up there is worth this.” Chloe rose all at once, quickly enough that Max was forced to release her hand and Rachel her shoulders. “It never changes with you. It’s all about how you’re a victim. Poor you, your daughter smarts off and stands up for herself and woe is you, you married some shithead and enabled everything he’s ever done by refusing to see him as anything but a hero. A hero doesn’t stalk teenagers, but you refused to believe me, your own daughter about it. Even after I left that day I bet you thought I was lying until you saw the cameras.”

Max rose beside her somewhat more slowly, enough so that Rachel took a step away from Chloe and reached out to steady the brunette. It's been a really, really long day. Chloe turned and shot a look at the two of them that was laced not with the anger Rachel thought they rightly deserved for putting Chloe through this today, but with guilt. That was another ball of yarn to unravel, but Chloe didn't look intent on doing it there. Rachel reached out and grabbed the forgotten overshirt that hung over the back of Chloe's chair and watched the bluenette approach Rachel. Joyce stood all at once as if she thought Chloe was about to leave and she wanted to stop her. Rachel, though, matched her girlfriend's eyes and reacted as Chloe hugged her tight, once.

“You were trying to help, I'm sorry I was shitty on the way over, but this was why.” Surprised by the personal gesture in a place that was rapidly coming to seem very impersonal to Chloe, Rachel nodded, her face pressed against the artist's. After a second, Chloe repeated this process with Max and declared she was sorry to waste Joyce's time. If Joyce was not aware of the nature of their relationship before, she was now.

“Are you staying somewhere safe this time?” Joyce called as Chloe turned and strode off toward the hall.

“I am but, you know what?” Chloe asks, “I’m not sure it’s actually any of your business. If you try to bring me back here, I’ll do whatever it takes to get away again.”

Chloe only turned back when Joyce asked Rachel and Max to stay and talk to her. While Rachel did agree, Max did not. It was oddly satisfying to watch the hurt cross Joyce's face as Max told her goodbye and pulled Chloe from the house insistently. After a few seconds, the door shut behind them and Rachel folded her arms across her chest. Okay, Joyce, try this shit on me.
Rachel was the one of them still cognizant enough to actually stop Max in front of her own door. While still talking normally, Max’s thought processes were beginning to get a little out there. They hadn't talked about anything serious since Rachel filled her and Chloe in on what Joyce had had to say. Their entire meal had been eaten with Max in a quiet, half-delirious state. She had, in fact, left her sandwiches completely untouched. Rachel held these and a few spare fries in a bag in her left hand. How much more do I have in me tonight? she asked herself. Rachel shot one look back toward Kate's door. Enough to take care of Kate and Dana? Fuck, I don't know.

“This is it,” Rachel told Max, who nodded once and wavered on her feet as she turned toward the door. “Okay, okay,” she pressed her right hand to the back of Max’s neck. “Stay with me long enough to unlock your door, okay?” Her exhausted Nu-Hippie nodded and, keys in hand, took and missed her first stab at her door's lock. Yeah, Chloe's been through some shit lately, but as for today, Max and I have kinda been through absolute hell. It was hard to think it had been only just over a day since she was freezing, running through the woods, alone. Worse for Max, she reminded herself as the photographer let out an 'ahah' and opened the door. Just inside the door, Rachel released the girl, earning a playful 'aww.'

“Yeah, yeah,” Rachel said, shoving the bag in her left hand into Max's chest. “Take it. Eat your sandwiches. Go to sleep and tomorrow we're gonna go to breakfast and you'll eat with us, okay?” The brunette looked up at her, appearing more like herself for a second and then frowned.

“I'll try,” Max promised her, taking the bag. Her drooping eyelids suggested that she was going to fall asleep on her feet. Max had let on that, technically, it had been somewhere in the realm of a day or two since she'd slept at all and far longer than that since she had slept a full eight hours. Naps only go so far. Max stumbled as Rachel pushed her in, insistently. Whatever the brunette had been about to say, Rachel gestured for her to make for her bed.

“And make sure to get up early enough for a shower.”

“You sayin' I stink?” Max asked her as she sat the bag of food on the side of her bed and stumbled toward her closet. Probably looking for something to sleep in. The screen of Max's laptop was dark on the desk, but Rachel knew that if someone were to press a button, the fateful video would be waiting there. That's alright, Future Max isn't as scary as she was, yesterday. If anything, Rachel just wished she'd taken a second to ask the woman why she was wearing Rachel's jacket- a version...
of Rachel's jacket. *Now I'll never know.*

“I am,” Rachel promised. “So do I. I'm gonna take a lo-ong shower, too. But first I'm gonna go talk
to Kate and Dana, okay?” Max looked at her in some confusion. “They were super worried about
you, so I'm gonna tell them you're okay and go to bed.”

“Oh, she replied, voice small and sleepy. Max didn't seem to be capable of asking too many
questions. Sighing, Rachel took a step inside and pressed her lips to Max's cheek, causing the girl to
stop, a tee she had just pulled from the closet clenched in her hands. “If you *really* want me to
sleep, you could stay with me.”

“We were *sick* today, remember? We probably shouldn't get caught in each others' room if
someone comes to bed check.” This earned a soft pull on the edge of one of her jacket sleeves and
very blatant puppy dog eyes. Max was trying hard to be adorable and in Rachel's current state it
was *super* effective. If she hadn't wanted to get things squared away with Kate and Dana, Rachel
was fairly certain she would have caved there and then. A night curled up around Max sounded *just*
fine right now. “Eat and go to sleep, okay Max?”

“Oh,” she repeated in that same soft, exhausted voice before she returned to finding something
comfortable to wear. Rachel made a quick retreat and was just through Max's door when she
thought to turn back.

“I'm going to be just down the hall after I get done talking to them, you know, in case something
happens.”

“And you'll still be here in the morning right?” *One day, Rachel decided, I'm going to get you back
for breaking my heart.*

“I promise,” she told the photographer. “I love you. Tomorrow night's going to be a night to
ourselves.” These were her parting words to Max. She shut the door to room 219 without a look
back and made immediately for Kate's. *Square away old debts, cover asses and do what's right by
your friends,* she reminded herself. This was a nugget of wisdom from Sera, of all people, but it
seemed appropriate in this state where all Rachel wanted to do was collapse on her bed and sleep
until her alarm went off. Kate came to the door the moment Rachel knocked.
“Hey,” Kate greeted, anxiously. “Do you want to come in?” Rachel noticed the dirty-blonde looking over her shoulder, looking for a sign of Max. *Sucks to disappoint, but she needed a nap.* Her answer was a quick nod. Kate for her part, stepped back and let Rachel in. She took a moment to look around the room. It was just a little dark, but neater than Rachel’s at home had ever been. Other than Kate’s laptop, her camera and a printer, she couldn’t see a ton of personal effects on her first sweep of the room. The girl stepped toward her bed, fingers working against one another in some anxiety. Kate’s school bag and purse rested in a corner and there was also a short bookcase full of various books very close. Sitting on top of it, not so subtly, is a bible. *Kate's anxious, eager.* Rachel knew she wanted more information than Chloe’s text that “Max is safe, we’re bringing her home now” gave.

When directed, Rachel settled into a seat at Kate's computer desk.

“So, um, what happened?” Kate asked, quite abruptly.

“I'm really tired,” Rachel told her. “So I'm going to kind of make it short?” The studious girl nodded. “In her room, we found some evidence that suggested Max had kind of run away. She was having, uh, let's call it a crisis.”

“This is about her um, being unwell?”

“Her mental health was a big part of it, but Max just panicked is what it comes down to, Kate.” The girl leaned forward on the bed, looking sad, like a scolded puppy. “I'd say more but it’s a matter of respecting Max’s privacy.”

“I understand. I hope she gets better soon.” *I know you do, Rachel wanted to tell her. You're a good person.* It felt like shit, lying to Kate, whose big earnest hazel eyes were so full of concern.

“Max kind of overstretched herself trying to be everyone's super hero. Now she needs to rest and she’s going to probably need a while to recover. Maybe a few weeks.” Kate watched her the whole time and Rachel quickly found herself rambling as she realized this. “Sorry, I just, she always does this shit, putting everyone else first until she breaks down and then she doesn't tell us what's going on. This time it was different, it was *way* bigger, but it doesn't change everything else.” *I didn't know I was feeling this upset about it? I think I need to sleep.*

“It’s okay,” then, after a pause, “You really love her, don’t you?”
“I do,” Rachel told her. “She drives me up a freaking wall, but I do.” While everything in her spoke of a desire to make a quick escape and head to bed, Rachel saw another opportunity appear in front of her. *I'm already here, aren't I?* A question which had been weighing on her mind since meeting Kate seemed in reach, proper to ask about for once. “Can I talk to you about something I've been a little worried about, a-and please don't take offense.”

“Okay,” Kate promised, but she no longer sounded quite so at ease, anxiety clearly heightening. *Okay, make this fast before you upset both of you, asshole.*

“Relax, it's okay,” Rachel counseled. “It's just something that's kind of been gnawing at me for a while and I'm getting to the point where not talking about the things that mess with my head just feels stupid.” She was given one more nod as encouragement by the typically rather quiet girl. Kate was once more wearing a ponytail and dressed for bed, in a light tee and long soft looking pants. “Are you comfortable around the three of us? I mean, when things are a little uh, romantic?” Kate's immediate response was to lean forward, looking guilty. *What is she-

“Have I done something to make you guys uncomfortable?” Rachel couldn't help herself. She laughed out loud.

“I was more worried about it the *other* way around.”

“It is complicated,” Kate answered, frowning. Rachel was too tired to get concerned by this, all she could really do was wait and see. “My God tells me to love, though, and leave the judging to him and that’s what I’m going to do. Does that make sense?” Rachel nodded. It did make sense. “It’s a messed up world, I have my God and he speaks to me daily. Some things, I can't work out so I just leave them be, okay? Besides, you three were my first friends when I came to Blackwell and even if there are things we don't or can’t share, it's okay.”

“Can I be uncomfortably honest with you for a second?” Rachel asked. Maybe she wasn't too tired to feel, after all. This confused Kate, but she eventually agreed with a soft nod. “No matter what Victoria says, you pull your look off well. You're cute, you're confident, you know who you are and no one confuses you about that. I just want you to remember that that’s probably why Victoria fucks with you.”

“I don’t understand,” Kate told her, honestly, though she looked down at her hands as if meeting Rachel's eyes was hard.
“Max thinks Victoria is hella insecure because of trying to live up to her parents and this idea of what they want her to be.” This was a rather personal discussion to pass on, but it was important to Rachel in the moment that Kate understood her. “You being able to look into a mirror and be happy with who you see is what upsets Victoria, that's why she goes after you.” Kate did not lift her head.

“Thanks, I guess,” the girl finally replied. “Do-um, do you think Max is right?”

“Kate, there aren't a ton of times I think she's too far off base and Victoria has always seemed super insecure. In the past, I was a shitty person and I used it against her. Now, I just kind of hope she finds a healthier way to express it.” We both fucked up, back then, Rachel thought, recalling her time practicing for The Tempest, her antics in manipulating Victoria into withdrawing from the play. She wasn't a bad actress. I wish I hadn't fucked her over. I wish she was rational enough to listen to me now. Rachel rose from her seat. She would have loved to shoot the shit a little longer but she still needed to talk to Dana and her body was starting to give out.

“Hey Kate?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for being my friend.”

September 20th, 2011 3:49 PM

You're not going to be sick, Rachel told herself. Your stomach will chill out. Outside, the grey-brown limbs of trees swaying in a strong wind momentarily drew her attention as she eased her car to a stop. Rachel glanced once in the rear view mirror to see the two girls in the back and then shot Max a look, in the front passenger seat. They were all focused on the line of vehicles in the distance, the most visible being those cars and trucks with their flashing lights. Firefighters oversaw a band of volunteers that had come from as far as Edgeton to protect Arcadia Bay from the encroaching flames. She could focus and even from as far back as they were parked, see those fires. She only hoped that the wind outside was not pushing the flames toward fresh fuel.

For the most part, the flames had been kept in check on the Arcadia Bay end of things. That was to say, their progress was slow, inching. They were still progressing. No matter the time and effort taken to wet the earth, to fight the fire, it was just a matter of time. There were not enough people to stretch the line of flame approaching Arcadia Bay at all times. The last one, she knew, had been the same way. The Edgeton fire chief had declared the May 2010 fire like something he “had never seen.” And you know why, right? It has to do with why it started. It was you, angry. The last one spread so fast because you were still angry, always angry. Then it died all at once the day you
Now, this one's slow but it won't die. Rachel rather thought this meant she was still angry about something but when she tried to find it, to think about what might piss her off, the answer shamed her. Once more Rachel worked her eyes over Max. The two of them had slept as long as possible the night they all returned from Los Angeles but even believing that Max had done her level best for sleep did not remove how obvious it was that the girl was dead tired. That made bringing up how Rachel felt hurt by much of Max's behavior difficult. Inwardly, Rachel was well aware that Max had been acting both in defense of Rachel and Chloe, but also herself. She also knew that she, Rachel, had crossed several lines over the last month and probably played a role in Chloe's showdown with David, not to mention in David being angry enough to confront Frank, resulting in the man's death. But Max ran away from it all when all either of us wanted was to know what was happening.

Chloe had revealed to Rachel that very morning the contents of her private discussion with that other Max, the one in which the woman had begged her to swallow her hurt pride and frustration for a few days. It was sound reasoning: it didn't take a genius to realize that the girl to Rachel's right was suffering, that she was not herself. All reports suggested she had barely spoken to anyone other than Rachel or Chloe in two days, even though Rachel had taken care to make sure she was eating. What was it Chloe said? That she just 'hit the reset button' on her own identity? This isn't the time for me to be angry about her running off. We'll talk, just give it a week.

The truth was that Rachel could not shift the blame for the fire in front of her to Max. In the end, she had set it and now it had raged for nearly four days. While Arcadia Bay was safe for the moment, to the east the fire was approaching a more populated region with that same creeping-moss surety. Can I afford not to talk to Max about this, though? What if that's the only way to fix this?

In the back, Chloe and Steph unbuckled their seatbelts and Chloe reached forward to rest a hand on her shoulder. Rachel wished she wasn't in the driver's seat, hell, she wished she wasn't in control of any of this, but it was wasted effort to do so. With no one coming up behind them and them being stopped just far enough away that neither police nor firefighters were bothering to come turn them away, Rachel knew they could watch the steady wall of smoke and the faint tinge of flame in the distance for a while.

“The fire has to stop,” Rachel reminded herself. The land was generally very wet, conditions very cool. Maybe the occasional light rain had been to thank for the slow progress, but it seemed a poor force all bit its lonesome. “Max is right. If this thing's still going it's because I started it.” Miles of land burned because I lost my cool when David shot at me. One thing's for sure: they'll never find Frank or Damon's bodies. Judging by the lack of information in the news, David had not reported any version of what happened that night to anyone.
“In the other timeline, that Chloe said that the first fire stopped at the same time her Rachel got stabbed by Damon Merrick,” Max finally chimed in.

“Does that mean I need to nearly die for the fire to stop?”

“I don’t know but I’m not voting for that one,” Max muttered, and then seemed to fall into a thought long enough for Steph to add in a ‘ditto.’ “It might mean you need to go unconscious or something”

“I’ve done that a few times since the first started. Sleep. Last night I slept like the dead.”

“Maybe not naturally, then,” Max said, beginning to sound frustrated. Rachel had to remember that they all needed some time to rest and constantly bouncing from one fuck up to the next was not working in their favor. But this one's kind of a big one, so I kinda need them. I kind of need them all. She glanced up into the rearview mirror where Chloe was leaning forward yet again.

“Go pull over off the side of the road,” she interrupted. It was pretty reasonable, just in case a truck had to come by. Chloe had been quiet for a while but now she was starting to sound upset, at least to Rachel's ears. Rachel couldn't help but wonder if it was from remembering the trip out to rescue her from the woods. She had been given to understand it was stressful. It did not take Rachel long to pull off the road and turn her engine off. Left in the sudden quiet of the dead engine, the sound of wind was all that they could hear.

“So,” Chloe said, “The fire, the wind are both based on your emotions. Maybe the rain is, too.”

“Maybe,” Max replied, sounding the most upbeat she had in a couple of days. “It makes sense, or- or maybe you need to look at the things you were feeling when you started the fire.”

“Or both,” Rachel told them. “I’ll do anything at this point, as long as it puts this fire out.” She really didn't want anyone to lose anything else. As far as she knew, other than the old abandoned Bowers property there had only been one other house lost. But the fire keeps getting closer and even with volunteers, they can't keep fighting it forever. Rachel couldn't imagine all of the woods that had been lost, all the animals killed or displaced. Rachel thought that Steph sensed her discomfort as the girl nudged the back of her seat immediately. She realized she had gone quiet and begun to grasp at her steering wheel despite the fact that the car was off.

“We’ll figure this out,” Steph promised her. Rachel looked up from the steering wheel, exhaling
slowly. The trees beside them continued swaying to and fro in a strong wind. Up ahead, she thought she could see it even messing with the fire, making it taller or shorter, sway or almost vanish. It was still early, but Rachel wanted them to be done with this soon, before people had to start breaking off to sleep or eat. *People must be dead tired up there.* Rachel would have offered to volunteer if she wasn’t afraid of what she could do around the fire, especially if it bore some remnant of a connection to her mood.

“I don’t really understand how all of this works but maybe you should try it Max’s way first,” Steph offered. Rachel understood the motivation behind that thought. The other way, trying to find what, if anything, could help her bring rain to fight the fire sounds dangerous. “And you need to calm down, Rachel or it might make things worse.” *How?*

“How?” she asked.

“The wind is you, right? It might be blowing the fire toward fresh kindling. It could make things spread faster.” Steph had taken like a fish to water with the knowledge that Rachel, Chloe and Max were even more abnormal than she already thought. Rachel was grateful for that but couldn't help but feel a little suspicious sometimes, especially when Steph showed decent comprehension of what they could do based off of their sparse descriptions and hurried explanations the day they got back to town. “So try to calm it down.” Rachel was going to try, but she also had to recall the night in some detail. She unbuckled her seatbelt and did her best to turn in her seat. Max was watching the fire ahead but when Rachel opened her mouth she cocked her head toward her like a dog hearing its name.

“I was out following David that day when I saw him leaving town, so I did my best to follow. I still don’t know how or why he didn’t see me. When I drove by the property I couldn’t find david but the RV was there and David’s car was there, so he had pulled off there. I was a little freaked.” This time Rachel faced Max more fully and the girl turned to match her attitude. Max was trying she just seemed a little out of it. “I was scared David would find something he shouldn’t.” Max’s eyes darkened, her lips turned down, and she nodded in understanding. “So I warned Frank. Frank texted me and told me to get David away.” Rachel looked back at Steph. “That’s why I called you and, it actually worked. He left. I waited outside of David and Joyce’s house and followed him when he left again. He went right back out there and by the time I parked a way off and got back to the property, things were bad.”

“Bad how,” Chloe asked her. Max answered for Rachel.

“The thing we didn't want David to find? He never found it but he could have. It was sitting out there, just by the RV. Rachel set it on fire and that’s when everything went to hell, right?” Rachel was watching Steph out of the corner of her eye and was oddly relieved to find no concern about them skirting around whatever the ‘thing’ was they hadn't wanted David to find.
“Right,” Rachel agreed. It was easy, sometimes, to forget that Max had been there and had seen it all in one of the experiences she called 'cycles'. It was kind of weird to think that somewhere out there Rachel went through all of that with Max right beside her. “David freaked out, shot at me. He and Frank got into a struggle and I tried to calm them down, to make them both stop, calm down, relax. Frank was drunk and scared and David was just angry, angry, angry.” Rachel sighed and began the process of shrugging off her jacket, finding that she was starting to warm up a bit. “And honestly so was I. I was so mad. I was so mad at David. Even before he shot at me, I was mad. I wanted him to suffer but I knew I couldn’t let it happen. I was just too angry to think straight.”

“You did everything you could be expected to, in that situation,” Chloe tried to assure her.

“I shouldn’t have been in it to begin with,” Rachel says, turning back to artists in the back seat. “It was wrong. I did this wrong. I handled it wrong. I shouldn’t have kept anything from you guys.”

“I’m glad you know that now,” Chloe said. “I’m glad you both know that now.” Max did not react to this shot in her direction, but then Steph chimed in.

“I’m glad all three of you know that now.” Rachel watched Chloe wilt a little at the comment. They really had all fucked up. But this is about fixing it, right? About getting better. Outside of the window, things continued as normal. The wind was dying down. A car carrying some volunteer firefighters drove past them as the woman behind the wheel ostensibly left for the day.

“There are only so many hours a person can work before they become a danger to themselves and others,” Rachel mused as the car passed.

“Maybe that’s it.” Max said, very quietly. “You’ve been having trouble figuring out why the rains start, right?”

“I still don’t know when or how it happens, but I believe you.”

“I remember it happening a few times you told David off or tried to talk me out of doing something stupid,” Chloe added.

“Exactly, that’s my point,” Max confirmed. As she watched Max came back to herself a bit: care, discovery, pride and relief passed across her face. She thinks she has something. If this was a part
of the Max that her girlfriend truly was, she hoped the photographer grabbed hold of it, and soon.

“What’s your point?” Steph chimed in, confused. The back and forth was going to make Rachel's eyes roll into the back of her head if someone didn't speak up soon, and clearly.

“The heat comes when you’re angry, embarrassed or… yeah, anyway. The wind seems to come when you’re nervous or flat out scared.” Rachel thought that it was about time she got to the bottom of ‘yeah, anyway’ but decided not to push. “What if the rain is a result of feeling protective?” She was dubious, but then, none of this made a lot of sense to her. *I’m not sure when it’s going to start making sense, but it can happen any time, now.*

“I mean, at this point I’ll try anything.”

It took them awhile from there, the four of them sitting in the car watching smoke and fire in the distance. Figuring out how to set it off was difficult. Rachel’s confliction and confusion didn't help. See, she figured, she was at least feeling a *little* protective of the Chloe and Max the night of the fire. That didn’t do anything resembling summoning rain. Max arguing that she was mostly angry throws Rachel off a bit but in the end she was forced to agree that she was focused on the anger, so she could access the fire. *It was a conscious decision, too. I made sure to focus on that.*

After a while, Max reminded her again that she was there, once. She had, Max told them, never seen Rachel at that level of rage. Rachel started one of the hottest fires Max had ever heard of outside of a lightning strike or a laboratory. She had definitely been *angry*.

“Now there are people working their asses off to stop or slow the fire down. No matter what they do, though it doesn’t act right.” Max was speaking quickly, as if trying to hurry Rachel to a conclusion. “Their houses are in danger, their people are in danger. There’s plenty to protect.”

“Yes, I get that. I agree with you,” Rachel agreed, though her guilt was really starting to rise. Max reached across the seat and pressed her lips to Rachel’s cheek.

“It’s going to be okay,” Max promised her, “and do you know why?”

“No.”

“It’s going to be okay, because you're here.”
They sat there for over an hour more and at one point the car as a whole had to vehemently reject Max's inference that she might leave the car and walk toward the fire, herself if it could set Rachel off. In the end, she wasn't sure what it was that did the trick, but she had gotten used to finding the feeling associated with the fire, not just the emotion but the sensation. When it came time for her to finally find the rain, the water, it was a dip into a cool pool on a hot day. The sensation even started in her feet as if she were testing the waters and then rose up around her. At one point, Rachel had been quite concerned she was about to fill her cab with water and was forced to step out of the car.

It was only a few minutes later that the four of them took a moment to stop and stand in a massive, 'unexplained' rainstorm. Max had momentarily been made uncomfortable as a peel of thunder and a strong wind accompanied the rain, but Rachel and Chloe's arms around her had eventually driven it away. Rachel had spent the rest of their time in the rain with Max pressed against her, but by the time they had gotten back to the car, soaking wet, whatever difficulties Max had with the sound of thunder, the gusting wind and the pounding rain had faded under the steady downfall.

They did not immediately drive home; the rain was thick, drops large. They could see nothing much farther a car length ahead of them. Rachel turned on the radio, the heater, her headlights and the emergency blinkers and the four sat in relative comfort, watching a rainstorm like Arcadia Bay had not seen in a couple of years hide the world from their view, cloaking it in a grey veil. Rachel couldn't say for certain whether or not she thought she could do this again at will, as she had been able with the fire, but she knew that like the fire it had consequences.

She emptied Max's stainless steel water bottle-which actually contained water, today- and then sat with her hand out the window, trying desperately to fill it from the rain, however unlikely and time consuming that would be. When they got the occasional sight of the fire line, it mostly just revealed smoke. If I have to be thirsty to do something like this, then I'll get a fucking big gulp from the Pacific Oil station. At one point, Rachel eased her car forward along the road, closer to the fire line to try to get a better view, or perhaps to hope that it forced the storm toward the far edge of the fire.

Either way, she dropped Chloe and Steph off by Steph's car a half an hour later, when the rain had thinned. As for Max, Rachel kept her under the roof of her car for quite some time, sitting parked in the Blackwell lot and listening to the sound of rain on the car roof. She thought, as the brunette leaned against her arm and inevitably fell asleep, that maybe she could let go of her anger and hurt after all.
Wonder if anyone out there will catch the not so subtle Skins U.K. reference.
“Max! Maaaaax! Wakie wakie!” Max rolled over in her bed but shut her eyes the moment they opened. She had left her blinds up the night before and sunlight was spilling in, bright sunlight. *Oh god damn it.* For a moment it was easy to imagine ignoring the voice entirely. There was a pillow beneath her head that if she tried hard enough, she might be able to put over her head and block out the world. The quilt covering her was heavy and seemed to hold her, to whisper soothing promises in her ear that sweet, sweet sleep was waiting for her if she just closed her eyes and sent Rachel away. Somewhere downstairs, someone was playing music with the bass up a little too loudly but that, too, was no match for a pillow over the head. Oh, Rachel was great and all, but it was Saturday and she desperately wanted a little more sleep after this damn week. After a moment of relative quiet during which she could imagine Rachel listening, ear pressed against her door, the blonde began to knock.

“Go away,” Max yelled, once, loud enough she thought it might be audible through the closed door. “Just half an hour!” *You sound like you're begging,* she told herself. *Because I am begging.* The philosophical 'they' said that talking to yourself was only a problem if you answered, but Max was coming to find it a familiar practice. The banging did not cease. Grumping, Max tried again. “Going back to sleep, goodnight Rachel!” Max kept her eyes closed and shifted against her bedding.

“Maaaaaaaaaaax,” Rachel sing-songed through the door. “If you don’t let me in I’ll start thinking I need to come in there, crawl into bed with you and start-”

“Stop, stop!” Max scrambled from the bed. She had no clue what Rachel was going to say next but it was either going to be lewd, embarrassing or both. While not particularly against whatever idea
Rachel was having, she wasn't quite in the mood for it to be screamed to the whole student body. She hissed in frustration as, wrapped up in her quilt, she stumbled trying to get out of the bed and slammed into the floor. For a moment, dazed, she lay on the floor blinking at the carpet. How did that happen again? She acknowledged conflicting ideas: first, that maybe she had been down there the whole time and next that her head hurt.

“Max, are you okay?” the thespian called. I'm tired, she wanted to complain, go away. Instead, with some difficulty, she extricated herself from the quilt and left it lying half on the floor as she stood up. Her cheeks heated up at the realization that she had, in a half-awake state, managed to throw herself to her floor. No one saw that. Max took a second to look down at herself and, while she wasn't in a state where she would want to walk out into the hall looking like this, she was fine opening up for Rachel. Sleepily she wiped brown hair back from her forehead and, rubbing at the spot where her skull had met the ground, opened the door in time to see Rachel preparing to knock again.

“What is it?” Max asked, almost immediately, without the good graces to feel bad about her crabby tone. Rachel was dressed for the day, unlike Max herself. The blonde had clearly just gotten out of a morning shower, as her hair was still wet, but otherwise she looked to Max like someone who had been up for a while: wide eyed, smirking a little derisively at Max's attitude and even wearing her jacket. Meaning she's about to try to drag me outside. Max sighed when, instead of answering, Rachel took one big step forward, bumped against Max's hip with her own and pushed her way into the room. But... but sleep.

“It's almost noon,” Rachel informed her in a tone that sounded rather close to complaint. Oh, well, shit. What's with your head?” the girl asked, before turning away from her and toward her closet door. Max was going to answer when Rachel pulled it open, reached in and began to sift through her shirts. She hadn't even had time to argue and with the revelation that she had slept in longer than she thought, she was going to be embarrassed if she tried. Max yawned over her first attempt to speak. Perhaps suspecting that she was trying to make a point, Rachel turned back toward Max, looked her dead in the eyes and then hurled a shirt at her. Max recognized it as having originally been one of Rachel's meaning it was a little bit on the bulky side for her, but she took it anyway.

“If you toss jeans at me next, I'm tossing something back.”

“Is that a promise?” Rachel asked, cheekily before rummaging about for a pair of jeans. God damn it, Max thought again before stumbling across the room toward her. “Well, you can't exactly go out in boyshorts, can you?”

“Says who?” Max asked, just looking to be contrary as Rachel playfully fought to keep her from having access to her closet. “Look, if you just wanted to see me changing, there were less annoying ways to go about it and I could've slept longer.”
“If you don't meet me outside in five minutes,” Rachel promised, freeing a pair of jeans from Max's hands just to jokingly toss them at her immediately after. “There'll be trouble.”

“What's even happening?” Max asked her, throwing both the shirt and pants onto the bed. She crossed her arms over her chest and waited for Rachel to answer. Her breath started to catch in her chest as the girl approached her, one eyebrow quirking as if she were about to tease Max, or come in for a kiss, or both. On the other hand, she thought, a good morning kiss. She leaned in, arms unfolding and reaching for the blonde. All Max got, though, was a cheeky wink as the girl pulled back at the last second and the sight of Rachel positively swaggering out of the room. It wasn't that Max didn't love the hell out of Rachel, it was just that in the moment she really wished her door opened out so it could hit her on the ass on the way out. As it was, Rachel gave it a quick pull and it swung shut behind her.

Only slightly woken by Rachel's antics, Max dressed and brushed her hair more slowly than she intended. She was just groggy enough that she far surpassed the five minute deadline the blonde had given her. There was no immediate banging on the door or attempt to embarrass Max, so she continued to take her time. About seven minutes after Rachel had left the room, however, she began the whole gimmick once more. It started with a hard and heavy knock at the door and spiraled into Rachel's sing songy voice calling for her to get out there.

“I'm coming, I'm coming,” Max insisted when Rachel began to suggest she was worried she would have to go and get Chloe or someone sooner or later. Is Chloe here? Max thought blearily as she opened the door. There was the familiar click of a camera and a flash almost immediately. Max blinked against the spots in her vision to see Rachel holding her phone up at eye level, now examining a photo of a very surprised Max with a grin on her face. Assuming that that was her punishment for being late, Max closed the door.

“Excellent,” Rachel told her. “I've got a new Facebook photo.” For a moment Max thought about asking her to 'please don't' before deciding she wasn't going to give the blonde the satisfaction. At least I brushed my hair and everything. There was no one in the hall to witness Rachel's antics, either. As the thespian slid away her phone and grabbed Max by her right hand, Max was left to wonder if it wasn't because the majority of people were sleeping in. The sane ones, at least. Another stubborn urge to dig her heels in very literally came and passed before she entertained a less shitty thought.

It felt like forever ago, but Max could recall with surprising detail the sensation of Rachel pulling her down this very same hall last September, the morning of the day after Max moved in. At the same time Rachel had been something of a stranger to her and, frankly, Max had been a stranger to herself. Now I feel like a stranger again, she thought. She could recall feeling so confused and concerned, suspicious that there was some hidden agenda in Rachel’s actions, in how friendly she was being. Technically speaking, she had been right, but not in the way she had suspected. It felt like that was an entirely different world, a different Max and a wildly different Rachel to boot. In
some ways, she guessed that’s was very so. Everyone changed with time, with exposure to ideas and thoughts and feelings. Rachel couldn’t be *that* big of an exception.

Speaking of Rachel, she was doing her best not to give away whatever hidden agenda had forced her to annoy Max into opening her bedroom door and getting dressed. Every attempt Max had to get a word out of her was met with silence. By the time they slipped through the front door of the dorms, she was done trying. At the very least, the urge to resist was gone and she was ready to go along with whatever Rachel was about to get her into. Max quickened her pace, intent on matching Rachel’s stride and then wrapped one arm around Rachel’s waist. When she pulled the blonde close to her side, Rachel's neutral expression split into a grin. *My girl’s definitely up to something today but that’s okay.*

Unlike the lifetime ago that was last year, Max knew now that Rachel would never try to hurt her. Perhaps Chloe was waiting down by in lot and the three of them were going to get a calm afternoon together. Max could go for that. There was not much time left before they would have to start thinking about things that were not pleasant, were not calm, again. In just over three and a half months, Jefferson was scheduled to stroll into Arcadia Bay. *I think it’s time I start giving them a crash course in Mark Jefferson.*

Any further thoughts about Mark Jefferson and the potentially dark times ahead evaporated from her head as Rachel turned them around the corner to the front of the main building instead of leading them toward the parking lot. Their favored picnic table was full and someone had moved one of the others right up next to it, which was surprising as frankly, Max had always thought that they were bolted down. *Can’t say as I’ve ever tried to move them before, though.* Arrayed around these combined tables, right now, were Kate, Brooke and Stella. This meant that it was neither related to their typical study group or their tabletop game as there were members of both present. She glanced sideways toward Rachel. *God, please don’t let this be some sort of intervention.*

The attempt at humor was mostly dry, as she had been for the last few days. Her girls had more or less put enough pressure that Max turned over her bottle of cheap ass vodka. She suspected it was hidden in Chloe’s room at the moment, but hadn’t bothered to care enough to even ask. Looking away from Rachel's grin to a table of people so distracted they had not yet noticed her yielded no answers, but at least there seemed to be little chance that this had anything to do with alcoholic beverages. *I kind of wish it had to do with drinking ‘alcoholic beverages’, though.*

“Morning, sleepy,” came a voice from behind her, practically at the top of its owner's lungs. The people arrayed around the extended picnic table definitely noticed her, causing Max to flush a bit at the sudden rush of attention as she turned back. Rachel was forced to pull to a stop beside her as Max first glanced back and then released the thespian to turn around completely. Her mouth hung open for a moment. Chloe was approaching holding what looked to be a plastic container for a cake, which more or less filled in the blanks on what was happening as far as Max was concerned. They had had a night of cuddling and television and all to belatedly mark her birthday the night before, but this seemed to be a “real” birthday celebration in the making.
While cake was certainly an appealing thought, what Steph was hauling along with her was somewhat more exciting to see. It wasn't the plastic bag hanging loosely from Steph's wrist that Max meant, either. Trekking along behind Steph as if he was somehow unfamiliar with the grounds of Blackwell Academy despite being a past student, himself, was Mikey. Some people continued to grow fairly late and it looked like Mikey was going to be one of those as at fourteen he had not broadened anymore at the shoulder but had finally surpassed Chloe in height by the looks of things, if only just. Beyond that, he still walked with the gait of the slightly nerdy boy she had made friends with a year prior. The nerdy boy who knows part of my secret, Max thought, remembering the encoded text Chloe had asked him to help her decode. That one was my fuck up, though.

Chloe pretended to look affronted when Max dipped around her and greeted Mikey first with one tight hug. For Mikey's part, he played it fairly cool if one discounted the surprised 'oof'. She felt one of his long arms tighten briefly across her shoulders and pulled back. Perhaps, she thought as she pulled back from the boy, herself, it was seeing Mikey again that she had needed to push her over the edge but as much as this impromptu birthday party struck part of Max immediately as being too much, she found herself too happy to fight it. There was about to be cake and almost all of her friends in Arcadia Bay were waiting for her. The boy laughed and said something that Max missed over Chloe complaining that she never got spontaneous hugs. A lie, a damnable lie. Oddly enough, the hug was enough to trigger a thought she had not had in some time, of a quick shared hug not with Mikey but with a friend of hers from back in Seattle. Okay, tonight you're texting Fernando and Kristen.

It was time, Max decided, to learn from her mistakes when it came to Chloe. I'll look them up online first, see if everything's okay. Next time I'm in town I'll try to hang with them. For today, though, it's okay to just be happy and eat cake with your friends, right?

Right?

One day, Max told herself, she would understand that and embrace it as a natural part of life. It was the kind of thing you were supposed to do when you turned sixteen and while her actual birthday had passed sitting out behind Steph's house with her girls, Steph and Pompidou, it hadn't been precisely the same as a party. Besides, we had to watch what we said around George. The guy was nosy as all hell. Together, Max and Mikey moved to join the rest of the group forming up around the table.

“I'm really glad you came,” she told him in an undertone. I feel like I should probably talk to him about our 'DC-tier superpowers' as he calls them. “If there's time later, can we talk about the uh, document Chloe sent you?” Apparently understanding her conspiratory tone as they neared the rest of her friends Mikey answered in the same near whisper.
“You better believe it. I've got questions. Lots. Chloe talked about some things in the car, but I want to hear all about you going all 'WaveRider' from you.”

“Who is that?” she asked, unable to suppress a laugh. She was forced to roll her eyes at his response, but as always Mikey took it all in stride, recognizing it for the good fun it was.

“A DC time traveler,” he replied. Of course it is. She stepped behind Mikey and reached up to push him onward toward the table. Their conversation could be continued later, when it was quieter and there were not people waiting on the two of them to sit down. To Mikey's credit, he only put up a perfunctory struggle before he gave up, sighed dramatically and allowed himself to be guided to the table. To that end, Max was able to step up beside him just in time to see the boy's eyes land on Kate and face light up. Oh yeah, they've basically been long distance friends for the last few years. This time, Max pushed him toward Kate and he complained a little but eventually sat down, a wide smile on his face. It was rather goofy looking. Max thought she liked the look on him. Better than being upset. There would be time to catch up with him later.

The two shared a greeting and Max turned to give a quick hello to the table at large, trying to remember her manners. That being said, she settled herself happily between beside Chloe, looking past her and Rachel both to Steph. The other brunette shot a speculative look over the table toward Mikey, then Kate and raised an eyebrow. As much as she might normally be down for playing matchmaker, Max shrugged noncommittally. On one end of the table beside Brooke, Stella seemed to be gesturing toward the football field.

“Everyone’s going to the game tomorrow but I don’t think I’m going to feel like being around that many people. Especially whoever comes with the visiting team.” The conversation seemed to be between her and Steph but open to the table at large, so Max jumped in, resisting the urge to look toward the big plastic container sitting just in front of Chloe.

“I totally get it,” Max said, scooting on the bench until she was comfortable where she sat, pressed almost right up against Chloe. The bluenette's response was to stick out her tongue and shift the cake slightly farther toward Rachel. Max decided to retaliate by laying her head against Chloe's shoulder. If they were going to drag her from bed on a Saturday, she was going to use one of them as a pillow, damn it.

“Hi Max,” Stella greeted all at once.

“Hi,” she responded before sitting up straight again and looking about the table. “Um, I’m glad to see everyone. Thanks for coming.” The truth was she wasn’t sure what social protocol dictated for this situation, but a direct 'hello' only felt polite. It did, notably, earn her rolling eyes from at least three people at the table.
“Hey, Stella,” Rachel said, cutting across what might have grown into an awkward silence. “Max and Chloe are dragging me hiking at this park nearby tomorrow. If you wanna come with us, I think we’d all enjoy it.” Max had almost forgotten about their agreement to go hiking. Suddenly feeling tired all over again despite just waking up, Max contemplated what if any retribution there would be if she turned off her phone and slept through the hike.

“I’ll think about it, thanks,” Stella replied. That seemed to be good enough for Rachel but Max couldn't help but watch the girl's face. It wasn't shyness the brought out the reply or caused the brunette's voice to trail off, her eyes to shift away from Rachel. It was, judging by the look on her face, discontent, uncertainty. Mad had to admit that she hated that Stella lived like that.

Before she could think of anything to say to Stella, Steph or Brooke (Mikey and Kate were absorbed in catching up, still, which was fine by Max) Steph spoke up.

“Alright, everyone. Figure out how to weigh down a paper plate.” The bag Steph had been carrying earlier opened and a box of plastic forks and package of paper plates were pulled from the opening. Cake, Max remembered, grinning despite herself. Simultaneously embarrassed by the whole situation and eager to break the rules and have birthday cake for breakfast, Max reached out and took the plate Chloe passed to her as soon as it was in reach. Her method of keeping the wind from picking the thin plate up and blowing it away was to rest her elbow on the edge of it.

Watching as the rest of the table awkwardly tried to weigh theirs down Max couldn't help it, she started laughing. She wasn't sure about the last time she laughed seriously and it wasn’t tainted by sadness, or by being tired or even bitter. She was just happy watching Brooke fumble to weight her plate down with her phone while reaching for a fork, or Mikey almost immediately losing his and overreacting by choosing to hold it down with both hands.

The lid of the cake container opened and the impression Max got from openly standing and stealing a look was white frosting with pale blue lettering spelling out her name and the number sixteen. There were no candles. That was alright. If Max was honest to herself, she had already gotten a wish that was honestly beyond her wildest dreams when Chloe and Rachel had not decided they were done with her in LA. That didn't stop Max from wishing for a piece of cake, though. Rachel was just pulling the first piece from the box (and passing it to Max when Max's first instinct was to gesture for her to hand one out to someone else first) when a loud, masculine voice sounded from a few feet away.

Hayden was dressed a little more casually than usual, wearing an old tee. One look at his face suggested that he was high off his ass and though she could not tell what it was the boy had taken, his face was lit with a large smile as he approached. After making Chloe insistently place the first piece of cake down in front of Max, Rachel raised a hand and called him over. Hayden didn't need
to be told twice and by the time Steph had dug out an extra plate and fork for him the boy was dropping into a seat beside Mikey.

“I thought you were going to be off campus.”

“Plans changed but I totally forgive you all for trying to cut me out of the cake.” Max laughed.

“Hey, Hayden.”

“Maximillion, happy birthday,” the boy lifted his hand. She was not sure anyone had ever called her that before but what she was sure about was that if she did not high five him he was going to give her crap until she did. A resounding smack sounded from the point of contact and then Hayden turned to Mikey. “Mikey North, what's going on?” Gratified at his arrival, she glanced sideways at Rachel.

“I invited him and Dana too, but they both told me they’d be off campus.”

“Well, surprise, I made it,” Hayden shot back.

“Thank you,” Max told the boy. “Oh, have you got the photo chosen for your next photo essay?”

“Yep,” he replied immediately, “And are you going to join us for the next Vortex Club shindig? You, Rachel and Chloe are welcome any time.” Victoria, Nathan and their cronies would have something to say about that. Even if Taylor is polite to me when Victoria's not around. Taylor pissed her off sometimes and today she did not feel guilty admitting that, as long as it was not out loud. Her only response to Hayden was an ambiguous noise. The boy chuckled in response as if he expected it and, irises almost as large as his plate, he took his first bite of the rich chocolate cake rather than give Max any shit for it.

Max decided to do the same. Sweet, sweet heaven, she thought as the cake hit her taste buds. Perhaps playing it up a bit she melted against Chloe's side. She wasn't sure who she had to thank for organizing this, much less bringing the cake, but whoever it was was her fucking hero.

For a while, Max sat with Rachel and Chloe and almost all of her friends. The sun was high in the air, the day exceptionally for September, if a little humid. Brooke and Steph pulled Stella into a conversation about tabletop gaming. Mikey and Kate talked about experiences when they were at
school together while younger, despite an age gap or how their families would hold barbecues together. Chloe, Rachel and Hayden were mostly talking about happenings around the school that Max sometimes didn't hold much of an interest in, but at any point she might be called into one of the discussions.

Max turned to Rachel at one point as things quieted down a little. The girl looked to be having fun. Perhaps noticing her looking, Chloe spoke up from beside her.

“Have you had any luck, you know, thinking about the things that you learned in LA?” Chloe asked in an undertone.

“Not really, but I mean, it involves changing how I think about the last two years almost. That's kind of intense.” It was certainly more than she was going to do in under two weeks and Chloe seemed to understand this, by the way she patted the back of Max's hand and told her to try to take it easy.

“When things get rough, come to one or both of us,” she told Max. “If you can't, talk to Steph. No more facing it alone, okay?” Max was going to verbally agree before, on Chloe's other side, Rachel clapped her hands once, loudly. Both she and Chloe turned to look at her. Max wasn't sure what she expected, what else Rachel could be about to say or do that might add even more reason for her face to turn red, but she definitely hadn't had what Rachel said next on her list of possibilities.

“Alright,” Rachel declared, reaching down to take hold of a bag at her feet that Max could not especially remember Rachel carrying out of the dorms with her. “Present time.” Immediately and incredibly uncomfortable, Max opened her mouth to say that it was okay, that they shouldn't, but it felt stupid and childish as soon as she thought it. Chloe understood. Max knew she understood by the slight nod of her head as their eyes met or the way the girl's left hand worked into Max's right, fingers interlacing. These were her friends and one of the things she wanted to do was be as normal as possible.

This was part of being normal, right?
Chapter Forty: Mob Against the Tarquins

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Disclaimer: Anything familiar to you, I don't own. This is a work of fanfiction for personal amusement, fulfillment and a bit of self-therapy. I make nothing from any of it.

Chapter Forty: Mob Against the Tarquins

October 7th, 2011 5:22 PM

Chloe reached over and turned off the news. She was almost certain she could feel her blood pressure rising. The new Occupy Portland movement might have had a tense second day, but what she had just seen on the large television in front of her coming out of New York was disgusting. If they've got to arrest people, can't they do it without trapping them in and pepper spraying them? Fucking kettling pricks. Both because it was getting close to time and because it took the poor taste from her mouth, Chloe abandoned the living room and joined the rest of the party in the kitchen.

Chloe noted as she drained the glass in front of her of water that Brooke was the only one of them that did not have a bottle of beer. She was not missing much, as it was particularly cheap and no one seemed intent on burning anything that night. Well, not the only one, she thought, looking from the end of the table over the party as a whole. She was forgoing the beer for now, too. Max, on the other hand was having her first drink in a while but Chloe was conflicted on this as this had not been a particularly ideal couple of days. Inside her head, Chloe lost the thread of the conversation going on between Max and Brooke.

Max had been less than cheery that morning at breakfast, admitting to a nightmare. It had taken Chloe and Rachel some time to get the nightmare out of her, mostly due to the nature of it and the people they were around. Once alone for a few minutes, Max had confessed through eyes a little too puffy that today was a sort of 'pre-anniversary' of the first time another Chloe Price had died in another timeline. Max's nightmare, she had said, was about a large fire and the sound of a fire alarm. It didn't seem immediately connected, she had told them, but it had scared the hell out of her and it was a miracle she had eaten that morning.

The three of them had talked and agreed to go on with the session that night but Chloe couldn't help but watch Max with some discomfort. The girl hadn't had a drop of anything harder than soda
since before Los Angeles. Look, I'm not one to rain on someone's parade but she used to drink a lot more than anyone else I knew. Definitely more than was smart. Chloe shifted her gaze toward the hall. Max and Brooke were around in the kitchen, but Steph, Pompidou and Rachel were nowhere to be seen. Alright, head in the game, miss Dungeon Master.

The notes in front of her were not sparsely written but on the back of the sheet she had a bullet point summary of the immediate situation the player characters were about to be in. First, they were on the verge of being ambushed by Boggards outside of (technically) a Mogogol village. That, Chloe had thought when planning, should be confusing enough unless someone was bright enough to insight check in a timely manner. The Mogogol village head was reclusive and would see no one, not even his own subjects, which was entirely unlike a Mogogol. The village, her notes said, were waiting for arbitrators from a nearby human city. She wondered if the party would impersonate them or simply try to do their job before they could arrive.

When Chloe looked up again the two girls in front of her were quiet. Over the last couple of weeks Brooke had become a closer friend to the group as a whole but as much as Chloe had engaged with her character as a Dungeon Master, she and Brooke hadn't bonded as much as say, Max and Brooke or Steph and Brooke. She supposed that was only natural, that some types of people were better friends than others, but Chloe certainly shared no small number of interests with Brooke. She was going to need to reach out a little bit more.

“So, everything check out with your parents?” Chloe asked Max to fill the lull in the conversation. Much like the night of Max's birthday celebration last year, Max and Rachel had decided to call their families that night and attempt to worm their way into a 'free night' that evening. What this meant was a night where Rose and one of the Caulfields called the school and made it seem as if their daughters were off with members of the family for the evening. As for what else it meant, Chloe intended to spend the evening curled up with her girls on the couch. I could definitely go for that right now.

“Yep, they told Wells that my cousin picked me up to go to a family gathering in the morning.” The girl grinned at this. This was her cashing in her “birthday gift” from her parents. Not that she's not going to get something in the mail in the next couple of days, or anything. The Caulfields just felt extra bad about not being able to give Max a birthday party (or, as she said had become the case, a birthday dinner) given Max's apparent emotional state. Chloe had done her best to try to set their minds at ease about that part, though. What Max was unaware of was that Ryan Caulfield already had a photo of Max, smiling widely as she sat cuddled up beneath Rachel's arm. It was clear that the nature of their relationship was not a mystery to the Caulfields, either, as Ryan had responded first with a photo of himself giving a thumbs up with his wife in the background and then, 'Next time send one with the three of you so we have something to frame up.' She wasn't sure how Max would respond to her doing that, but the smile on the girl's face in that moment had simply been too much of a relief.

Steph and Rachel made a sudden return from the upper floor of the house, with Pompidou in tow, their steps muffled momentarily by the carpet in the hall. It had been a while since they bothered to
get beer on game night and before then, Steph had always been the DM so it was a bit odd to see her set a bottle down beside her dice bag as the two girls 'argued' about something in the player's handbook. *You know, I've never actually seen Steph's fake ID. She's never actually said she had one. How does she get her shit?*

As soon as the other two settled in Chloe spotted the change at the table almost immediately. Oh, two or three different conversations bounced around, but occasionally a set of eyes would shoot toward Chloe, despite her making a show of looking at her notes. The truth was that she was more than ready for the session. Her reviewing her notes mostly amounted to looking down so she could think in some peace. Eventually, conversation died down a bit more and that was her cue to tilt her DM screen up and start uncovering her notes behind it. She wanted to grin at the way four sets of eyes moved toward the screen at once. *Okay, so maybe I haven't fucked this DM thing up.*

Chloe joined the others in freeing dice from the confines of her small, stylized dice bag. Rachel and Steph each had a couple of extra sets so that by the time everything was put together they could usually manage any given roll in one go instead of having to balance numbers and reroll certain dice over and over again. Chloe's own set, at least for the purposes of this game, remained behind her screen and in her hands. Throughout most of her life she had decried silly superstitions like throwing salt over one's shoulder when they spilled some, or crossing paths with a black cat, but when it came to her dice she did not like the idea of them falling in the hands of someone who was rolling badly. *There was* bad energy in the world and it was reserved for the dice of players who had been too lucky or too cocky. She wasn't intent on having it passed onto her dice.

Those landed in a small, compact pile as they escaped their cloth prison and she rubbed her her hands together to give the impression of someone well prepared for what was coming. Rachel made some comment under her breath to Max about Chloe being 'cute when she showed off.' Chloe watched the girl's amusement turn into a challenging glare. *What a nerd. She takes this seriously.* If anyone was adorable in that moment, it was probably Rachel, genuine emotion in her eyes. Their back and forth before sessions was all in jest but it was proving to be one of the joys of dungeon mastering, something which had proved both less stressful and more tedious than Chloe had anticipated. Oh, she had gone into the game thinking she had everything down pat but it had only taken two sessions for her to realize that she was in over her head. Making rulings on rules that were unclear in the moment was one of the biggest joys of being a dungeon master. It was still early days for this campaign, but Chloe hoped as she prepared to call them 'to order' that she had begun to get a handle on things.

“Alright,” Chloe declared, as if to quiet down the table which had been silent for almost a full minute by that point. “I think it’s time to kick off.”

“You mean ‘kick things off’?” Max asked. “I'd rather you not die before the session starts.”

“I knew you just loved me for my brain,” Chloe replied, sounding affronted. “As if I don't have a
“Well, you're very cute,” Rachel added, as if to emphasize the absence of the 'winning personality.' Chloe took it all in stride. 'Taking it in stride' here might mean giving Rachel a bit of a scare later, one way or the other, or grinning a little bit at an inopportune dice roll just to make her paranoid, but she still took it in stride. She gave the bullet-pointed list in front of her a quick glance and then turned the sheet over for a closer look at more detailed notes.

“Last time,” Chloe started, “you were given a job by the guard of the town of Niheim to determine why there was such a high number of travelers reporting that they were being robbed along a road into town. While you had some difficulty getting in touch with any of the travelers who made a report, you did find a couple sitting at the roadside cooking their nice rat dinners and lamenting that someone had stolen not just the goods they were taking into town but their horses and cart in the middle of the night.”

“Right,” Brooke said, “poor people.”

“Quite,” Chloe agreed. It was gratifying to watch the smallest and least important NPCs in the world garner any kind of reaction. Both players and their characters had had a certain sense of urgency in their quest after that scene. “You tracked some footsteps that none of you could identify to a cavern and decided to take a nice long rest outside of the mouth of the cave. Happily, your gear was not missing when you woke up but those strange footsteps were all around your campfire when Isp went to check your game traps, which unfortunately were unsuccessful in netting you anything for breakfast other than your rations. After packing up camp, Isp decided to go in five minutes ahead of you to scout with the agreement he would wait if he discovered anything, right?”

“Yep,” Rachel confirmed.

“Nalla decided to go with him,” Chloe gestured to Brooke as the four gathered around the table began to watch her, listening close, ready for their cue that the game had started in earnest. “We’ll see how that will work out, considering Nalla hasn't been super sneaky so far.” This earned a frown and a shrug from the brunette.

“Too late to change my mind,” Brooke told her.

“True that,” Chloe answered, making finger guns at her. This earned a rolled eye that she appreciated. The somewhat bookish girl had become more than tolerant of Chloe's attitude over their time gaming together but Chloe knew she still came off as ‘ridiculous’ from time to time. She lowered her tone again, until she was speaking in her 'DM voice' and finished the recap. “As we
ended last session the two of you came to the edge of this fairly expansive underground pond and spotted lights and shapes in the water. The cavern around you, voluminous, ceiling crowded with stalactites but floor oddly clear of them, is lit in a blue-green hue from the water filtering out whatever the source of those lights are below.”

“I think my insight roll told me that there were small buildings of some sort down there,” Brooke chimed in. Chloe nodded.

“There's definitely something,” she said, “some kinds of structures. You'd have to go diving to see what they are but all you know for sure is that the tallest you see is well beneath the surface and might even go all the way down to the bottom of the lake. And I think,” Chloe said, switching tone a bit, “that is when you heard the voices shouting at you in garbled common.”

“Oh right,” Max chimed in. “I totally forgot about that. Damn, I wish we'd all gone together, now.”

“I did not forget about that,” Chloe promised. “And that is where we'll start off.” Rachel opened her mouth to say something and, predicting it, Chloe cut across her. “Your passive perception is good but their stealth rolls were better.” The blonde took one look at her, squinted as if to say 'I'm watching you' and then picked up and began to roll her D20 across her palm. “You're surrounded by four very obviously amphibian humanoids and now the footprints you've been seeing make sense. They're made by creatures with four long toes and webbed skin stretched across them.”

“Mogogols,” Rachel said, looking delighted. “But I don't think they can breathe underwater so, that doesn't explain the things in the pond.” Chloe did not respond, she simply watched Rachel impassively for a second while internally hoping that the idea that they were being surrounded by Mogogols caught on. Yes, harmless, friendly Mogogol. No need to be concerned. What Rachel didn't know was that the structures beneath the water were basically capped tunnels leading to a Mogogol village in a lower, damp but certainly not subaquatic cavern. Unfortunately, this path as well as the road they had been sent to investigate was frequently hunted by the Mogogol's less scrupulous older cousins, the Boggards.

If they figured it out before combat began, Chloe was going to be surprised. Neither of the characters had a particular reason to know the difference and Chloe had convinced Rachel not to peruse the monster manual during the length of this campaign, so ostensibly the only player who was likely to know what was really happening here was Steph. The brunette in question sat beside Max, twirling a pencil in her hand with a blank sheet of paper in front of her. Chloe was a little relieved to see her preparing to fall into 'roll and sketch' mode rather than staring ominously and knowingly at her. The combat was likely to remain a surprise. Still, these things are nothing for this party.

Chloe lost track of time as the game unfolded. It was easy to do if she wasn't careful but usually
one of the players caught on shortly before they would usually break and gave her a warning. This
time, everyone seemed intent on the story which began to unfold after the Boggard ambush.
Several jokes about frog legs for dinner and three offended Mogogol—not to mention, a failed
charisma roll to make up for this--later, and the party was on the verge of being invited down to the
village. Let's see what they do here.

“The tallest of these Mogogol looks at you, Nalla and says in this raspy, croaking common, 'Are
you the arbitrators sent from Fore Well? The ones sent to help us?’”

“Um,” Brooke started, and then shifted to her character's voice, having caught on fast to that
particular part of roleplaying. “No. Are you trying to make a deal with them? ’She gestures to the
three dead and one unconscious Boggard.”

“The Mogogol in front of you-you still can't place their sex or gender-shakes their head and says,
'No, with our Brog, our leader. He behaves unusually, does not speak to the people.' At this point,
they gesture to another of the Mogogol who came up during your fight and says, 'Mother
Mogogol-Who-Croaks-In-Her-Sleep was the apprentice-’” Chloe was cut off by a short peel of
laughter that passed from person to person. She waited with a smirk as things got quiet and
continued, ‘’ was the apprentice, until the master Lore Keeper went to reason with the Brog. He
entered the Brog's chambers without permission and has not come out since. It has been two days.
We had rather hoped you were the arbitrators.’”

“I wanna roll insight on something,” Steph announced. At Chloe's nod she rolled. “After my INT
modifier that's a sixteen.”

“What did you want to know?” Chloe asked, aware she probably should have questioned the girl
before.

“Were they watching this whole time hoping we were the arbitrators? Because if so that sounds
like they're kind of desperate.”

“Well,” Chloe said, pondering how the character might come to the answer. “They're looking a
little waterlogged and awful disappointed. So yeah, it might be fair for Mara to assume that they
altogether interfered with the robbery because they thought you were their arbitrators.”

“Wonder if they would have just let it happen if they'd known we weren't?” Max pondered. Max
had been fairly quiet all night so far, but given what she had revealed to Chloe and Rachel that
morning it was not surprising. Then again, her Tiefling fighter was mostly built to punch things and
maybe she thought it was better to let the bard do the talking.
“Could be,” Chloe answered. “But like Nalla said, Mogogol are usually friendly in most stories people tell about them. Often super helpful. In fact, the Lore Keeper—”

“What was her name again, Chloe?” Steph asked, as if to see if Chloe could read it with a straight face again.

“Mother Mogogol-Who-Doesn't-Piss-Off-The-DM,” Chloe responded, earning a small smirk from the artist who had already begun to sketch the scene in progress. Chloe personally found such habits exhausting and would never have been able to played at the same time as she drew but it apparently helped Steph relax. “Anyway, she says, ‘It isn't unheard of for Brogs to take two or three days in isolation during times of peace. Heavy lies the head that wears the Green Corona, and all of that. We are not at peace, constantly being harried by Broggard border raids and the Brog has not left his cavern in a week. It is most unusual.’ And while you all mull over that, we're gonna have to have a break because I need a cigarette.”

For a moment there looked like there might be some disagreement on the break issue, which was particularly gratifying, but in the end, stretching and groaning the party broke. *I could pop a beer,* Chloe thought as she covered her notes and such with her GM screen. It was mostly a symbolic gesture: she did not think anyone would peek. *I could raid what's left of my stash and have a toke?* Turning the idea over in her head, Chloe decided to join the others in stretching.

“Snack time,” Max declared. *That means she's done with the beer, so that's a plus.* Judging by how quiet she had been, the night had not gone as well for Max as they had wanted, so it was probably better she grabbed something to eat.

“I think I'll have a drink after all,” Brooke told them, as if asking permission. Steph's response was to gesture grandiosly with one arm toward the refrigerator. On the other side of the kitchen Max was pouring a bowl of pretzels. Reaching for the cigarettes in her pocket, Chloe waved at Rachel to get her attention and then told her she was going out back. No sooner had the word 'out' escaped her mouth than Pompidou stuck his head out from beneath the table, rose to his feet and tore from the kitchen to the back door.

*Poor guy,* she thought as he crossed the room, nails clack-clacking against the floor. *Probably needs to pee.* Cool air rushed into the room when Chloe opened the door. Behind her Rachel and Brooke were talking when they both suddenly went quiet, apparently having realized the same thing Chloe just had: it was *hot as hell* in the kitchen. Pompidou passed through the back door and out to the yard where he rushed for a far corner of the lawn. Enjoying the quick brush of the breeze against her face, lit a cigarette and stepped out, leaving the door wide open. If anyone was cold they could shut it behind her.
Stretching, she looked up into the night sky, watching a thin trail of smoke lit by the light spilling from the kitchen as it reached toward the stars. Pompidou did his business on the other side of the yard, giving Chloe a few seconds of peace to enjoy the brief feeling of relief as she popped her neck and rolled her shoulders. Her companion in the back yard eventually made a return to her side and lifted his head up to look expectantly at her. Though she would much rather continue to stretch her legs, she had some difficulty saying no to Pompidou when he looked expectantly at her. She knelt down.

Immediately, he dropped onto his side, front right paw raised in the air to give her better access to his chest and stomach. Hunkering down, she gave the dog a quick tap on the end of his nose. He responded by sticking his tongue out and panting, whereas usually he took it as a sign she wanted to play. Chloe obliged the dog and was rubbing his belly with her free hand when Steph stepped out back.

Steph, Chloe knew, was just a little buzzed. It was easy to recognize the state in Steph because of how she became somewhat less reserved when buzzed. If you'd told me when I started hanging out with Steph that she was holding back, I'd have called you a liar. Chloe couldn't help but be a little bit relieved that when she looked up from Pompidou and took a quick draw from her cigarette, Steph was not holding a beer. Keeping the party sober sounded ideal, especially since there was a chance there might be a political and conversational bent to the remainder of the session.

“Hey, Dungeon Master,” Steph greeted.

“How ya doing?” Chloe asked. Having abandoned her post as official belly rubber, Chloe was treated to a pathetic look on the dog’s face as he rolled onto his stomach and watched the two of them. “Having fun?” Chloe offered her cigarette to Steph, who shook her head. She often forgot that while Steph would partake in a bit of grass she wasn't a fan of tobacco.

“Absolutely. It's going really well.” Chloe took this to be praise as well as an answer to her honest question. She hadn't been fishing for that, but it was nice to know that Steph didn't think she was fucking up. “You gave Nalla and Isp chances to roll things they really needed. I think everyone's having fun. Even Max.” Steph didn't know the specifics of what had Max upset but she wasn't stupid. “Honestly, you're doing fine.” When the girl tossed an arm around Chloe's shoulders and made as if to deliver a noogie, Chloe nudged her off, grinning. She definitely usually holds back.

“Thanks, Steph.” For some time, Chloe had been worried that Steph—what was the phrase—held a candle for her. That had been particularly stressful for a few reasons. First, she was still paranoid that she was taking advantage of Steph by staying at the house. There wasn't much either of them could do to quiet that voice in the back of Chloe's head but she tried not to bother Steph about it often. The fear, unfortunately, made its presence known on the regular. The second and perhaps most pressing concern Chloe had dealt with when the possibility of Steph quietly having feelings for her occurred to her was that, quite frankly, it would not have been reciprocated. Chloe wasn't
stupid: she knew she and Steph could have been compatible. There were just not feelings there. Thankfully, she must have misinterpreted something, as things had been great between them of late.

“So, you gonna come in and have some pretzels or something before we pick back up?” Chloe pondered this for a second as she pulled on the rapidly dwindling cigarette. She called for Pompidou and gestured toward the open door, but he responded by rolling around in the grass at their feet. That seems like a no, Chloe thought as she followed Steph to the door. She left him to enjoy himself before coming in for the night.

Pompidou had turned out to be better behaved than even Chloe had expected. He had a tendency to bark when anyone came to the door, which had turned away more than one neighbor looking to hire Chloe to look at their car, weed-whacker or lawnmower. Chloe did her best in these situations to explain he was harmless to anyone who did not mean them harm but some people understood and others didn’t. She couldn’t be assed about the second group. Besides, business on that front was not drying up as quickly as she expected it would: people in this neighborhood seemed to love the idea of hiring the punk who lived down the street rather than be overcharged at the local auto shop. For smaller jobs like someone who could not figure out how to restring their weed eater, Chloe would occasionally not ask for any compensation at all, simply that they hire her if anything else should arise.

“Alright.” After returning from the restroom and securing a beer, herself, Chloe popped the top and settled into her seat. Steph had gone back to her sketching while engaged in a conversation with Brooke. By the sound of things it was about the Occupy Wall Street protests which were still spreading across the country like a wildfire. Their conversation immediately brought to mind the news report earlier in the night and Chloe had to try hard not to let it ruin her mood. Occupy Portland, being so new, had not quite seen as many arrests or as much unrest as New York City had, but was still all over the news. Police were not handling themselves very well in New York, Chloe thought. She just hoped the Portland PD kept its cool. Chloe had her own opinion on the protests and going into it was likely to make the twenty minute break that was coming to an end turn into an hour long one and possibly even enough to make her give genuine thought to looking up where she could park in Portland. Think about that tomorrow. Tonight, tabletop.

“Are you all good to go?” Chloe asked. It took her a moment to shake the question of how much money it might cost to get some blankets and socks to the camp in Lownsdale or Chapman Squares. No one immediately said no to her proposal to continue the game so Chloe lifted her DM screen, popped her knuckles and then made as if to continue before reaching for the pretzels in the middle of the table at the last second. “Good,” Chloe declared before biting down. “Because I need a second.” When she was done, Max leapt right into things.

“I want to try to figure out what the Boggards are doing patrolling the upper cavern when the Mogogol wealth is downstairs,” she told Chloe.
“That's an insight check.” On the outside Chloe responded impassively, but inwardly she was scrambling to decide precisely what she could say. Oh, I've got it. “Go ahead and roll.” The familiar and comforting sound of a die hitting the table came to her ears. I love these people, Chloe thought as she surveyed the table as a whole. The back door was still letting in some cool evening air and Rachel seemed to be enjoying it, judging by the way she closed her eyes and leaned back in her chair, smiling. Or she's tired, I don't know.

“Seventeen,” Max declared after double checking her character sheet. Must have rolled high. Her INT is her dumpstat. Chloe made a show of 'hmming' and rubbing her chin before she answered. It was just one of those showmanship things.

“Well, the ones you faced earlier were clearly dressing and acting like thieves, so best case scenario they just want to rob any Mogogols who stray too far from fishing the lake or anyone coming to visit them.”

“What about worst case scenario?” Max asked.

“Well, Boggards are carnivores and the Mogogol are meat, so there’s that.” Brooke inhaled sharply, as if to indicate some sympathy for the kinder, more generally lawfully good aligned of the two groups of frogmen.

“But hey,” Chloe continued, brightening her tone. “Great news. So are you four. You could always sacrifice yourself to the Boggards to buy the Mogogol some time.”

“Unlikely,” Max responded and Chloe grinned at her.

“That’s the spirit,” Chloe told them when Steph and Brooke nodded their agreement. “Damn the innocents suffering, you’re a band of traveling murderhobos. Now, Mother Mogogol-Who-Croaks-In-Her-Sleep is waiting on you. So let's find out what you do next.”

Though part of Chloe's mind was discontent with thoughts of what was happening in Portland and New York, as well as several other cities, her life was here in front of her. She decided to ask herself questions about her interests in what was happening elsewhere later, and focus on the game. It was a luxury a lot of people did not have and she thought it would be shitty to let it go to waste.

Chapter End Notes
Time for some real talk, I guess...

In its first form, this chapter was jokingly titled, "the one where I turn readers off by getting political" when I sent it to a friend for a once-over. I wrote this chapter about two or three weeks ago because it fit with the character, Chloe's personalities, her life experiences AS WELL as this is historically when the Occupy Movement began in Portland. When I wrote it I had no idea that I would be posting this chapter up right now, when a group of Occupy Portland folks would be active again in protest.

So I know this is likely to bring me some heat and I AM political, I am vocal about my beliefs. So, while I won't try to turn this into a forum for debate, neither will I accept any attacks about this.

This was coincidence, pure and simple. If people thought Chloe was the type to be apolitical, they didn't pay attention to LiS. She doesn't sit quietly with injustice shoved in her face. Right now she's processing.
October 15th, 2011 6:12 PM

As far as Rachel was concerned this was going to be a night they deserved. Whether it was the stress which was slowly starting to build in Chloe and Rachel as they neared closer and closer to the day of the play, the air of tension in the school in the wake of a more politicized discourse between the students (something which Chloe was participating in with little regret) or Max's discomfort at the approach of winter and thus, winter break, things had not been exactly rosey over the last few days. Rachel, who was beginning to feel like the pressure was just a little more than she could handle (especially with her mind on other things) had finally taken Hayden up on his offer of attending a Vortex Club party.

While Chloe had been dubious enough about coming for the first couple of days after Rachel proposed it, it was Max who had been the real obstacle. Rachel had promised Hayden that without both of them by her side she wouldn't be attending the Halloween party, whose theme this year was 'A Digital Hell.' Max had immediately been made uncomfortable by Rachel's suggestion that they come and it had taken her some time to get a confession out of Max as to why. Max had explained that she still had knowledge of the events of another timeline and in that timeline, a halloween party marked the day that Max discovered that world's Rachel's body and was then forced to watch her Chloe die, again before being kidnapped. While Rachel could understand the less than pleasant associations such an event might leave one with Halloween parties, Rachel had tried to convince her to tell them more about the dark room but was met with a 'when I am ready, I promise.' On the subject of the party though, it took the better part of a day for the three of them to reason out why she did not want to go:

Nathan factored into it more than Max had wanted to admit and Victoria, who despite Max's attempts to make friends with her, remained distant towards her, if less hostile. Once Max had laid out her reasoning, there was only one conclusion the photographer could come to: she had to go, or both of them won. Nathan, especially, could not be allowed to win. For the most part, his attitude remained stable: he had not exploded on anyone and any incidents of raging out were usually no more than a grumble. In fact, for reasons Rachel could not understand, the boy had approached her once in what was the most uncomfortable moment of her life. He had looked like he wanted to say...
any number of things, but after thirty seconds of them standing about seven feet apart, the boy had left.

Now Max stood at her side, no more relaxed than Chloe (who was looking as if her interest in the party was waning) but less dubious and more determined. Rachel thought that maybe a year ago she would have sighed at their antics: Chloe either had some prejudices to deal with or more class-based awkwardness to fight and Max was acting as if a party was some sort of chore to be completed. This was *not* a year ago and Rachel understood both of their attitudes a *lot* more. Not to mention, a year ago, Nathan had not yet gone full-on creepmonster.

Rachel shot a look to the girls and then turned to the hall. For the most part, what she saw was what they all saw every day upon first stepping into the school building: posters, trophy cases, the faint glow of the vending machines in the distance. The difference was that the whole building was dim, there was not a security guard in sight and the series of tacky, alternating black and orange streamers lead the way to a gymnasium which was currently blaring *some* sort of techno. Until she got closer the specifics were going to be lost on her.

“No David, no security at all,” Chloe said, laughing bitterly. “I don't know who pays Wells how much to look the other way like this, but I'm impressed.” The bluenette took a look around the hall. For the most part they were alone and Rachel was about to nudge one of the two forward before the doors opened behind them, forcing Chloe to step out of the way anyway, as the three turned to see who was arriving later than they were. Rachel reminded herself that Max had not spoken in about five minutes as she matched eyes with the boy coming in from outside.

“Hey, you guys made it,” Hayden said by way of greeting as he shifted his shoulders beneath his jacket and let the door to the school shut behind him. “I'm glad you guys came,” he added, raising a hand to catch Rachel's proffered high five and then glancing once at Max, who Rachel thought was watching him as if she could not quite decide what to say to the boy. *This is gonna be a long night unless I can get these two to loosen up.* “Chloe, come find me in twenty minutes or something if you want a toke. I had to go over to Edgeton to get my hands on some grass since Frank fucked off a couple weeks ago, but it's supposed to be some decent shit.” The first crack in Chloe's wall was visible as the girl grinned at the promise of smoke. *Is she out, or something?*

“I hear that,” Chloe said by way of agreement.

“I'd be down for a smoke,” Max said, quite suddenly and then patted her front right pocket as if to suggest she was holding. This earned an appreciative nod from Hayden, who gestured toward the gymnasium.

“Fuckin' hippie,” Rachel sighed, tossing one arm around Max's shoulders and the other around Chloe's. A hallway over, the bass dropped. As they approached, she shot Chloe a look. Despite the
fact that this music was not Chloe's thing she looked to be in a better mood at the promise of a smoke. Rachel could dig the tunes but it was more about whether she could convince either of the girls at her side that they wanted to dance. *I have a couple of ideas about that*, Rachel mused and dropped her arms to her side so that she could grab Max by the hand and pull her toward the gym a little farther.

“Why are you late, Mr. Vortex Club?” Chloe asked the boy, falling a step or two behind Rachel and Max, whose ‘game face’ had not yet been replaced by what Rachel hoped would become a sign that she was enjoying herself.

“I had to make the supply run, of course,” he replied. “Didn't I just say I was up in Edgeton or did I forget? I'm a little fucked up.”

“You're fine,” Chloe replied, chuckling. Rachel glanced back at her. While Max had not made any particular attempt to look like she was going to a party, this time Chloe had. Or, more precisely, she had cooperated with Rachel's antics. She rather thought, as she examined Chloe from a step or two ahead of her, that it had been a successful experiment. Chloe's paler blue eyes popped pretty well with her usual eyeliner and a bit of eyeshadow, but the thin dusting of silver body glitter across the contour of her cheeks gave her a slightly otherworldly look in the low light. Rachel rather hoped Chloe would get a look at herself in the mirror and maybe have the good graces to say, ‘damn, good job.’

The streamers were set in a continuous line from the front doors all the way to the gymnasium and, by the looks of things did not extend anywhere else inside of the school. She wasn't entirely sure what to make of this last detail until she and Max stepped into the gym and were exposed to the sheer size of the crowd inside. Buried under the sound of blaring music and thumping bass, the dull roar of a crowd of people far too large to be students from Blackwell Academy alone hit her. The figures in the dim gymnasium, moving beneath the expensive looking lighting system were so numerous that they must have included among their number other teenagers from Arcadia Bay and surrounding cities like Edgeton or Bruss.

The gym was packed. *Okay, yeah, there's some fun to be had here*, Rachel told herself as she surveyed the crowd. It was when she felt Max press a little more tightly to her side and Chloe stepped up close behind them that Rachel came back to herself. While she had been gaping, Max had taken one look at the room and was now, she saw in flashes of light between darkness, once again looking as if a dignified and orderly retreat was the only thing on her mind. Chloe, on the other hand, looked more at ease and open to the party as she nudged them both forward. Hayden was not behind them when Rachel looked back but he was not her date, and thus for the moment, not her problem.

They only made it about five or six steps before one of Max's reasons became visible to them. Whatever mix was being played came to an end in time for Rachel to hear Victoria Chase five or
six steps away from them. She was sitting, when Rachel looked, on a stack of old gym mats, her feet hanging a few inches above the ground. Flanked on either side by the usual suspects, Courtney and Taylor, the girl had spotted them and was taking full advantage of the momentary lull in the music to make sure they knew it.

“Oh look who stopped crying in her room long enough to come and walk among us.” Rachel made to take a step toward the mats and give Victoria a piece of her mind but Chloe's arms closed around her shoulders from behind.

“No,” Chloe said, still needing to speak at a comfortable level to be heard over the crowd, to be heard over the voice of whoever was emceeing. Max did not seem to notice Chloe's advice. We barely got inside and she's already starting on Max, Rachel wanted to grumble. Max, for what it was worth, broke free from Rachel and crossed the distance between them. In the rest of the gym, something agreeable must have been said, because an appreciative cheer went up. The heir to the Chase legacy sat up a little straighter as Max approached, picking at the hem of her top as if she better wanted to show off what no doubt cost more than most of Rachel's wardrobe. It's always about trying to impress people, isn't it, Victoria?

“We could be friends, Victoria,” Max said, barely audible from where Rachel stood. “We really should be. I think, in general, you're awesome. You just need to ask yourself if there's really any reason to be a massive dick to people.” Victoria glanced at Taylor, who rolled her eyes. While Rachel watched, Victoria rolled hers back. You've got her trained well, Chase. Rachel smirked at Max's back, because she knew that, all in all, this exchange between the girls was bullshit. Max had told her enough about both of those girls to be sure this was no natural reaction, just Victoria needing validation. “There is no one here that is worth knowing that you have to impress, Victoria. You're naturally talented, attractive and people want to like you. You don't have to be this way.”

“Are you hitting on me? B-Because-” the remainder of her response was cut off by the start of another song and that was Rachel's cue to shrug Chloe's grasp off, as much as she quite enjoyed the artist holding her closely. Taking hold of Max's shoulder, Rachel winked in Victoria's direction before the lights went down. Max was content to be led away by Chloe and Rachel after that and, try as she might to put the moment behind her, Rachel couldn't help but wonder at the small smile on Max's face. Maybe this was a confrontation that Max had been working up to for a while or maybe the look on Victoria's face when the music cut her off in the middle of her no doubt scathing retort about her own sexuality was gratifying. It certainly had been for Rachel.

Deprived of what was likely to be some shot about Max trying to recruit her to Rachel's 'harem', the three found their way into the crowd. The girl does like to flatter herself about me wanting a piece of her. It took a bit of focus for the three of them to actually stay together as they found some small enough hole in the crowd for them to be near one another and still firmly engulfed by the bodies around them. Around them, people who Rachel did not recognize moved to the music, some of them looking more graceful than others, far more doing very little more than moving against one another. The actual dancing portion of the night was going to be something of a difficulty, Rachel thought as she turned, laughing to Max and Chloe, the latter of which was jostled to the side by a
stranger's elbow.

While Chloe spent a fair amount of the next few minutes actively pretending not to enjoy herself, she did help Rachel in getting Max to finally loosen up. It took only a few seconds for Rachel to remember that, strictly speaking, Max could not particularly dance. The good news was that the majority of the warm, heaving mass of people around them, spread throughout the balmy gymnasium, was the same. Rachel gave up caring about any of that as she felt Chloe once again wrap her arms around her shoulders from behind and, pulling Max until they were face to face, she did something very similar herself.

As well as it could be called dancing, they danced. Chloe let go of whatever music snobbery she was guilty of harboring deep in her heart, Max's face went from tense to distracted by the music, by their closeness, by the complete lack of stress and finally to some sort of enjoyment that Rachel wasn't entirely sure she'd ever seen the girl wear. If she had had to pick a word for it, she would have chosen 'bliss.' At one point, not long after they found themselves buried, just one more puzzle piece in the crowd, Rachel let her eyes close as they moved. She felt Max's lips on her chin and at one point Chloe's on her neck. It was more than pleasant, it was a new kind of closeness that she craved so deep within herself that she thought it might be evidence of a soul. When she opened her eyes again, it was like another Blackwell Academy, another world.

As she felt Chloe move past her, Rachel broke away from Max to let the two of them connect, taking up a position behind Chloe, to continue dancing, to continue being tuned into that new Blackwell. This world was made up in the specific of Max's smile and Chloe's wide, enthused eyes and in the general, on the peripheries, walls of arms and legs, faces she did not want to focus on, people who lived their own lives in their own worlds. Later she would think that the school and gymnasium had not mattered, that they had simply been branches of Yggdrasil which held in its boughs a hundred mortal worlds populated by fantastic creatures, cloaked in deserts of suffering, fields dotted with desire like flowers, rivers of effort and oceans of hope.

Eventually, she found thirst enough to distract her from her own fields, her own oceans and made to break from Chloe and Max to track down precisely where these red solo cups full of beer she occasionally spotted in the crowd were coming from. It all smacked of a keg somewhere in the old, pale off-yellow gymnasium. She expected them to stay there, wrapped around one another as the music played. (Rachel had decided long since that she was bad at trying to guess a specific subgenre of what she labeled 'techno'.) Yet as soon as she tried to pull away from Max, the brunette turned and caught hold of her hand, looking at her questioningly. She did not want to leave, the little shit. Rachel grinned and tried to free her hand, to let both of the girls who were now watching her know they could remain there if they wanted and she would find them when she could.

Instead, Max held tight to her hand and, slipping beneath Chloe's arms, took the artist by the hand with her left. The message in either girls' face was clear: they were coming with her and that was fine by her. This place is so hot, she thought, using her free hand to wipe sweat from her forehead. She caught the sheen of sweat displayed across both of their faces before she turned and began to shoulder her way through the mass of people around them. She was sure as she bumped past this
person or sidestepped that one, that it had not taken them this long or this much effort to get into the crowd. It had grown since they arrived. Rachel was pleased to realize she had absolutely zero concept of how long ago that had been or even how many songs had passed. Frequently one ran into the next, anyway.

Strangely, she was not any cooler once first she, then the other two pierced the outer wall of the crowd. Somewhere behind the mats in question, where Victoria had either never left or recently returned to without her cronies flanking her, was a table laden with solo cups. All attempts at conversation whether between her and Max who did not look ready to come down from the endorphin high or between her and Chloe, who was suddenly eagerly eyeing the table, were complete failures. Behind that table, a boy with a Vote for Pedro tee who Rachel did not recognize had to pantomime the cost of a beer, but eventually Chloe and Rachel walked away with the drink, toward the doors of the room.

Victoria either did not try to say anything to them as they walked past her or could not be heard over the crowd. Rachel was no longer interested in what the blonde photographer was up to, all she could do was struggle with the urge to empty her cup all at once. Her throat was parched and she felt as if there was a fire in the room; that fire was emanating from somewhere in the center of her chest. Oh, she found herself thinking, confused by the realization. She must have had some kind of look on her face because Max's gaze transformed and she pulled Rachel from the room with Chloe in tow.

The hall was cooler, sure, but it did very little to quiet the heat that Rachel knew was coming from inside her chest, from warmth pooling like a shield around her heart. Okay, am I about to set Blackwell on fire? She did not think she was. The fire was content to sit there and shift in response to her still rather rapid heart beat, her expanding and contracting lungs. They weren't alone in the hallway. Two or three couples lined walls, necking as if it was the end of the world. Rachel took in a long breath through her nose but felt no cooler, no calmer.

“You okay?” Max asked her, face contorting into concern as they stepped a little further away from the doors to the gymnasium. No, Rachel thought in Max's direction, feeling a little dejected. Go back to being happy, damn you! I'm fine!

“Yes,” she promised, and then took a large drink. Chloe moved around her to get a better look at her face. Rachel could tell that she was not the only one of them drenched in sweat, and couldn't help but wonder how much of that was the ambient body heat of maybe a hundred, hundred and fifty people on the floor of the gymnasium and how much of that was from being close to her. “I'm, warm,” she told them when Chloe reached out for her, a searching gaze on her face. “You know,” Rachel clarified, hitting her chest with a closed fist. “Warm.”

“Do we need to go outside?” Chloe asked, now concerned, too.
“No, it feels different this time.” When she turned back to Max, the girl was smiling again. Rachel pondered whether or not the photographer was a little redder than she had been a second ago, but they all looked like they had just run a mile. The air between them relaxed and then Chloe shrugged, pulled her phone from her pocket and announced she was going to go find Hayden. *Gotta get your smoke on before your girlfriend starts smoking?* Rachel thought to herself and, hazy, lightheaded, she almost laughed at the poor joke. When Chloe started to slip away from them, for a second Rachel had the urge to reach out and grab hold of her, back her against the wall and kiss her.

Instead, she watched the bluenette turn, blow them both a kiss and set off into the building, texting. Exhaling, Rachel turned to Max and instead wrapped an arm around the girl’s shoulders. Max did not seem to realize that she was being pulled close to Rachel until it was too late and the look on her face, of intense awareness of their proximity was so endearing that Rachel decided to spare her any teasing over it. She did not, however, deny the way the girl’s face changed, the familiar gestures and body language that let her know Max was about to kiss her. Rachel set her abandoned cup on a table near the door and gave in to the coursing chemicals produced in her brain, telling her that she didn’t just *want* to return that kiss, she *needed* to and there wasn’t particularly a downside, so why bother fighting?

She was just beginning to consider whether or not she felt high when Max pulled away from her, took her right hand and began to lead her back into the gym. Rachel made sure to lace her fingers with Max’s as the girl led the way. They crossed into the realm of loud pounding beats and Rachel barely noticed the shift in temperatures: she was warm because of herself as much as the room around her. For a moment, she had to be careful not to bump into Max as the girl suddenly slowed but, assuming that this was just Max looking for an entrance point in the crowd, Rachel did not react overmuch until the photographer set off in another direction entirely, for the mats they had last seen Victoria sitting on.

Nathan was on one end of the set of gym mats stacked one atop the other. Eliot and Courtney stretched out in the center and on the farthest end, trying to send “get the fuck away” signals that even Rachel could spot from the doorway, amid the flashing lights, was Victoria. Rachel recognized the boy leaning almost over Victoria by the Vote for Pedro shirt and his pathetic caterpillar moustache. He was trying to engage her in talk despite the fact that she was making ’I can’t hear you’ gestures with her hands and spending most of her time looking away from him. Max released Rachel suddenly as Victoria reached for her drink and began to sprint.

Rachel did her best to follow, able to sense the change in Max’s body language even from the back. She was running like a leopard that had spotted its prey. *Did Victoria do something to piss her off that badly?* Rachel wondered as the brunette reached the mat. It drew the eyes of everyone there when Max reached up. For a moment Rachel thought she was going to slap Victoria, but instead that open hand seized the cup the blonde was holding and then Max spun on her heel. Nathan was watching with open frustration, Eliot with contempt and Courtney as if she had seen a rather disgusting bug. Victoria was obviously cross after she got over the surprise of Max’s hand that close to her face and then her eyes widened in genuine surprise as Max hurled the cup, contents and
all, at the boy's face. Dumbfounded, Vote-for-Pedro stumbled backward, looking kind of like he had seen something unexpected. He was drenched a moment later.

“If you ever try that shit again, I promise I will kick you in those pathetic things you call balls hard enough you'll be the first to learn what they taste like.” How Max was so clearly audible, even to the immediate area, Rachel was unsure. She just knew that Max's words were a vehement promise, dripping with rage. For a moment, Vote-for-Pedro gaped, eyes a color Rachel could not guess going blank as he processed what had just happened. Rachel could remember some fairly blatant threats coming out of Max's mouth but few so colorful and specific. Victoria was coming back to her senses, enough to look simultaneously amused and annoyed when Max turned away from the boy as if he did not matter, leaned in close and called something into Victoria's ears that made her recoil and stare at the boy and discarded cup as if they were both snakes ready to rise to bite her.

While Max turned back to her with a dark look on her face, Victoria rose and made an escape from the situation with a surprised looking Courtney in tow. They made for the far wall of the gymnasium where the doors to the locker rooms could be found. Rachel didn't want to imagine exactly what might be going on in there if the doors were unlocked but Victoria apparently vastly preferred that to whatever was going on.

The boy with the caterpillar 'stach shot a hateful look at Max's back and then hurried past Nathan and Eliot toward the crowd, the front of his shirt stained. Over Max's shoulder as the girl approached, she watched Eliot make some sort of unkind statement to Nathan, eyes locked on Max's retreating form. Rachel was more interested in Nathan, who was watching Max, even if his face was impassive. That, Rachel decided, was not okay. Dancing was fine and all but all of the sudden the gymnasium’s humid warmth felt a bit threatening. When Max was in range Rachel positioned herself behind the girl, between her and Nathan and pushed her girlfriend toward the doors again after sharing a long look with Nathan's blank stare. Wasn't he supposed to be high off his ass at these parties? More involved in dancing?

Once they were in the hall yet again, Max began to lead the way, instead, going roughly in the direction of where they last saw Chloe heading. It took Max a second to look back toward Rachel, her face distinctly uncomfortable, and then shake her head. They agreed as a trio to stay at the party and that was what Max seemed intent on doing but there was nothing saying they needed to sit around the gym. Following behind Max, she waited patiently for the girl to find the words she needed to explain what was happening. When they were in a quiet and frankly rather dark portion of the school, Max exhaled. No one was immediately visible in the hall with them.

“The guy was up to no-fucking-good,” Max told her. Despite her attempts to calm down she was still upset and her words dripped with rage.

“Did you see it or was this something that you, you know, 'rewound' because of?” If it was the second, was Rachel then talking to Max from the future, technically? What an odd thing to be
wondering about.

“Oh, no, I saw it, that piece of shit. I think I'll be good to go back in a few, I just need to chill.” Rachel momentarily wondered if the girl was making some sort of pun about the fact that she, Rachel, was currently operating something like a small, inefficient space heater but realized when Max began to try classroom door after classroom door that there was something else on her mind. Rachel checked her phone and saw that maybe an hour and a half total had passed since their arrival; the night was still young.

Max found what she must have been looking for all along when she pulled on the door to the science lab and it opened. By dim lights that seemed to be emitting from a few small battery-powered lanterns, seven sets of eyes rose all at once to the door. An eighth person, who Rachel could not identify from behind Max as she entered the room, was passed out hunched over a table. Rachel blinked once or twice and faces bearing various looks of relief came into focus. One of those faces immediately jumped out to Rachel as Chloe and as Max split off toward the front of the room, Rachel shut the door behind her and sought out her taller (and likely higher) girlfriend.

All told, the people in the room were sitting in something of a ellipse, trying to circle as best as the tables allowed. Rachel took in the crowd: Steph, Chloe, Hayden, Warren, Justin, Taylor, Brooke and, interestingly, Stella. Trevor seemed to be the boy passed out over the table. Chloe was sitting on the end of one table next to Justin and, surprisingly, Taylor. Rachel hadn't seen her since she and Victoria were being dicks to Max earlier. They were passing around a joint that probably came from Chloe's dwindling supply. Hayden sat at a chair only a step or two away, though, so it could certainly have been his. Sitting only a bit farther from the table, Steph raised a solo cup full of beer in greeting and returned to her conversation with Warren, who Rachel reflected she didn't know a ton about except that he seems to be all manner of interested in Taylor as of late and it was the world's worst kept secret.

“You're late,” Chloe told her and then looked past her for a moment. Rachel turned in time to see Max sliding down the aisle between the desks toward them on Ms. Grant's rolling chair. Oh lord, she thought as Max pulled to a stop just short of running into her. Unable to entirely resist, Rachel worked her fingers into the brunette's hair and leaned down to place a kiss on her lips. “Hey,” Chloe objected. “What about me?” The girl passed a joint to Taylor as if the two of them hanging out was as natural as anything.

Indulging Chloe in a kiss and then accepting the smoke not from Taylor, but from Justin, Rachel found a chair to settle onto as Max eased up beside her. Brooke was pressed up against a counter reading that damned Stephen King novel she was obsessed with by the light of one of those lanterns, but occasionally took a sip from a red solo cup. Across the room, from beside Steph, Stella began to couch. When Rachel looked she saw that a second joint was being passed back and forth among the smaller group and, by the sound of things, Stella was having a rough time getting the smoke down.
“And I didn't expect the science lab to be unlocked,” Rachel mused.

“It was definitely not,” Warren called from the other side of the room. The boy excused himself from the other circle and approached, not to clarify but perhaps to join in on their own. Or, Rachel thought, it's a thinly veiled excuse to talk to Taylor. The girl in question was rather quiet, as it turned out, as if not entirely comfortable. When Taylor saw Rachel looking, she seemed decide to engage in the conversation. Max rolled over toward Steph but Rachel couldn't hear what she was saying.

“The Chemistry class has to turn off the smoke detector all the time, so it the lab's the best place for a little puff-puff-pass.” Rachel nodded, wanting to appear chill with the girl, but the bottle blonde's behavior toward Chloe or Max under Victoria's guidance rubbed her the wrong way, especially knowing that Max often spent hours at night keeping Taylor company as she dealt with issues of her own. Issues, which if Max was to be believed, stemmed a bit from the way Victoria treated her.

“Hey,” Rachel said, scooting past Justin to lean against the opposite side of the table as Taylor. “Max was right about one thing. There's no reason for you guys to be shitty with her, you know. I think Max would like nothing more than to be your friend. Probably Victoria's too, but I don't see it.” Taylor looked conflicted for a moment before she sighed, making a noncommittal hand gesture that Rachel suspected was a request for her to go away.

“You don't get it,” Taylor told her, sounding defensive. “Victoria can be a real ass some time but she is the most fierce, loyal friend a person can have.”

“Maybe,” Rachel told the girl as Justin passed her a blunt, pretending not to be listening to them. Rachel was dubious. “It's just that if to be her friend you have to act like her when she's being a jerk, I wonder if it's worth it.” Taylor shrugged and looked uncomfortable. That was, all in all, the opposite of what Rachel had wanted so she backed away from the table, took her hit and then offered it to the girl. Justin and Chloe had been not-so-secretly watching but Hayden was already off at the other group and Warren is busy texting. She wasn't sure to who, but suspected that perhaps it was an act and he, too, was paying attention to their conversation.

“Max isn't as weird as she acts, sometimes,” Taylor said, taking the smoke. When Rachel glanced back toward Chloe, she looked irritated at the comment. She doesn't get it, Rachel thought. This was Taylor trying to maintain face while showing some recognition of her failures. Might just be bullshit, but could be a good sign.

“She's not weird,” Rachel told the girl. “She just deals with a lot of shit and whether you want to admit it or not, something tells me that you'd understand some of it better than we do.” Taylor had the good grace to genuinely look embarrassed. “Honestly, fuck the whole thing with you both
wanting to be Victoria's friend. I think you'd be the kind of person she should be friends with: you take a lot of shit, but you also seem to recognize that the things you do are shitty, too. The other two don't even pretend.” Taylor's dismissive 'whatever' was a bit quieter than usual, a sign, Rachel hoped, of thoughtfulness. *Well, I did my part.*

The music from the gym was still blatant and obvious. Rachel wondered again how the school was convinced to look the other way for Vortex Club parties. It made very little sense, but if security staff were crawling all over the place, that would include David Madsen tonight, as he was back at work. There would be no beer, no loud tunes, no group of people fumigating the science lab while drinking and talking about *fuck* knows what. The party would be akin to a middle school dance. Rachel, took one last hit before passing the smoke again to Taylor and decided as she surveyed the room that she was pretty okay with staff being away. The worst part of it all was that the Vortex Club did not inherently turn her away as it did Chloe. She could see the appeal of coming to and even planning these parties.

“I wanna go dance,” Rachel declared some ten minutes later, her head hazy, the smoke thick in the room. She had begun to notice that the room was getting uncomfortably warm and figured, judging by the long-lingering, familiar sensation of unnatural heat in her chest, that it was probably her fault. “Any takers?” She looked first at Chloe and then Max. While the photographer looked pretty middle of the road about the idea, Chloe rolled her eyes, scooted off the edge of the table and intercepted the joint going from Taylor to Justin. She took one last, long draw and passed it on to the boy who raised it in salute. Max only shook her head and said that she was fine here for a few minutes.

*That's okay. She still came to the party. She's still talking to people. Hell, she and Brooke even talked Stella into coming.* Rachel just wished that they had managed to convince Kate, who was nervous about being “exposed to that lifestyle.” The girl who barely blinked at the walking rainbow that was the trio's relationship found something about the partying “lifestyle” scary. Rachel had just accepted it, but now she felt bad to think that Kate was upstairs, ostensibly alone.

“I'll be back and anyone who passes out gets their faced drawn on,” the artist approaching Rachel called to the room at large. Chloe's hand pressed into hers and the girl pulled insistently toward the front of the room. “Goes double if your name is Max Caulfield, I think you'd look pretty hot with a mustache.” Rachel snorted and, as Chloe pulled the door open, caught Max's reply.

“You're already baked if you think you're outlasting me tonight.” *That, at least, is promising.* As the door shut behind them, Chloe gave a great, long-suffering sigh as if the music that was now much clearer was somehow offensive to her ears.

“Work, work, work,” Chloe joked, shooting her a look that Rachel did not care to take the time to decode. As long as in a few moments she was lost in a world made up of her and Chloe, nestled somewhere near the trunk of The Ash Yggdrasil, Rachel did not care about much else. Whatever
was to blame for the almost otherworldly euphoria earlier as they danced, Rachel had long since decided not to worry about it. In fact, she rather thought she wanted it back. *So, to sum it up, they’re both having a good time, I’m having a good time and Max got to tell off some skeevy mother fucker. It could be worse.* “Rachel?”

“Yeah?”

“You're really hot.”

“Girl, I know it,” Rachel promised her, preening for a moment. Chloe laughed and did not bother to clarify if she had meant it as a compliment or a commentary on the unusual heat radiating from her. “You're not so bad yourself.”
Chapter Forty-Two: Oikos

Chapter Notes

I decided that today would be a double chapter day. For literally no reason whatsoever. So, enjoy the first, Oikos.

Disclaimer: Anything familiar to you, I don't own. This is a work of fanfiction for personal amusement, fulfillment and a bit of self-therapy. I make nothing from any of it.

Chapter Forty-Two: Oikos

November 22nd, 2011, 8:03 PM

Max turned her head pointedly toward the stage, mostly because Rose and Joyce were trying to catch her eye and it was getting harder to pretend to miss them with the crowd thinning rapidly around them. Several people were leaving the area already as this particular play had run later than the others. The polite clapping was long since over. Family members and close friends as well as a couple of staff members seemed to be the only ones left. One of those staff members, she knew, was David Madsen who loomed at the back of the assembled chairs like a great bat. He had not yet spoken a word to Max, Chloe, Rachel or Steph, perhaps realizing the tenuous nature of things between them. Given what Chloe had revealed about David believing that Chloe was the one he was chasing through the woods the night Frank died, it was also possible he was (rightly) scared.

About this time the first actors and actresses began making their way to the front. The majority of them had not bothered to change out of their outfits, though a few looked to have loosened something or switch into more comfortable shoes. For the most part, they were coming the long way around the stage; at least just about everyone but the two whom Max was looking for. Oh no, it wasn't that simple. Chloe was the first of the two to appear, pushing out from behind the curtain. She was still mostly dressed in Laertes' almost princely outfit but had stuffed her boots on quickly after the curtain fell. Chloe crouched at the edge of the stage and then jumped from the end of it, landing on soft, cool ground without a moment of hesitation.

Chloe made a bee line for her. For some reason this produced no small amount of happiness in Max, who grinned as she spotted Rachel following in Chloe's footsteps only an inch or two behind. Max decided to meet them as close to the stage as possible, to buy a little time before things became uncomfortable with their mothers. Chloe slowed up at a certain point, apparently reading
her intent to join them by the stage. Max felt herself folded into Rachel and Chloe's arms for a minute. Her compliments were lost in the moment of the embrace but, that was fine. They already knew everything she was trying to say.

“Sure you should be hugging your sister like that, Laertes?” Max finally managed. ‘Ophelia’ reached past Chloe and popped Max lightly on the shoulder as they pulled apart. Chloe, on the other hand, took Max by surprise by pulling her close once more and planting something of a major kiss on her. Okay, someone's in a good mood. Max cooperated, even returned the kiss in kind until it began to feel a little too intense for the public eye. That did not make her move her right hand from the back of Chloe's neck as they pulled apart, at least not immediately. She hated to kill the mood but that was probably already done by more than one set of eyes being turned on them by the people in the immediate area. Plus, they both deserved a warning. “Your mothers are here,” she told the girls and did her best to gesture behind herself as casually as possible. She wasn't sure how close they were but as she sought to turn around, Max caught Chloe's response.

“You sure throw that word around really easily.” At first Max was content just to place herself in the middle of the two, wrap an arm around their shoulders and wait for Rose and Joyce to come and, hopefully not ruin the good mood. At Chloe's admonishment, though, she borrowed a gesture of Rachel's for the first time, her left hand sliding down from Chloe's left shoulder to press lightly into her back, between her shoulder blades. The bluenette leaned into her a bit. Max wasn't entirely sure what it was about that spot that did that to Chloe, but she did hope it helped her calm down.

Joyce and Rose were taking their time, stopping politely to let people past or allow families to reunite with actors, but in no time at all they came into a conversational range and Max removed her arms from either girl only to feel Chloe immediately take her newly free hand. It's not looking good for Joyce. Chloe's slowly hardening face was not exactly aggressive, but she looked to be burying amusement and adrenaline beneath a sort of forced impassiveness. Rachel, on the other hand, had eyes in the moment only for her mother. Where as Rose had spared no expense to looking as if she was very well off and respectable in her dark pantsuit and expensive looking jewelry, Joyce was still dressed for work and frankly looked as if she had not had the best day at the diner. Still, each of the women wore almost matching kindly looks on their faces as they approached and Max did her best to echo this.

Rose was the first to speak, congratulating first her daughter and then Chloe before pulling Rachel into what was actually a fairly expressive hug for Rose. Joyce kept her distance. It doesn't help that the moment Joyce got close to us, Chloe took a step back. Still, the artist was trying to keep her expression neutral. Max was just about to greet Joyce and Rose as respectfully as possible when one more person entered the picture. Max had only seen the woman in question once since the day that Damon Merrick 'went missing.' On that occasion, Sera had been dressed in all black, waiting in the lower levels of the courthouse to see Rachel after her father was declared guilty.

Dressed for work, herself, Sera Gearhardt was more classically attractive than Max remembered her being. Then again, the first time she had been attacked, kidnapped and drugged and the second she had clearly been in tears, a kind of mourning of her own. The true awkwardness of the moment
came to bear in full force, causing Rachel to stumble over her greeting as Rose released her. She tried to speak twice and then after taking a breath, gestured to Max.

“Sera,” she said, “this is Max. I've never gotten to introduce you.”

“It's been a long time, Max,” the blonde greeted her. “I'm glad to see you again.” There was a certain amount of gratitude in her voice and face which made Max feel uncomfortable almost immediately, so she was relieved the woman punctuated this greeting by turning to look toward Rachel, obviously wanting to speak to her. “I’m told you'll remain in town over break, so when Chloe and Rachel come by for dinner, I hope you will come with them.”

“Yes, Ms. Gearhardt. “

“Stick with Sera,” the woman advised her. “Makes me sound like less of an old bag and maybe I'm vain but I could use that nowadays. Now I need to go dote on Rachel a bit. I've got a few years of that to make up for.”

“I gotcha,” Max promised her, trying to set herself at ease around the woman. It was a complex situation there: Sera was clearly important to Rachel and had been since the day Rachel learned about her. However Max could not entirely shake her tendency to associate Sera with not one but two dead men who Max felt partially responsible for now. When she shot a glance at Rose, the prim woman was quietly checking her nails. *Okay, this is either going to be really uncomfortable or really bad or both.* Rachel did not seem to know which way to look: her attention was being split between her mother, Sera, her girlfriends and Joyce. She was worrying about too many people all at once. Max took a risk at being a little too forward in front of Joyce and Rose and reached over to squeeze Rachel's hand.

While this seemed to be all Rachel needed to focus on Sera as the woman moved closer to her to speak a little more freely, Max turned back toward Joyce and Chloe. Joyce looked ready to speak to Chloe, but given the complete lack of an engagement she was getting from Chloe, stalled Sera on her way by to introduce herself.

“Hi, I'm Joyce. Chloe's mother,” she said, extending one hand with long, pale blue false nails toward the woman.

“I'm Sera, Rachel's- oh, well what would be appropriate?” she asked Rachel, now only a step or so away from her.
“Sera's my biomom,” Rachel told Joyce, her voice a little gravely as if she could use a glass of water. Sera gave a quick nod as if to accept the title and then walked past Joyce to Rachel where the two struck up a conversation about the play with Rose right beside her. Max wasn't entirely sure which awkward conversation that was about to unfold she should pay attention to, but the level of discomfort she was feeling was starting to reach truly impressive levels. It would be shitty, she thought, to try to slip away right now for many reasons, not the least of which being that Chloe and Rachel would be on their own with the issues ahead of them.

Joyce took so long to finally speak, looking her daughter in the eyes from a couple of feet away that Sera had turned from Rachel to greet Rose at the woman's 'hello.' Rachel looked pointedly anywhere but at the women as Sera informed Rose she had raised a 'fine young woman.' Fine is one word for it, Max joked internally. All in all that exchange was downright friendly considering Rose’s husband was in jail for setting up Sera’s murder. Chloe and Rachel have less than stellar home lives. Then again, at least Chloe has Steph now and most of the time that's pretty good.

“Hello, Chloe,” Joyce finally said, shifting her purse strap up higher on her shoulder as she folded her hands together in front of her.

“Hi, did you enjoy it?” Chloe asked. It was clear she was trying to sound polite but she was not particularly successful at this. Max could hear that Chloe, too, was thinking about what it would take to beat a hasty retreat from the situation. Rachel's not going to be far behind, she thought as the blonde looked back up at her mother and biomom. Are they her 'mothers' then or what? I feel like this is the sort of thing I should know about her. As for Chloe, she couldn't help but wonder what Joyce would say if she knew that last month Chloe had nearly gotten arrested in Jamison Square in Portland during an attempted 'occupation' of the park.

Chloe's involvement in the protests in Portland was not as frequent as the artist wanted them to be, but she had become more vehemently supportive of the Occupy movement's message that the current distribution of power between the wealthy and the poor was dangerous. Personally, Max agreed but every time she thought about putting herself into the center of one of those protests, she remembered bits and pieces of events from the other timeline, though most of those were focused on reports over the protests in New York. Suffice it to say, the bits she could remember were disjointed and so impersonal as to sound like nonsense, but it did not sound like things were going to be pretty for Occupy protesters. After the pepper sprayings and arrests in Portland last week, she only resisted asking Chloe not to go to any further by reminding herself how much it would upset her.

Besides, Max thought, Chloe's too proud of those protests. If Joyce tried to tell her not to go, she would lose her cool big time.

“Yes,” Joyce finally told Chloe. “You did wonderfully in your role.”
“Thank you,” Chloe answered, almost as soon as the words were out of her mother’s mouth. There was an edge of finality to her voice as if she were trying to politely escape from the conversation, but still being assertive. Joyce looked at Chloe, mouth gaping slightly and then turned to Max as if trying to save face. Max wasn't sure the woman was looking in the right direction. Ever since Rachel had made the implication that Joyce might be trying to manipulate her, Max had been pretty dubious of the woman. 

*Holy shit, I think it’s been months since I went by the diner.*

“You’re not going home for thanksgiving?” Joyce asked. Max shook her head but at that moment Rose spoke up.

“Max, Chloe and their friend Steph are joining Rachel and I for Thanksgiving dinner,” Rose announced.

“I convinced mom and dad to let me stay with Steph over Thanksgiving break, but that means they’ll probably wait until the very last second of Christmas Break to bring me back to the school.” Max was trying to sound as if she was in the mood to joke, but at that moment the only sensible thing to do, at least as far as Max was concerned, was to beat a sudden retreat.

“I’m sure your parents will miss you this Thanksgiving,” Joyce counseled, sounding sympathetic to them as if to make Max feel guilty. Max's stomach twisted a bit when the woman turned her eyes on her daughter and added, “It’s important to be with family over the holidays.”

“I totally agree,” Chloe told the woman. Joyce blinked at her once in some surprise and then almost recoiled. It took Max a second to catch the inherent message: Chloe was going to be with her family over the holidays and that didn't include Joyce. *Oh, way too harsh,* Max found herself thinking. She got the idea that telling Chloe she was being a bit too cruel any time soon might end in trouble though. *Besides, Joyce did fuck up and only Chloe can decide when and if she's ready to repair things.* This was one of those moments where Max's interference in it needed to go no further than, ‘talk to me about how you're feeling.’

The air between mother and daughter became decidedly less friendly after that. Max again considered where she wanted to be and decided that at that moment she wanted to take a step back and stand behind her girls. She hoped they would understand; she absolutely did not want to be anywhere near that scene all of a sudden. The awkwardness, the conflict or potential conflict in the air felt like it was partially transferred through the air, through her. Was she capable of and willing to engage in conflict for other people? Absolutely. Did she enjoy conflict? Not even a little and sometimes it made her inexplicably uncomfortable, no matter that she felt a little guilty for reacting that way. This, here, was one of those 'sometimes'.
Joyce gave a quick forced smile and excused herself. She made no special effort to promise Chloe they would talk soon; she just nodded, muttered for everyone to have a lovely evening and turned to walk away. There was no way to make that situation less awkward. As if that was a cue the extended situation fell apart in that Rachel made a sudden promise to call both her mother and Sera the next day.

“For now, I've gotta run, because if I don't get this makeup off before the wrap party, I think I'm never going to be able to sweat again.” Rose gave a chuckle and told her to go have fun. Sera's response was for Rachel to buzz off and go see her friends, they would talk soon. About the time that the taller blonde asked if she could talk to Rose for a few minutes and Rose agreed, Rachel was in full retreat and Max definitely understood the motivation behind that. With a quick goodbye, Rachel turned and gestured for them all to hurry back stage with her. Max could have sworn she felt a sudden gust of wind at their backs as she and Chloe did so. Ahead of her, Chloe shivered.

After her girls had stopped and, true to Rachel's word, washed away the majority of the stage makeup in play (it was going to take a good warm shower and a hard scrub to finish the rest) Max agreed to join them for the wrap party. She did so wishing that she was a little tipsy or at least had had an extra hour or two of sleep. There was no immediate sign of beer or any illegal substances, which made sense: this gathering was not official but it certainly wasn't protected by whatever force defended the Vortex Club from the prying eyes of staff and security. Not to mention this was happening on the school's lawn behind the stage. A few folding tables had been secured from one of the school closets. Given that the actors had conveniently 'accidentally' retrieved more chairs than needed, as they had last year both times, there were enough seats behind the stage for cast and crew to be present in its entirety: Keaton was even sitting in discussion with Juliet. He probably would be part of the wrap party for a short while, judging by the two prior.

While Max had skipped the last one she had been convinced to come tonight. She was more relieved than she cared to admit when the majority of the cast greeted her alongside Rachel and Chloe and despite the presence of a couple of people whom she did not particularly want to even have to look at, Max felt mostly welcome. Steph, who had been doing the lightwork alongside Brooke on the soundboard waved the three of them over. I wish my stash wasn't running so low. I could've done with a smoke, first. Whoever takes Frank's spot is going to be fucking loaded.

For the most part after they settled down at the closer end of the table, Max remained quiet and listened to the cast and crew talk about the show. Occasionally she was prompted or piped up to offer outside opinions on how well certain scenes, choices in attire, stage direction or lighting had worked out. Having done this once alongside many of them, she had a fair idea of what they might want to know that they would have had trouble seeing from their own point of view. All in all, the first few minutes after they arrived were fairly calm, even despite Eliot occasionally shooting a glare down the table at them or the presence of the ticking time bomb to his right.

After a couple of months of having remained fairly calm and even headed (and by all accounts being a better student) Nathan was clearly out of sorts. By the time that Max had been there for half
of an hour, he had already made two or three offhand comments about playing such a tiny, pointless role. Just about every time he spoke, she remembered trying to comfort him in response to what she had perceived to be his nerves after A Midsummer Night's Dream, telling him it was over and the performance didn't have to weigh on him anymore, that he had already done all the hard work, right? Max remembered him seeming to finally lighten up, finally speak to her. She also remembered very clearly that had been a guise and the moment she had let her guard down, the Prescott heir had snuck something into her drink, much like the strange boy a couple of weeks ago had tried to do to Victoria. Sometimes, though she had not voiced this concern to anyone, she worried Nathan had been involved in that, too.

It was Nathan who ended her enjoyment of this wrap party when, almost an hour later, he made an offhand comment, about non-cast and crew being present. To do so, he had spoken over her, cutting across her response to Hayden's question about one scene or another. Her response was so automatic that she felt like it was preplanned. Max stood up, smiled at Hayden and a couple of people closest to her and excused herself from the party without looking at anyone else. She especially did not want to catch Rachel or Chloe's eyes as she excused herself: she wanted to give them the option to stay if they wanted. Hayden and Dana called out her name, regretfully, as if trying to talk her out of leaving. Max had just reached the path to the dormitories when she heard footsteps at her back and none of them belonged to either Hyaden or Dana.

Chloe, Rachel and Steph were stepping up to stand behind her. None of them looked especially beaten up about leaving the wrap party so Max relaxed for a moment, until she caught Nathan's voice on the edge of her hearing. The boy was practically yelling to be sure they heard him. *Fuck this place, sometimes.*

“Huh, I guess it's true what they say: dykes do all go off at the same time.” She wasn't able to make out what Hayden's response was, but his tone was far from friendly and she definitely caught the word 'vasectomy'.

“Okay, I am definitely out,” Max told the three. “If you wanna go back, I get it.”

“Fuck that,” Steph replied as Rachel wrapped one of Max's arms in her own.

“Yeah,” Chloe agreed. “You know what time it is?” The bluenette gestured toward the parking lot with the cap that accompanied her costume.

“Time to make a bad decision?” Max asked, hopefully.

“Time to make *many* bad decisions,” Rachel corrected.
December 22nd, 2011 8:25 PM

It was usually a sad occasion right before a break, especially one of the longer ones, when Chloe and Rachel were forced to say goodbye to Max. Certainly Christmas Break was not nearly as long as bad as say, summer, but it was still a fair amount of time apart, time when Chloe and Rachel could wake up and reasonably assume the ability to see each other whenever they wanted. They just would not have quite the same easy access to Max. For this reason among others it was not a surprise that the air in the Gingrich household was rather somber that evening. It was, however, a little worse than usual.

Over this break, you see, it was not just the distance that was going to be able to mess with them but also the promise of what was coming. By the time she and Rachel were reunited with Max-who was now pressed to her side balancing a glass between her knees-Blackwell Academy would have changed: Max's favorite teacher would be dead at the hands of an aggressive type of cancer and the man hired to take her place would be on his way to Arcadia Bay. By all signs, the celebrity alum was a monster who was already slated to take over next year, anyway.

With Max's help, Chloe, Rachel and Steph had long since looked up what they could on Mark Jefferson. What became clear pretty immediately was that his past was not exactly spotless. By some unsubstantiated reports he had some tendencies that made him come off rather shady, especially in relation to how he acted around young women. Since none of those had ever come to fruition there had not been any legal proceedings to mar his record, but she was still a little impressed that the hint of impropriety had not been enough to make Blackwell's collective nose turn upward. Max's otherworldly predictions looked to be coming to fruition. The Devil was coming to Blackwell.

Chloe took a long sip from her glass as she tried-and failed- to make it seem as if she was paying more attention to the television screen than the girl up under her arm. Tonight's drink was very sophisticated for them: cheap, off brand root beer mixed with Kraken rum. At least, that was what
most of them were drinking. Sitting on the table at the far end of the couch, beside Steph, was a half-empty glass next to a bottle of, frankly, expensive whiskey. Chloe recalled her distaste for the drink upon trying it. She had been forced to ask Steph why she would willfully drink the swill.

Her answer: 'I like this scotch. A lot. I like the taste. I like the smell. I like the feel of it in my hand.'

Chloe shook her head. Some people were strange about their drink and, apparently, Steph was one of those. Chloe sat her drink back on the table and brought the hand that was not wrapped around Max's shoulder to rest atop the girl's knee. Max lifted her head, smiled briefly and returned to watching the reboot of Battlestar Galactica. It was, at least, safe sci-fi. Chloe had never seen it before and was doing her best to give its leading characters a chance to live up to the antics of Chewey, Han and the bunch. Few things beyond maybe Firefly managed that.

“Max, you okay?” Chloe murmured as the show stretched on. She had made a concerted effort to keep the question quiet, both not to interrupt the show for Rachel or Steph and not to draw attention to the stiff way Max's face sat, frozen, unchanging. This again forced the brunette in her arms to look up. Rachel reached over to the table beside her as she sat in the recliner and took a long sip from her own drink, hazel eyes locked on the two of them as if she had heard and taken notice, after all.

“Not really,” Max finally answered, then, as if trying to be flippant, she muttered, “But I'm getting there. Maybe in another drink I will be.” Chloe didn't like that answer, but all she could think to do was tighten her right hand on Max's right knee and shake it softly. “I'm ready for it, if that's what you mean.” By this point Steph had turned to listen in on the conversation. Attempts to keep things quiet had failed so Chloe abandoned the pretense and voiced a concern she had been keeping in all night.

“Rachel said you talked to Drewer yesterday,” some tense half-political situation unfolded on the screen between Old Big Shot Military Guy and his son, Young Big Shot Military Guy. Chloe tuned it out in the moment, in favor of Max's response. She would rather they had a chance to talk things out before Max left the next day.

“I did,” the girl told her. “I thanked her, told her she was my favorite teacher, that she touched my life and my art and—you know what?” Max asked. “It's true. She did. I feel like a lot better of a photographer now than when I came here. I've been taking lots of pictures this month.”

“That's for sure,” Chloe told her. “You've probably burned through more film in the last month than half of last school year.”
“Well, it's something that, you know, that other Max told me back in LA. After I came to Blackwell, I used to tell myself it was my motto, now, but I hadn't really thought about it in a while.”

“What was that?” Steph asked, not having been present. Then again, Chloe had been there and couldn't quite pick out what Max might have been talking about.

“‘Always take the shot.’” Max paused a moment as if tasting the words on her tongue and then shrugged. “Anyway, I took a photo of Drewer and I together. I'll probably send it to her family, or put it up somewhere when the news hits the school.” Rachel was leaning forward in her chair. Chloe gestured for Max to go on. There was something about the lilt to the girl's voice that made it clear there was more she wanted to say. Considering that Max had said very little since Chloe picked her and Rachel up from the school four hours ago, Chloe was ready to hear it. Tonight had been reminiscent of Max's bad days back when she was keeping her fears a secret: just quiet enough to be disturbing. “It's making Jefferson a lot more real to me. By the time I come back, he'll probably already be here and then it all starts.”

“What all?” Steph asked, as if looking for clarification. “All the shit he does?”

“All the shit we'll have to do to keep up with him, to catch him in the act but do it before someone gets hurt. I have to find out it happened within a certain time frame to really be able to use my power to help, unless...”

“Unless what?” Rachel prompted her.

“Well, unless I take a photo every day and make sure to time and date it.”

“That shouldn't be too hard,” Chloe said, both encouragingly and a little teasing. “Maybe a morning selfie?”

“Have you seen my bed hair?” Max asked, whipping out her 'Max humor'. Chloe gave her a sympathy chuckle and smiled, reaching out to mess up Max's hair. The girl clearly did not see it coming but she did huff once, loudly about it when Chloe was done. Rather than conversation dying out or really shifting topics, surprisingly it was Rachel who kept the conversation going. Hopefully it would help to exorcise some of Max's demons before the brunette was out of their reach.
“I got Victoria to stop being an asshole long enough yesterday to start talking about her favorite photographers,” Rachel said. “I don't know what you said to her at that halloween party, but it did something.” Max shrugged noncommittally. “Jefferson's one of them, you know? One of her heroes.”

“I know,” Max said. “She will trust him implicitly and this timeline is so different now that I don't know if she'll be safe from him for as long as she was in the other one. But if I'm honest?” Steph patted the girl on the shoulder to prompt her. “If I'm honest, I hope that the Chases are the reason Wells hired Jefferson. Or maybe he just did it because he was a famous Blackwell alum. Either way, I really hope he's not in league with the Prescotts yet.”

“If he was, though,” Rachel asked,” doesn't that mean we know where to pay attention?” Max nodded as if she had not quite considered that and then shook her hand as if the idea was lukewarm to her.

“Yeah but it also means there's not much we can do to stop him from getting his claws in Nathan. Maybe he already has them. Either way, Nathan could have already given him the idea to drug people, take them down to the Dark Room and photograph them.” 

I really don't like Max leaving us before something like this. This is our last night together before Mrs. Drewer dies, and the kind of creep that makes Max scared comes to take her place.

Chloe jumped as Pompidou's head suddenly wormed its way onto Max's leg from where he stood just in front of them. Max chuckled as the dog sniffed at her and then looked up at her with those large, begging eyes. Chloe wondered if he could tell Max was feeling unwell or just wanted ear scratches which Max gave out by the boatload. Rachel fell quiet again. The actress had been going through a thing or two, too. Chloe was well aware that rachel had had trouble processing her part in Frank's death, not to mention started thinking about college. Unfortunately, Chloe thought, she can only talk to her therapist about one of those things.

One thing was for sure, Chloe realized as she moved her right hand and joined Max in petting the shepherd-pit mix who was giving a bit too much in the way of attention to the glass Max was holding out of his reach. The couch was going to end up as the scene of a mass cuddling before the night was through.

January 17th, 2012 7:15 AM

They had been back at the school for a week but, given Monday off for Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Rachel had decided that she and Max were going to take that day to themselves. Unfortunately, on Monday, Max and Rachel had been out on the grounds of campus when the newest teacher at Blackwell Academy finally arrived. Rachel had seen him in photos but had been forced to admit to Max that he was fairly attractive in person. Mark Jefferson, she learned that day,
swaggered when he thought only one or two people were watching, but when there were more eyes on him he walked with a practiced, composed and confident stride. The man had actually stopped and took a photo of the school before going into it. Max had theorized he was probably preparing his classroom for himself but she had also wanted to leave campus immediately. Rachel had understood and found a fair compromise in the two of them spending a couple of hours together at American Rust, where their hangout remained mostly untouched.

As pleasant as things had been after they abandoned campus, she was rather glad that the day was over. There was just one little problem. It was the morning of Tuesday the 17th and for the first time since mid-October, Max could not bring herself to eat. Originally, Rachel tried not to feel worried, but it did feel like a bit of a step backward for the girl. Her solution to this, for now, was to simply not attempt to push too much attention on her. Unfortunately, plenty of people were noticing. Max coming back to the table with only a small plastic cup of apple juice was enough for most of the breakfast crew (Chloe, Rachel, Kate, Steph and now, Stella) to share a look between them. Kate and Stella were, obviously, still on the outside of why this was happening, but were very obviously no less concerned.

*It would be easier if I could just talk to Max and Chloe alone, but,* Rachel shot a glance around the table. Stella had her long, dark hair held back and one equally thick eyebrow raised whenever she shot a look at Max, who intentionally turned her eyes away from anyone who looked too long at her. It wasn't like Rachel was annoyed at the others; even if this was the days without a wider friend circle, the walls still had ears. David was keeping his distance while watching over breakfast from the other side of the room. He had been steering clear of them and remained rather subdued in general. (*Chloe doesn’t trust it and the truth is, neither do I. David doesn’t seem like the type to be talked or scared into rationality.*) The prevailing theory was that he would go back to himself in time, when he had had time to mourn his divorce.

*Honestly,* Rachel thought, spearing a bit of egg with her fork, *we've had to fuck with David enough.* David was never going to be their friend but as long as he left them alone, she rather thought they could use him if Jefferson got up to the tricks Max said he would. Jefferson was the immediate threat and that meant that she couldn't particularly turn her frustrations with David into some sort of vigilante cause. Frankly, she thought that it was time to hang up the cape and tights. Hell, maybe it had never been a good idea.

*The worst part of all of this is that Max is going to have to be in Jefferson's class without me or Chloe.* It was enough to make Rachel uneasy and she had been doing her best not to dwell on shit, lately. The thing was, a potential sexual predator on campus who even then, further had potential to become a murderer was something that one fucking dwelt on, as far as Rachel was concerned. The table had become rather quiet over the last few minutes. She prompted Kate to talk by asking her *something,* but the question was forgotten as soon as it left her mouth.

Mark Jefferson had had a considerable effect on Max and the idea of the girl stuck in a room with him without her there jacked her own anxiety up a notch. *But,* she had to remind herself, Hayden
and Kate will be in the room with her and I trust them. It was as she tried to tune in to Kate's answer and catch Chloe's eye that the air in the entire cafeteria changed and Rachel finally got to see Blackwell's newest Antichrist up close and personal.

The photography teacher, Mark Jefferson strolled into the cafeteria at close to 7:30. It was not unheard of for teachers to eat from the breakfast line and Jefferson apparently had not had breakfast. Rachel watched openly as he gave the room a brief smile before turning to the line. She recognized the smile; it said, 'I'm a chill teacher who you won't have to worry about.' It was an appeal to the 'kids' not to worry about him. When Rachel looked around, she felt her stomach drop slightly, taking in the wide spectrum of reactions throughout the room. Victoria began to immediately fawn over him and, most alarmingly, make bedroom eyes his way. Predictably, Taylor and Courtney followed suit, because that is what they do, that is what they always do. She says jump, they say 'how high?'. Nathan, on the other hand, looked up once at the man and gave a brief nod to himself. Rachel wasn't quite sure she could begin to guess what that meant but, considering what Max claimed would happen when the two connected--assuming they haven't already--the nod did not particularly feel wholesome. There came a soft spread of gossiping voices passing about the room.

“I’ve heard he’s a really, really good photographer,” Kate said, drawing Rachel's eye back to the table. She was about to balance trying to find a way not to appear too unusual to Kate without giving the impression she particularly cared for the man when she realized that Max had gone still as a statue. The photographer's pale lips were shut into a tight, thin line and her hands grabbed to the table as if they had been crafted that way. Rachel understood what was happening. Kate had been trying to draw Max into conversation, but it was not working. Kate has no reason at all to understand. Rachel got that.

“Alright,” Rachel started. She pushed her tray away all at once deciding that she wasn't going to let this escalate. Up at the front of the room, the man of the hour was peering down at the trays of breakfast food, likely doing what all of them did each morning, trying to work out what looked good and what was probably going to be, honestly, subpar that day. “Chloe, can you do me a favor and take that up for me when you're done?”

“Um,” Chloe answered, humming in the back of her throat. One look at the artist said she knew just what was going on and could probably assume that Rachel was going to try to help Max who still had not spoken or even looked at anyone at the table. “I feel like I should come.”

“Yeah, if you want to,” Rachel told her, in as soft and caring a voice as she could manage. “Max and I are gonna go grab some fresh air,” she told the table at large. Chloe apologized briefly to the table and hurried off with her and Rachel’s tray as Rachel began to try to shake Max a little. Steph was verbally trying to redirect conversation at the table from Max, because that was what Steph did: she looked out for hers. It took a few more seconds, but Max finally unclenched her fingers and stood up. Rachel shivered slightly (goose walked over your grave) as she glanced toward the front of the room, drawn to it by a force that was hard to explain. When she looked, she found that the man in question had turned from his tray and glanced toward them. Jefferson was looking at
them through thick lensed glasses, his left hand reaching out to grab the lapel of his suit jacket and straighten it, as if the action was completely subconscious.

*It’s a completely innocent glance*, Rachel had to tell herself as his eyes shifted from Max, to her. *It’s just the brain reacting to movement. Nothing more. It holds no meaning. To him, Max is as big of a stranger as I am. Hell, to Max he’s a stranger. She just knows what he is. We are alright.* The man watching her faked some look of sympathy as he shifted his eyes back to Max, who was clearly in some form of discomfort. *Fuck this, we’re getting out of here.* Rachel nudged Max, who started moving but not before she saw the dark blue eyes fix for a moment on the teacher. Rachel wondered precisely how he was going to interpret the look of complete and utter terror on the girl’s face.

It was as they were approaching the door that David, arms crossed and a sneer visible on his face which seemed half-assed (his lip did not quite curl high enough, he did not look around the room with enough contempt in his features) up at them as if suspicious. Then the man grunted, looked down and pretended not to have noticed. Immediately, Rachel felt an insane urge to warn the man, but there was nothing she could really say, was there? Quietly, she thought that later she might be able to convince Max and Chloe to let her anonymously send David some of their research on the man. *Unless*, Rachel told herself as she urged Max forward, *he’s smarter than David.* If he’s all that Max says he is he might know someone is onto him and get shiftier than Max expects. Maybe we won’t catch him when he makes a move.

Once they were out of the room Max started to become responsive again immediately and by the time they were at the doors to the building and Chloe had caught up to them hauling her own bag and Max’s, the photographer was answering Rachel in simple ‘yes’es and ‘no’es. With Chloe at the lead, they lapped the campus once. While doing so, Chloe further managed to draw Max into talking.

“It-it doesn’t happen much outside of dreams but, sometimes that other Max- her um, her memories do resurface in pieces. Seeing him brought up some bad ones.”

“It might help you to tell us,” Rachel told Max. Voicing fears didn't always rob them of power, but trying to fight them all on your own frequently gave them more power. They settled in, eventually, at Steph’s favored picnic table.

“I remembered, like actually remembered her being his captive. I can feel the needle pressed against my neck, fear, right before David comes running in.” Then, the girl paused and looked up, both hands rising as if to push her hair back from her forehead but instead gripping at it. Rachel reached up slowly and fought the urge to remind Max that it had not been (or would not be) her neck. Instead she focused on resting her hand against Max’s. She had seen a similar gesture once in Stella, during a particularly unpleasant meltdown in which the girl had begun to pull at her own
hair. Whether this was Max's motivation for grabbing at her own locks or it was a reaction of concern, Rachel wasn't ready to find out. She slowly freed one of Max's hands from her thick brown hair and, taking hold of that hand, brought it down. “By that point, Victoria was already dead- Chloe had been for hours and hours.” The brunette brought her left hand down, too, and then leaned forward. “It's not alright, it's not alright, that Chloe had to find Rachel’s body and then get fucking shot right after.”

The girl spoke rapidly and despite the fact that there was no one around Rachel would have liked it for everyone's sake if the upset girl were a little bit quieter. Chloe scooted closer but this was the signal for Max to free her hand from Rachel's and stand up, shaking her head. She did not walk away but it was clear that for the moment touch was disturbing to her. Rachel hoped it did not remind her of Jefferson's hands. Chloe was not hurt by this gesture any more than she was judging by the small nod the bluenette gave in response to Max standing.

The photographer was upset.

“I know, alright, I know that this was all another world, another Max, another Chloe, another Rachel. But – god damn it.”

“Max, we understand.”

“Definitely,” Chloe backed her up immediately. “It's not stupid to be upset, especially having to remember shit like that. It's not your fault that you remember that.” When Max exhaled just then, it came out sounding half like a sob and Rachel realized that try as she might, Max had not banished her fears, the ones which used to drive her to secluding herself, to locking herself into her closet, to not sleep or eat for far longer than healthy. She had not silenced the voice telling her that she might be the rightful heir to the memories like the ones she had experienced today. “It's bound to be worse with him actually here, right?” Max nodded, trying to reason with herself as she tugged at the neck of her shirt, ran her hand over the knee of her jeans, grabbed at the bag over her shoulder; she moved with nerves and a lack of direction. If this were early September, Rachel might think Max was about to run away from them.

“But here’s the thing,” Rachel promised her, standing to step closer to Max's personal bubble and draw her attention. “The minute, the fucking second he steps over the line, we’re going to ruin him. Do you hear me? The only place that will hang his photos is the Museum of Dumbass Psychopaths Who Get Outsmarted By Their Students. M-D-P-O-T-S for short.” The fuck am I even saying? Rachel asked herself. Max laughed, though it was still hard to distinguish from a sob and when she looked up again some of her fire looked to be back. Chloe opened her arms and took a step forward, questioningly. When the photographer lowered her back to the ground, shuffled her feet, digging her relatively new converse into the dirt a bit and nodded, Chloe stepped forward.
The tallest of the three of them wrapped her arms around Max’s shoulders and asked if Max thought she was going to be able to handle class.

“I'll do my best.”

“Take a table with Hayden or Kate- or both,” Chloe said. While the two were distracted in their embrace, Rachel freed her phone and sent the two other photography students a quick message.

Me

Max is gonna hate that I did this, but stick with her through photography class today, please? She's not doing so hot.

“That's smart,” Max told Chloe finally, “especially if Nathan's getting up to his old shit again.” Okay, we're back on the topic of what to do, instead of what happened somewhere else. Rachel felt like she could actually help with this. She slipped out of her jacket and when Chloe stepped away from Max, wrapped it around the girl's shoulders. Fuck it: let her keep it today.

“Have you given any more thought to how to figure out if Jefferson has any connections with the Prescotts yet?” In the past, Max had said that the only thing she can think to do is the same thing she did in September when she stole a copy of Nathan’s files (which were quite the read if Rachel did say so herself. “You never explained how you got the information before or how you want to do it now.”

“I sort of- well, basically I used my powers to get into the Wells' office.” Chloe made an impressed noise and Rachel was happy to see-Max slipped her arms into Rachel's jacket. “Wells is kinda so far down the hole on alcoholism that his mind is sorta in the shit. He always keeps an item on his desk that references his password. It’s not that hard to get into his computer; I've done it three times. One time his password was literally written on a post-it and stuck on the underside of the desk.” Chloe laughed. At this Max seemed to lighten up slightly and Rachel relaxed, taking each of the girls by a hand. “I wanna do it tonight. I want to get this part over with.”

“Can I help you?” Rachel asked. It was not really a request and Max knew it, because she looked sheepishly down at the ground.

“I mean, it's a lot harder to get caught by yourself,” Rachel lifted her chin and continued to stare at the brunette, who raised her eyes briefly to see that the idea had not gone over well and then lowered them again and sighed. “Having lookouts would help, I guess.”
“I'd come along for this one, especially since you two always get the fun illicit adventures on campus all to yourselves, but I sort of agreed to work hard on that history essay and it's due on Thursday.” Rachel promised her, as the warning bell signalling ten minutes until class rang, that she could come along for the next time they decided to break into the school.

“Thank you,” Chloe responded, sounding relieved. “Fact is, I haven't been included in many plots lately.”

“That,” Rachel said, “is because you've been busy doing homework or odd jobs around your neighborhood. Actually, I hear that pays pretty well over there.” Chloe laughed.

“I'll take you two out to dinner, somewhere that isn’t the diner. Which basically means chinese food.”

“I'm in,” Max chimed in immediately, looking a little more herself as she fixed her widest, most 'aww' inducing smile on Chloe. Rachel immediately marked this moment down in her memory as evidence that Max was just fine using the fact that she was cute to manipulate the shit out of them if it meant chinese.

“It might have to be tomorrow, but we can totally do it.”

“I'll be happy to carb load.”

“And you're going to eat lunch with us later,” Rachel prompted the girl.

“I'll try. I've been doing better,” Max said, defensively. “I am trying.”

“I know that and I'm happy for you, Max.” Rachel settled herself on the end of the side of the bench that Chloe and Max moved to sit back down on and enjoyed the feeling of the three of them simply close to one another until the bell rang again. Today, school, tonight, Mark Jefferson gets his shit wrecked, maybe?
Chapter Forty-Four: Aletheia

Lost

And no one gave a toss

But now we've took our slot and so the story changed

January 17th 2012, 11:10 PM

The halls of Blackwell at night were always the same, Max thought as the door shut behind her. She flexed her fingers beneath her gloves and turned her eyes to the school. They were in one of the side halls; the one closest, as it turned out, to the dormitories. For that reason, if no other, Max wanted to keep moving. The only lights obvious in the hall were small, red ones that simply signified that smoke detectors and fire alarms were active and ready to do their duty. That's going to be annoying, Max told herself as she reached forward and caught Rachel's elbow in her hand. To her credit, even in the eerie quiet of the hall after hours Rachel did not jump.

The tiny bit of light which filtered in through the doors was not enough to really let Max make out Rachel’s face but she knew that before they set off, feet shuffling along familiar, smooth tile floors, the blonde turned back to her. Probably, Max figured, she was trying to get a read on Max's emotional state. Max would have understood and appreciated that, frankly, as that morning she had been a total wreck. That was this morning, this is now. Let's get down to business. Quietly, in the back corner of her mind, the old refrain 'to defeat the Huns' had a bag tossed over its head and was stuffed into the back of a van to be disappeared somewhere.

The farther they went from the door, the closer they got to being safe if they were to turn on a light but also the darker it got until they were in near perfect darkness. The pale glow of vending machines were fixed up ahead, lighting the nexus in which all three hallways in the school intersected. Soon enough they passed through the darkest stretch of the hall past the photography classroom, among others, and into the center of the school where, now, Max could see Rachel's
face when she turned back. The girl was concerned. She also looked distinctly uncomfortable dressed in the majority of her prowling outfit; the heavy black sweater, burnt gloves and, frankly, ruined sweatpants did the trick of helping to conceal one from view but it was not strictly necessary. Max hadn't had the heart to correct the girl when she stopped by Max's room in the middle of the night, ready to go, but figured Rachel had recognized her mistake when Max strolled out of the dormitories in her street clothes.

Again, Max moved her fingers to be sure these new gloves weren't going to be a pain in her ass. Then, resting one hand on Rachel's shoulder briefly, she drew narrowing eyes and a brief nod from the thespian. Alright, let's get this going. Max dug into her pocket. Her gloved hand brushed something small which was most likely the thumb drive and then found purchase on her phone. Its 'flashlight' emitted more than enough light for the pair them to get through the hall and come to a stop outside of the front office. Rachel did not slow, not knowing what Max knew. Once they passed through this open doorway, she was going to find a locked door. It was always locked.

Max glanced back up at Rachel and felt a momentary sense of vertigo. For just a moment, she was not looking at Rachel Amber, but at Chloe Price. It was not the Chloe Price she was used to: this one was slightly thinner and looked back at Max hungry for answers and a little angry, wearing an unfamiliar jacket with a familiar beanie. Max blinked hard and the thought went away, leaving only Rachel behind, watching her for answers. It wasn't that Max saw a memory, or even really saw Chloe in front of her, it was just a thought, an idea, a sensation. She wasn't like Chloe: she didn't 'read peoples' presence.'

This was, most likely, an artifact left behind by the angry, hurt woman based out of another Los Angeles entirely. Max was aware, the same way someone would be who read the sparknotes of a story instead of reading the book might be aware, of details. She thought that she and Chloe-- that was to say a different Max and a different Chloe, had done this once before in the other world. Before's the wrong word. That would have been in 2013. So, 'after' she corrected herself. Rachel must have sensed her hesitation.

“We're here,” Rachel prompted her, as if she wasn't entirely sure that Max knew where they were. Sometimes, she found the tone with which Rachel spoke to her a little bit condescending. Those times, she had to remind herself that it was her own frustration speaking. The truth was that there were plenty of times she had found herself standing somewhere, so lost in the thoughts in her head or in panic that Rachel's guiding voice and tone had been all that stood between her and just breaking down somewhere she wouldn't want to.

Like this morning? If the girls had thought Max was bad at the breakfast table, there had been a second when Jefferson's eyes met hers where Max was close to simply losing her cool. If it hadn't been for Rachel practically holding her up she might have. The worst part of it all was that she did not have solid memories of the man to blame her mental state on. She had not been having any kind of flashback, it was simply the idea of being in a room with someone like Jefferson that had frozen her to the table. Like in the dream. Only this time, instead of Chloe arriving to pull her from the corner, she and Rachel had both escorted her out of the school and brought her somewhere where
she could actually think again.

And it’s time to focus. Max glanced away from Rachel to a small box set into the wall just about twenty feet down the hall. Contained inside of that was a decent sized fire extinguisher. That was her first option for getting through the locked door set into the back wall of the room ahead but she found it to be something of a gamble. Oh, it had worked last time, certainly, but she had to confess that since that last time she had gotten physically weaker. Max didn’t want to admit this to Rachel and Chloe but her recovery as far as her ability to eat and keep food down was not quite as complete as they expected. I have been getting better. I have been trying. They don’t get it. Given that the fire extinguisher was pretty light, Max wasn’t so sure she could really drive it down with the force required for what she needed.

“This is gonna be a little scary for a second, but you won’t even notice a second later.” Not like I have a better plan A. Max watched concern cross Rachel’s face by the light of her phone. It was healthy, reasonable concern. If Rachel had said it to her without any context, Max would have begun asking questions. Instead, the thespian nodded as if to say that she trusted Max implicitly. Max waited a moment longer before taking off to see if that made her feel guilty like it used to. Certainly it made her feel a little undeserving. She wasn’t sure any of the three of them deserved that kind of questionless trust. That thought did leave her feeling guilty but she really had no time to unpack everything rattling around in her head.

It didn’t take Max more than a few seconds to reach the extinguisher, with her path lit in fair detail. In case of fire, smash shit. F airly sturdy glass rested over the front of the box, made not to be shattered if bumped into too hard, as had happened last week to one of the doors of the trophy case when Daniel DaCosta ‘tripped’ into it between classes. What looked deceptively like a heavy extinguisher waited for her inside the box, the key to breaking into Principal Wells’ office which was currently locked away behind thick, dark wood. She reached down to grab the small, metal glass breaker hanging from the box on a fairly short chain. As she lined up her quick swing, Max remembered the first time she had done this almost exactly a year ago.

Time flies when feel like you ought to die. She hadn’t been sure then if it was one of those things where it was going to be easy to do, if she was going to be able to put enough force into it on her first try.

Now, Max knew better. She did not have to swing particularly hard; it didn’t even take much force for the glass to shatter. Excellent, Max told herself as the glass began to fall both inwardly and outwardly, not making a significant noise by itself. While the glass made neither ear-piercing crash nor pleasant tinkling, what did make a noise was the sharp, world ending alarm that began to blare inside the school. Max slipped her phone back into her pocket, reached into the box and after flipping a latch, seized the fire extinguisher and pulled it free. We have about four minutes if David’s on duty, maybe eight or nine if not. If she were David—that was to say, freshly divorced and living alone-she might have been working night shift.

“What the hell?” Rachel called from down the hall as she hefted the fire extinguisher up and started toward the blonde. There was no reason to whisper anymore, and Rachel knew it. As she approached the doorway to the front office, Max remembered the first time she had had to do this.
She had been immediately disappointed: the extinguisher couldn't weight more than nine pounds and she had been counting on it being heavier so she could use its weight to her advantage. Despite feeling slightly weaker than before, she still felt far more hindered by the thing's shape than its light weight. Max hauled the object, one hand on its handle and the other on the bottom, past Rachel who stepped aside when she realized that Max wasn't surprised by the alarm blasting across campus. Still, standing a little dumbfounded, her visage registered in Max's eyes in the darkness and pulled an unexpected chuckle from somewhere deep in her stomach. “Max, I don't mean to question your plan but-”

“In a few seconds this will never have happened,” Max promised her as she approached the imposing door across from her. Ignoring the tacky nameplate set into the otherwise unmarred wood, Max raised the fire extinguisher and decided to set the girl at ease. “You ever shut yourself into a room and break a doorknob off?”

“Can't say I have,” Rachel responded, dubiously, now practically yelling. It was easy to do with that damn alarm trying to bore through one's ears and liquidate their brain. Max grunted a chuckle as she stopped short of the door and eyed the knob. Line it up, get this done with. I don't know how many swings we have in us. The truth was that her arms were already getting tired. This was not a heavy weight, but it was bulky and the idea of having to take more than three or four shots with it was not good. The truth was, if it took that many it probably meant she was too weak to get done what needed to get done. Max was going to have to confront some hard truths about her behavior if that happened and she did not want to have to. It was better to just leave some things alone. Focus.

“You feel stupid and a little trapped at first, but it's easier than you think to get out without a doorknob, not to mention,” Max heard her own tone rise to a yell as she slammed the extinguisher down as hard as she could against the knob, trying to turn one edge of the bottom of the cylinder so that it might focus the force of the blow. The alarm outside of the office continued to scream and the knob hung on, though she thought it was hanging lower than natural. Okay, but why am I so tired? “It does wonders for making locks kind of fucking pointless.” Max took a deep breath, a little shamed by the fact that she was already beginning to feel out of breath. Holding tight to the round top and the handle of the bright red fire extinguisher, she slammed the end down again. No, God fucking damn it! When Max moved the extinguisher away and very nearly lost her grip on it, she took one more look at the handle. Again, it hung angled downward, but had not broken. Her swings were clearly doing something but she needed to break the damn thing off and like it or not, she had not been the best to her body over the last few months. Those particular chickens were coming home to roost. “We have a minute at most,” she called over her shoulder, “I need you to help me out.”

The thespian did step up beside her, winking one hazel eye and then, instead of helping her, slowly pushed her aside. Exasperated, Max reached out to hand the extinguisher over; Rachel was strong enough to get it done, surely. Rachel did not take the offered tool. Instead, Max watched in a mix of frustration and fascination as Rachel grabbed hold of the doorknob. At first, nothing happened: Max knew the knob was damaged but there is still one good solid metal piece at the center of the whole mess that needed to be broken or somehow dislodged.
As Max was about to tell Rachel that she was not superman and wouldn't be breaking that metal rod with her hand this evening, she got a whiff of something. It was not pleasant smelling: smoke and something metallic. *Oh*, Max told herself, shifting around Rachel to try to get a better view of what the girl was doing. From her angle, Max watched the knob deform slightly under her hand. *Fucking cool.* Bit by bit, the knob heated up. Max's head swung around, quickly. Even over the blaring alarm she could hear the front doors to the school—the closest set-opening. Things were going to get bad if they weren't through that door in a few seconds. *Help her out,* Max told herself.

“Rachel, David's going to be here any second. He's going to catch us and we're going to have to deal with him dragging us around, shit talking us. I don't know about you but that doesn't sound like any fun to me.” Rachel did not turn her head, did not look at her. Max watched her in profile and saw the girl's brows point inward, saw her jaw work as she ground her teeth and less heard and more *felt* when Rachel cracked her neck. There was a moment almost immediately after when the smell of smoke increased and, burning faux gold paint and impurities in the thin metal, Rachel pushed her fire harder toward the knob. If past experience was anything to go by, Max knew to take a step back, so she did. Impressively, the doorknob didn't simply explode from the force of Rachel's ability.

Instead, it began to visibly look heated, glowing slightly. Max dropped the fire extinguisher and was forced to jump back another step so as not to crush one of her toes. Ignoring for the moment the fact that not only had her arms just given out under far too little pressure but she had also failed to open the door for the first time, Max glanced over her shoulder. No one had come into the room yet, but she could see the telltale signs of flashlights from down the hall. When Max looked back she did so in time not to *hear* the snap of the small metal rod attached to the handle so much as see it in the way Rachel's grasp changed on the handle. Max reached immediately into her left pocket and freed a thick, if short, screwdriver from it, pushing Rachel aside again with her right hand. A glowing mass of thin, cheap brass hit the carpet, which was something of a fire hazard.

The look Rachel gave Max when she briefly sideeyed the thespian was that same trust, whole and complete. Either she did not know that they were seconds away from being discovered or it did not bother her. *It's okay, all you need is to step into that room and everything is over.* Max rammed the screwdriver into the remnants of the handle. She could feel it in her arm as the rest of the knob was dislodged and, with very little effort, she managed to turn the mechanism inside of the door using the flathead. When she thought she felt the familiar click, Max pushed on the door, placing her spare finger to her lips.

Max stumbled into the dark room, took two steps and turned. Rachel was framed for a moment against the backdrop of a flashlight aimed right at her. Behind the light Max saw a pointed chin, a thick mustache, a man who had hurt Chloe. As David called out for them to freeze, Max raised her right hand and closed her eyes. She pushed herself from the world, away from Rachel and David, from the alarm and the anxiety and into the timescape. This time, instead of making for the nearest sensation with all of her focus, she split it. Half of herself remained frozen on the spot and half struck out into the hazy grey void that was the timescape in which she found herself.
It was different trying to root one's self to a point in space while pushing against time. It became more difficult to taste the emotions of a moment as one approached it, to see the sounds or feel the conversation. Max knew to look for the acidic taste of her guilt, her realization that she had neglected her own health to the point where she was unable to get through the door by herself and then to try to go past that to the sweet and sour 'aha' moment of seizing the glass breaker and lining up a swing. Things weren't exactly so linear in the timescape but as long as one looked for connections between times, it was usually fairly simple not to get lost wandering in it.

Max could hardly remember what traveling was like before she became aware of the smog-vapor of the timescape. She had the vague sense that it was more instinctual than anything and that was why she trusted the idea that she could find one point from another as long as they were connected. There was no guidebook to this kind of thing, no one to tell her that that idea was right. She had had one person in front of her once, who might have been able to give her advice but at the time Max had been so fucked up that she hadn't even thought to ask.

Max found a jagged tear in the timescape, from which an aroma that turned into taste was emitting. This aroma was the very same 'aha' she had been looking for. She could see herself in the tear, reaching for the small, steel hammer-like object hanging from the extinguisher. By the time she got it, the tear was already showing her Rachel who stood, gaping in surprise and confusion by the entrance to the front office. Excellent, Max thought while doing something that almost equated to shuffling feet in this non-world. That act, which sometimes Max even had difficulty defining and recognizing, reminded her where she was to stay as another part of her passed to when she was supposed to be.

The Earth returned around her, silent and dark. She still felt weaker, a little more tired and certainly shaky but when Max drew in a breath it was free of the smell of burning brass just as much as the night was unmolested by the fire alarm which would now not be set off. It only took her a second or two to unlock the door to the office and stride out. Rachel was still just out in the hallway and by the light of Max's phone flashlight, she was clearly visible in her rapid, confused search of her surroundings before she turned into the office and saw Max, waiting for her inside of Wells' office.

“Max?” she asked, blinking against the sudden glare in her eyes. “Oh w-wow.” Max gestured for her, unable to stop the smile from splitting her face. Every first time Rachel had ever seen her powers, they had elicited a similar reaction. The genuine wonder in her voice always made up for the slight fear in her eyes. Opening the door slightly wider, Max beckoned her again and felt relieved as the taller girl's legs began to work. Let's go, let's go.

“What the hell was that?” Rachel hissed as she passed firmly into Max's personal space. Max found she did not mind. Even confused, Rachel was pretty fucking gorgeous and now that they were likely to go completely undiscovered, Max felt like she might deserve a second appreciating that. The second passed and Max stepped aside. “You were standing by the fire extinguisher down the hall and then-”
“Gone?” Max asked, humming slightly. Neither of them were keeping their voices down. Max did not mind. The hard part was over. Rachel nodded her response, though it took longer than necessary. “Time and space are my bitches, honey, now get in here.” Max took the quirk of Rachel’s lips at face value and shut the door behind her with little care. Moving across the rapidly becoming familiar floor of the Wells’ office, Max found the lamp chain on his desk and pulled the chain, spreading a dim light across the room. “We're gonna wanna make it fast.”

“They won't see the light?”

“No one has a reason to come to this building for like, forty-five minutes or so, and with the snow on the ground they’ll be taking it slow,” Max promised and then remembered that Rachel had no clue at all how extensively she used to follow the guard patterns on campus. *Come to think of it, I couldn't fuckin' count the number of nights I followed one of the night guards.* “Why don't you see if there's anything in meatspace that we might need?” Max practically strolled around the desk and dropped herself back into Wells’ seat. “Damn, this is comfy.” Feeling callous, she backed the chair up and spun once in it.

“Meatspace?” Rachel asked, brow furrowing as she waited just inside the door.

“Out here in the 'real world.' I'll be online.” Max pressed the power button on the computer and then looked up at Rachel. The blonde girl was now watching Max with some sort of incredulity and did so for several seconds before shaking her head, hard and stepping over to the filing cabinets in the corner of the room. Max reached into her pocket and pulled loose the new, yellow flash drive with her gloved hand. She quite enjoyed watching Rachel start her search as the computer booted up; it was more fun when you had a partner in time. “You know, I know you can't remember, but we wouldn't have gotten in without you. Thanks.”

“You're welcome, I guess?” Rachel answered, sounding confused about whether she should have said anything to that or not. Max laughed. It was so much easier when she could be honest, and frankly, hearing Rachel just slightly out of her element was kind of cute. “What's funny?”

“Your face, now keep looking.” Max shot to her, turning back toward the computer, which had finally booted up.

“I thought you liked my face?” Rachel replied, sounding offended. If Max had turned around in that moment she thought she might have see the girl pouting.

“It's glorious, Rachel, now let's nail this shit to the board and get out of here.” *Whatever that means.*
“Aye, captain. You interface with the main computer and I’ll take an away team to this filing cabinet.”

“Gods, I love it when you talk Trek to me,” Max promised. She realized as she did so that she hadn’t felt good all day. Not really good, at least. In the moment, though, whether it was the adrenaline or the back and forth, flirting and joking and just living, she wasn’t sure but she was happy. Just living means breaking into locked rooms and looking for evidence that a sexual predator is working with the Prescotts, apparently. Max ran her eyes over the desk. I could get into this whole investigator shtick.

Step one, Max told herself as she stared at the screen, was to find out what brought Jefferson to teach at the school. He was an alum, so maybe it was that paired with his relative fame or maybe he was recommended to Wells by the Chases or perhaps the Prescotts had longer and deeper ties with him than expected. Sean Prescott is only about eight years older than him. The idea that they might have run into each other in Jefferson's early teenage years and formed some kind of mutual bond off of being absolute, heartless bastards was not out of the realm of possibility.

Frankly, the way Sean Prescott treated his son, at least, didn't make him being a psychopath seem all that unlikely. Max was about to get started when it struck her in that moment that she had never told Chloe and Rachel about why Samantha Myers left town before she even showed up. Research, especially the kind that was not fully legal, often yielded unfortunately detailed results. The Prescotts were, whatever else was going on, a skidmark on this town and sending Samantha running after the 'accident' that left her with three broken ribs was only one part of their crimes.

Get on with it, Max. She took a moment as the password prompt popped up on the screen to examine the desk. In the past, Wells would leave an object in a place of prominence and mark it somehow if it referenced or even directly was the password. The one exception was the time he had left a small post-it on the edge of his desk with an arrow pointing down. That particular day, she’d found the password written plainly on a second post-it attached to the underside of the desk.

Today, there was nothing that stuck out as being out of place. Nothing new seemed to be set on to the front of the desk and the only post-it she could find was blank and attached to the back of the, bronze bird that always sat on his desk. Strangely, though, the bird was turned so that its beak was facing the chairs opposite of the desk more directly than usual. You know, Max told herself as she heard Rachel grunt, it's never been the falcon before. She couldn't come up with the names of any falcons from fiction or history off the top of her head, though. The password prompt obscured the letters as she typed 'F-A-L-C-O-N'. Next she tried the same word in all lowercase letters and by the third attempt, the screen still had not gone blank and begun loading Wells' desktop but a hint had formed at the bottom of the screen.
The man in black fled across the desert and the gunslinger followed. Also, a pain in my ass.’ Max blinked. On the whole it sounded like a pretty generic and irrelevant phrase, but Max was certain she'd heard it before. She turned on her chair to find Rachel watching her, a manilla file folder in her hand. I wonder if she's got something, but I need to get in here.

“Trying to get the password. The hint is: The man in black fled across the desert and the gunslinger followed. Is there a reason that sounds familiar?” When Rachel responded, her voice was slightly higher and a bit more drawn out, just the slightest bit pretentious sounding. It was, Max recognized immediately, a less-than-flattering though not inaccurate mimicry of Brooke Scott's voice. Rachel didn't have to finish speaking for the puzzle pieces to click.

“'The Dark Tower is Stephen King's greatest achievement and anyone who reads it can't tell me he's just a horror author.'”

“Biiiiiiingo.” It only took Max a second after that to free her phone from her pants pocket, gloves or not. She pulled up her inbox and looked not for the contents of the message preview but the small icon depicting Brooke's face. Fuckin' aye.

Me

are you awake?

“What did you find?” Max asked Rachel as she began to count to thirty in her head. If Brooke didn't get back to her, she would just have to google it and try to find out what to do. Okay, so that's the first line from the book. I read that much. What does that make the password? Max glanced back at the falcon. Is it possible 'The Gunslinger' has a pet bird or some shit? In answer to Max's question, Rachel shook her head. It was not the most encouraging response she could have gotten.

“It's just his resume and his record when he was here. Good student, nice grades- like five or six fights though and twice someone got sent to the hospital. Sounds like he had a temper.” Max nodded but allowed herself a second of distraction to compare him to Nathan. She was about to speak when Brooke's response came in, the phone in Max's hand buzzing insistently. When Max answered it, Rachel was freeing hers, presumably to snap a photo of each page of the man's file. Rachel Amber, you're a genius.

Brooke

What's up
Me

Did The Gunslinger have a bird?

Brooke

What

Me

From that Stephen King series. I feel like I remember hearing someone saying he had a bird, what was it called?

Brooke

he used a bird as a weapon once. Clawed out his teacher's eye. Kinda gross.

Me

What was it called? Someone was asking me and I can't remember.

Brooke

Two seconds.

His name was David.

Me

Thanks. Are you looking forward to the session on Friday?

Max laughed audibly as she slid her phone back into her pocket. She would be sure to keep up with Brooke in a minute or two, but Max was busy trying not to grin too much at the last part of the hint. Also a pain in your ass indeed, Wells. She registered Rachel inquiring after her chuckle but was too busy moving fingers across the familiar keyboard layout. 'D-a-v-i-d.'

The screen went black a moment after she hit enter and then the principal's desktop roared to life. Max didn't waste any time. Though the computer protested and stalled as much as it could, she popped open a browser as Rachel approached her, making a sound of some appreciation and
enjoyment. She felt the chair shift as Rachel put one hand on its back and knelt beside Max. In this state the girl was about half an inch shorter than Max, which gave her a rare opportunity while the browser remained blank and unresponsive. Max pecked the girl on her forehead, earning an earnest, sweet smile and then turned herself back toward the computer.

“We're in, fuckers,” Max practically crooned in celebration. “Now if this piece of shit can run faster than the speed of death we might get done here before we're eighty.”

“Chill,” Rachel advised her. “We're fine here, right?”

“Right,” Max promised the girl, their eyes matching again. “At least, I know I'm fine. I've looked into a mirror today.” Rachel's smile turned to a smirk and though it meant having to take extra care to balance, the blonde socked her fairly roughly on the shoulder for the inappropriately timed humor. It didn't take Max any time to get into the man's e-mail system with the same password he had been using a year and some change ago. What did prove problematic was finding any sign of email correspondence about Mark Jefferson at all. Eventually, using the search function built into the mailbox, she dug up a series of six e-mails between Jefferson and Wells that seemed to be fairly normal between employee and employer. Wells, it seemed, was happy to have a man of Jefferson's clout coming to Blackwell and Jefferson was happy for the chance to 'return to my community' and 'share years of knowledge gained first and second hand.'

In short, as Max and Rachel read through the chain of messages back and forth, there was zero sign of the man being connected to either the Chases or the Prescotts. Sean Prescott certainly at one point congratulated Wells on a fine hiring decision but the same could be said for any number of people who Max suspected were part of the school board. This meant nothing. As much as she hadn't wanted to find any evidence to suggest Nathan and Jefferson were already brothers in arms, it was somewhat disappointing to have nothing new to go from, to consider that they might have to start from scratch in the fight against Mark Jefferson. Max cleared the browser history and pushed back from the desk a few minutes later before shutting the computer down.

“So we found nothing?” Rachel asked as she began to stand. The thespian's knees popped audibly in the quiet office.

“Maybe,” Max grunted, feeling more than a little grumpy. “Or maybe the lack of evidence tells a story.” With that, Max rose to her feet herself and took the time to position the chair roughly where it was. Watching as Rachel frustratedly put the file back, Max slipped her flash drive back into her pocket. “Maybe Wells really just put out there that the school was going to need a replacement next year and Jefferson really just applied. It would be really hard to turn him down for the spot.”

“Why would he come back?” Rachel asked as she slid the cabinet shut and the two of them began to make toward the door. Max peeked out the moment she cracked it open. “If you're rich and
famous, why come back?” This time, the girl spoke more quietly. They were about to return to their creep-and-whisper tactics.

“Well, he was starting to fall out of vogue a little but he was a native to Arcadia Bay, a graduate at Blackwell at one time. He must have decided that it was a good hunting ground. Hell, sick fucker’s first victims were probably here,” the next phrase made her shiver, but Max thought it bore saying. “Predators love to hunt on familiar ground.”

“What do we now?” The freshly locked principal's office door shut behind the thespian and Max led her into the hall. The smartest move was to leave by the same door they entered, so Max led the way, muttering as she went.

“Now we watch him like a hawk. Now, we watch Nathan like a hawk. He could be up to his old tricks already and the thing is, if he is, Jefferson might catch on and that might be how they get connected.” With a sigh, Max issued her last edict. “Now, we go into the belly of the beast.”

“What do you mean by that?” Rachel pressed, sounding properly concerned again for the first time since they had broken into the school to begin with.

“Now, we join the Vortex Club.”

End Part 3

Are You Ready For Me?

Chapter End Notes

And with that, we come to the end of Part 3 - Are you Ready?. So, there have been overwhelming themes behind each section of this story so far. This one was about healing, self-recognition and acceptance and airing grievances. In this section I wanted to show the characters pushing toward the edge of their individual problems and facing them. The showdowns did not always happen properly, or well, but the reality is that when mental health is involved, when issues like emotional abuse are involved, rarely does everything fall out black and white. It took Chloe parts 2 and 3 to realize that the reason that David's words bothered her so much was because she believed them. It took her that long to step away from an unhealthy, toxic environment and identify toxic elements outside of it, such as the lack of communication and keeping of secrets, robbing of agency that existed between her and Max. Rachel needed to
confront her own tendency to push her emotions to the side and pretend they didn't exist as well as realize that impulsive and dangerous behavior in defense of those you love is not just limited to her father and not just dangerous or problematic when he does it. As for Max, she badly needed to learn to trust herself because it was keeping her from trusting others and in the process she was violating their trust, violating their will, their agency. Also, most obviously, she needed to be forced to confront self-destructive behaviors that were going to go nowhere good, very quickly. It was not always pleasant, it was not always done morally, but my hope is that I told a story about these characters facing down those demons in this part. Moving forward, I hope to tell a story of just that: moving forward, self-actualization, healing, but don't forget that there's still a demon waiting in the wings for the girls to deal with. Max will tell you: time ticks ever on and there are some things you just can't avoid.

Final words, I promise. Given the themes dealt with in Parts 2 and 3 I really, want to take a moment to talk to those dealing with mental and emotional conditions, whether it be anxiety, depression or anything else that hurts you, that stresses you, that stretches you to your limit. I know that sometimes this is the most useless, worthless thing to see or hear when you're dealing with these things but in my own struggles I've occasionally found it to be the thing I needed to hear the most: You Are Not Alone. These struggles go on, day in and day out, in the minds of real people, people you probably see every day and might not even know are suffering. You will always find people fighting that fight, who understand the sheer amount of energy and passion you have to dedicate to things that others might see as no big deal, or maybe even just to continuing the fight. You're not alone. We are out here, we understand. I may not be able to personally comprehend everything you've experienced, but we, the collective we, understand. If that idea does anything for you today, then let it set in: there are those who understand the fight. In the case of an emergency in which you feel that you might be a danger to yourself, I would ask you to reach out to someone. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is available 24/7 at 1-800-273-8255. I've never called them myself, but there have been many days where I have hovered over the 'call' button and even having gotten through, I often look back on those particularly bad days and wish I HAD called. This is for a very simple reason: we are not made to be alone and we do not NEED to be alone.

Be well, and if you've enjoyed, I hope you continue to enjoy.
Chapter Forty-Five: Synedrion

January 21st, 2012 10:30 AM

Max's stomach was twisted into a knot, her hands threatening to shake just slightly but all she could do as she paced in front of the picnic table was tell herself that this was nothing compared to the things she had already done and probably compared to what would need doing in the near future. And, at least, I have back up now. Max turned to glance at Rachel. Rachel stood at one end of the table, upon which Chloe was lying on her back, absentmindedly shooting the breeze with Rachel. Chloe was, in comparison, at ease. Though, Rachel playing with her hair probably had a thing or two to do with it. When Hayden came marching out of those doors to tell them it was time, Chloe was going to stay behind while Max and Rachel walked across the lawn to the doors of the school and into the cafeteria to face down the Vortex Club, or at least, the actual members of the club itself.

“Max,” Chloe called, “calm down. Between Hayden, your natural charms and your mojo, you've got this in the bag.” My 'mojo' can really suck, Max wanted to tell her. Instead she continued to pace, grateful she would not be doing it long enough to wear a rut into the grass that was already rather thin as a result of the number of people who used the table on a daily basis. Her new chucks felt amazing under her, not that they provided a ton of foot support, but it felt great to be back in shoes and out of sandals, and, she needed every ounce of confidence she could gather, whether from Chloe's flippant reassurance or just the comfort of familiar clothes.

“You're sure you won't come with us?” Rachel queried, and Max watched her pull her hands back, earning a frown from the blue haired artist looking up at her. “We're a bigger force to be reckoned with together.” Chloe shook her head again and made as if to sit up before deciding better of it.

“Look, I'm all down for the plan. I just don't want to do anything that gets me stuck in a room with Nathan Prescott on a regular basis. And, Max, I know how much you like her and that things have been getting better with her, but Victoria still pisses me off. Just because I don't want to hang out with them doesn't mean I'm not in on it, though. It's a good plan. Why wouldn't it be? It came from you two.” Max had already endured Chloe lecturing them on the Vortex Club getting more than
they deserved in the two of them, considering Nathan was present. It was Chloe's thinly veiled way of asking Max if she was sure she wanted to expose herself to someone who upset her so much. Max, however, had a plan for that, an intermediary.

“You know,” Rachel pondered as she settled down into a seat, “Nathan's still under the impression that Hayden gives some kind of fuck about him. I think he wants us to get a move on and bring some shit down on Nathan.”

“I can't blame him,” Chloe chimed in. “If it were me, he'd already be in jail somewhere.”

“I'd be right with you all if we didn't have to wait for Nathan to make a move of his own, to attract Jefferson or show some sign he and Jefferson hooked up.” There was a moment where Max watched a look of revulsion cross Rachel's face and, raising an eyebrow, waited for her to tell Max what was so upsetting.

“Can you find better phrasing? I can't think of anything more shudder-worthy than-”

“For all of our sakes,” Chloe said from behind Rachel, “please don't finish that sentence.” Rachel turned in her seat and as Max resumed pacing, the girls beside her shared a quick peck. It was pretty cool in the dead of January, probably just under forty degrees. While somehow Chloe had some sort of natural resistance even with such a thin jacket and without her signature beanie, Max suspected Rachel's own fortitude in the face of the cold was not so natural. Max, on the other hand, was just cold. The pacing was only doing so much to mitigate that.

She was, as such, relieved when the doors opened and Hayden stepped just outside of them in his jacket. Whether he was rubbing his hands together to warm them or in anticipation, it was hard to tell. He certainly wasn't grinning for once, even if he didn't look grim. The boy raised an eyebrow and then a hand to signal them and then stepped back inside. Max stopped her pacing and reached out to take Rachel by the shoulder. When the blonde turned bright eyes and red cheeks on her (the cool wind apparently cut through whatever defense against the cold she had) Max nodded toward the door. Before she could turn and lead the way, Chloe sat up and took hold of one of Max's hands, squeezing silently. The brunette made sure that her oldest friend could see that she was determined and wasn't going to give up on this idea. This, it seemed, was all that the artist needed to smile, climb from the table and walk with them toward the doors.

“What?” Chloe asked when Rachel wondered what she was doing. “Did you think I was gonna freeze my ass off waiting for you?”

“I really hope not, you can't spare any,” Rachel vollied back.
“Hey!” Max made sure not to turn and look at either of them. Playful or not, she was going to stay neutral on this and that would be hard to do if the grin on her face was visible to anyone, except, perhaps the boy looking through the glass of the front door at her as she quickened her pace. Rachel and Chloe bickered for a moment or two and then fell quiet when Max opened the doors to the school. Hayden took a step back to let them in, hands now in the pockets of his jacket. The school was mercifully warm or, at least, it had more than twenty-five degrees on the temperature outside. That was close enough as far as Max was concerned. She was dressed more for an appearance of someone trying to make an impression than for warmth.

“So,” Hayden asked Chloe immediately, “you joining us?”

“No thanks, I'm gonna kick it over there or something,” Chloe announced, gesturing to a stretch of wall a few feet away from the door. Hayden nodded.

“No offense, but I'm glad. I told everyone I was bringing two new recruits and no one was super into the idea. Three might be pushing it.” Max watched Chloe slide her hands into the pockets of her jeans. If this bothered her, she wasn't showing it. Rachel, on the other hand, shot Max one concerned look. “Oh, and fair warning, there's some weird vibe going on between Victoria and Nathan right now. He's pretty pissy.” With that unfortunate (or very fortunate, Max thought) announcement out of the way, Hayden turned away. As Hayden gestured them forward and made for the cafeteria, Max leaned close to Rachel.

“It's okay,” Max promised the girl. “I'm going to rewind as many times as it takes to get this right.”

“Then, I'll be listening for you,” Rachel responded a little flatly, attempting to continue looking fairly laid back as she started after Hayden. Max waved a quick goodbye to Chloe, who immediately made for the aforementioned stretch of wall and sat down, digging something from the backpack slung across her shoulder. Only about four days ago, under cover of a snowstorm, Max and Rachel had snuck into the school to look for evidence of some collusion between the Prescotts and Mark Jefferson. Max did not feel the same kind of nerves in her body as they now followed a few steps behind Hayden, but she did not feel anywhere near as calm as Rachel was behaving. It really sucks freaking out about every little thing.

Hayden raised a hand to slow them as they reached the doors and entered first. Rachel waited for Max and the two of them listened until Hayden made sure everyone was ready for them. Now, Rachel's earlier calm exterior shifted aside for a moment. The blonde locked hazel eyes on Max's blues and made sure to show her that incredible trusting nature. The message was clear: Rachel would do and say whatever Max asked her to in order to get this right. That also means I need to not fuck up. When Hayden called for them to enter, it immediately went almost as Max and Rachel had predicted. The moment they came through the doors together a couple of awkward looks
passed around the table from some of their friends, Victoria seemed to sigh as if this whole thing was going to be a hassle and Nathan went from disgusted at their appearance to enraged almost from the beginning. Nathan tensed up at one end of the table. Courtney sat to his right, Taylor beside her, then Victoria. Beyond that, the committee consisted of Sarah, Zachary, Juliet, Dana and her boyfriend, Logan and of course, Hayden.

“Oh fuck no,” Nathan declared from where he sat at the end of a lunch table. “No way in hell those nosy dykes are getting in here.” Max could definitely feel her hackles going up and her anxiety rising at the same time. It was funny, if she had been able to dispassionately experience anxiety (if such a concept made any sense) she thought she could actually scientifically measure it in that moment. As it was, she just had to force her feet to continue into the room alongside Rachel, who was quite suddenly at the lead. Okay, Dana, Juliet and Hayden are going to be on our side. That's three out of ten. It was enough, at least, that Max held some hope they would be able to at least argue their case. Besides, Rachel's still pretty popular around here. Max figured that Rachel could grab Logan, (who was watching the scene unfold with an unusual mix of amusement and impatience) and was at least liked by Zachary and Sarah as much as either of them were capable of liking anyone over their own egos. No, Rachel was in no problem. The issue would be getting her by them. That was up to Rachel making it clear they were a package deal. If we can swing all six of them, that's all it takes to get in.

“Nathan, dude, just hear them out,” Hayden advised him as he walked toward the table. Nathan crossed his arms over his chest, sneering directly at Max. She allowed herself to take the boy in and wonder at the transformation from the person she had tried to help. Nathan had a certain attractive quality about him that something as silly as facial scarring could do nothing to touch. What detracted from that was the constant rage, the scowls. These had not been Nathan's companions when she first came to the school and first tried to befriend and help the boy, now he was never seen without one or both. “They could bring a lot to the club.” Max drew her eyes from Nathan's, both the real one and the artificial and to Dana. She looked a little jarred, but smiled encouragingly. A similar attitude could be seen on Juliet's face, but she was a little bit busier trying to pretend not to be listening to the argument unfolding.

“Fuck. That.” This declaration was followed by Nathan suddenly standing up. “If you actually try to make us listen to this bullshit, I'll walk out.” There had been plenty of adversarial moments between them, but now Nathan was glaring across the room at them and he could not seem to decide who he hated more. He's going to lose his shit. This realization was followed immediately by the one that she might do the same if he did. Turning and running out of the room was not likely to go over very well. Feeling guilty, Max stepped closer to Rachel. She tried not to let either guilt or fear show on her face but when the edge of her arm brushed the leather of Rachel's jacket, she felt the slightest bit safer. If he loses his shit, maybe that works in our favor. “What in the name of fuck were you thinking bringing the feminazi and her slut in here?”

The nerves building in her stomach began to worsen at the raising voice and the language. Rachel's face remained impassive, but when their eyes met, she reached out and took hold of Max's shoulder, whispering for her to calm down. Whatever she might try, Max was sure her feelings were written across her own face in big bold letters. When Hayden tried to calm Nathan down and
admonish him for the language, Nathan moved past that to threats, to promises that Nathan ran this school. Far from making Hayden scared of him, the taller of the two boys stayed standing, arms crossed and his face slowly transforming from patronizing to a glare that would make Max uncomfortable were she on the receiving end. When Dana tried to speak and was instantly snapped at to shut up, Logan chimed in.

“You're being fucking ridiculous, man, calm down. What can it hurt to just let them talk and get this bullshit over with?” It wasn't the ringing endorsement Max had been hoping for, but it was more supportive than Sarah was being as she pulled her phone from her pocket. Dana was attempting to recover her image of someone in a perpetual good mood, but it was far from successful. Max didn't blame her. She almost wanted to tell herself that there had to be another way and leave, pulling Rachel along behind her.

“What the hell do you know?” Nathan shot back at the boy. “I could see to it that any hope for scholarships goes right out the fucking window if you don't watch your fucking mouth.” Logan did immediately shut his mouth, but the look of anger settling on his face was almost pleasant to see and it did not hurt that Zachary's became a mirror of it. Apparently, if you threatened one Bigfoot, you threatened them all. Max glanced at Rachel to try to see what her read of the situation was, but she remained calm, now folding her hands in front of her in a gesture more reminiscent of Kate than anyone. One of Rachel's 'masks'? Either way, this might be a good thing, I just wish he would shut up. At that moment Rachel stepped forward, coming to stand beside Hayden. Max followed as quickly as she could. Nathan's fit seemed to stall when Logan didn't respond.

“So, why would you want to join, anyway?” This was the first question they had actually received from the table and despite a certain suggestion that it was stupid to want to join when Nathan hated them so much, its overall lack of hostility was surprising. That was mostly down to the source. Victoria looked to be taking a moderate stance. Thinking about it, Max realized that for as much shit as Victoria used to give her and Chloe (it had been some months since the last shot was taken) about being Rachel's 'harem', Victoria had never really said anything to Rachel. Occasionally Max thought she caught the girl shooting looks the thespian's way, but that was not the same. All in all, Victoria had calmed down significantly and if she was actually going to hear them out, complete with eyerolls and sighs as it might be, they had an ally so unexpected that Max was very much thrown off her game.

“Because we want to do something good for Blackwell.” Rachel answered, plainly. Nathan's sneer was accompanied by an audible sound not unlike a large cat hissing, but the blunt and simple answer had scored points with Taylor even if she quickly stumbled to cover that fact up. There's something more going on here, Max decided as she glanced at Victoria. Upon meeting her eyes Victoria looked down at her hands. Victoria had her own clique and in the past had worked hard to put down others just for the sake of remaining in control of it. While that had diminished as of late, it didn't suggest such a departure from who Victoria was that Max understood what was going on. Does Victoria want to be Rachel? Why was it that she used to drop so much shit on Max and Chloe when they both did their best to cut in-school drama out of their lives completely? Yes, she's been better since halloween and maybe that's part of why she's hearing us out, but she's still standoffish. It was possible, Max decided, that Victoria both wanted to be Rachel and wanted Rachel. Chloe had
made frequent assertions that Victoria struck her as closeted and a lot of very confusing, contradicting feelings could often result from those situations.

The committee as a whole talked to each other for a second, during which Max leaned toward Rachel. The girl wrapped an arm across Max's shoulders and allowed her to lean in close enough to plant a peck on her cheek and then advise her to focus on Zachary and Victoria before going quiet. One by one the rest of the table in front of them did the same. Dana and Juliet looked satisfied about something and Max didn't think it was Rachel's short answer to Victoria's question. We've already got three of them on the hook. Maybe I can grab Taylor, too, but it's everyone else we need to get. It's better to leave it to Rachel. When someone spoke again, it was Hayden.

“So, are you done yelling and ready to listen yet?”

Fuck no, I'll walk out before I let you morons vote some hipster feminazi bitch and her pet dyke into the club.”

“You know what, dude?” Hayden asked, speaking over about four mouths which opened to respond. “Good shit. We've already got precedent in place for that, don't we?” Nathan's face darkened and he lowered his head despite the fact that Hayden was still the taller of the two.

“What do you mean?” he asked, voice low and threatening.

“I mean the last time Zachary walked out on a meeting, what did we do?” Nathan licked his lips and swallowed, but did not look to calm down any. Zachary, on the other hand, crossed his arms across his chest and looked smug, something which didn't go unnoticed by Nathan. “We assumed he voted no and did the rest without him. We can do that here. Okay, Max thought, there's been some trouble in paradise before we got here. Good to know.

“No, you can't!” Nathan's fists pounded the table, despite the fact that he had to lean down to do so. “You can't do that! Do you know who I am?” This question apparently was what it took to break through Hayden's cool demeanor and when Max looked away from the broad-shouldered boy with discomfort, she took a small solace in the eager, Chloe-like smile that bloomed on Rachel's face like a flower in spring. Chloe's such a bad influence on you.

“Of course I know who you are, asshole.” Hayden threw his hands up in the air as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing and then tried and failed to reign in his voice. “I went to elementary with you. I'm only at Blackwell because your parents talked this place up to mine. You remember elementary, don't you Nate? I picked you up off the ground after you got knocked on your ass, like, thirty times for being a snooty brat until your parents pulled you out for the rest of the year and
sent you overseas.” This didn't endear Hayden to Nathan, it did not calm him down. Instead the Prescott heir's face became a shade of red akin to an apple. Max marked the interesting backstory down for mental perusal later. “I've always picked you up off your ass, Nathan, but you just want to wallow in the dirt this time. That's not my fault, it's not Logan's, it isn't Victoria's and it's damn sure not Rachel or Max's fault. I don't know what happened to you but you've changed and it's not for the better. You're everything you ever told me you hated about your dad and worse.” All color drained from Nathan's face and as Hayden turned to the rest of the table, Max knew things were about to escalate. “Now, I'm gonna go out on a limb and guess Nathan's vote registers as no-” Max saw it coming before Hayden did. Even Rachel ducked.

“Hayden watch out!”

The chair Nathan had just been sitting in sailed over the table. Hayden was not the only member of the Vortex Club forced to duck and Rachel pulled Max bodily away from their friend as the chair slammed into a table behind him. Seething, Nathan stalked toward the door, but that wasn't good enough for Hayden, now. Max fought to stay standing as Hayden bumped into the two of them and crossed into Nathan's path. A hundred and one threats about what his father could do to Hayden must have danced on Nathan's tongue as the larger boy grabbed the spoiled Prescott by his shirt and lifted him so that his heels did not touch the floor.

“I wish you had punched your old man in the face when you had the chance,” Hayden hissed. Dana and Victoria rose to their feet as if worried for Nathan. Max wasn't worried, per se. She just intended to enjoy what was about to happen as a bit of schadenfreude. “Now you're just his petty little clone.” In one fluid motion Hayden released Nathan and pushed him back so that he ended up sitting on the edge of a nearby table. “If you have enough person left in you, go take your fucking meds, drink some water and call me when the guy I grew up with comes back. I'm done with the thing wearing his skin.”

Hayden reached out to Rachel and Max each as he passed, as if to silently apologize for the bump. Max swallowed, unable to find words over the realization that Nathan's behavior was hurting more than just her. She shook her head and while Nathan sat, arms over his chest, like a petulant child physically sat in time out, Hayden rejoined the table at large. Victoria and Dana both sat back down and Victoria tried her best to immediately look bored with the proceedings. Taylor hurried to match her and Courtney was too busy visibly enjoying the scene to notice either of them. Max remembered Hayden's declaration that something was going on between Victoria and Nathan. Maybe Nathan's behavior had become more isolating. This was unexpected. The incident with the chair in the first week of school, the fight between Hayden and Nathan, it took on a new light with these revelations. It must have been crushing to have a friend turn on you, she thought at Hayden, whose back was now to her and Rachel. Sarah was now sneering, herself and it was hard to say at who. Max thought that they might have lost their shot with her already. Rachel unwound her arm from Max's shoulders and stepped forward.

“As I was saying before,” Rachel continued, in a voice that reminded Max of Rose Amber, “we want to do something to help the school. It's pretty well known Max is always running around
helping people out, probably did so for everyone here at one point—"

“Being a nosy bitch, you mean,” Nathan shot back.

“—even if they’re not grateful for it,” Rachel said, as if she had never been interrupted. Max was glad to be behind her in that moment where she could keep an eye on Nathan and make sure he wasn’t moving. If you can get Victoria to say yes, that’s her, Taylor and Courtney. Pair that with Dana, Hayden and Juliet and we’ve got a majority. Go get ’em, girl. Victoria notably looked back down at her hands, a bit red in the face at Nathan’s outburst. Without her direct input, Taylor and Courtney were unsure how to react. It was almost comical watching them stare at one another as if silently asking whether they were allowed to speak their minds. Max wanted to sigh. Victoria’s behavior wasn’t exactly friendly, it was more conflicted. Of course it is, after the thing at the party and whatever’s going on with Rachel, her pride’s probably hurt.

“Last year I sort of tuned out and got wrapped up in things with my parents and bio-mom,” Rachel told them. Max wasn’t sure why the specificity, but she didn’t question it too much. Victoria finally looked up at this, her ‘bored shitless’ face back in gear. “So I want to do something for the school. Why not this?” This last confused Max, as it sounded as if Rachel was both asking a question and wrapping the discussion up. “How about you let us in for one event. Let us help. If we suck at it, tell us to fuck off. If we’re useful, we’re in.” That’s not what I meant, Max thought, a little bit desperate. I might have to rewind. She had expected them to need to make a harder sell than this.

Zachary grunted thoughtfully and even Sarah looked as if she didn’t loathe the idea, even if she wasn’t a fan of looking up from her phone in the moment. Max had to fight very hard not to either smile or look surprised when Dana immediately spoke.

“I’m in,” Dana said, raising her hand. Hayden and Juliet did the same in silence. Max rather wondered if Hayden's silence wasn't more brooding. She glanced at Nathan, whose face was beginning to get color again and it did not look good for him keeping his cool. There was a moment where Logan looked between Nathan and Juliet and then, making sure that the first could see him clearly smiling, raised a hand. Four, so quickly. That's almost half. Zachary looked more bored than Victoria.

“I don't really care one way or the other,” Zachary said, dismissively. “I abstain. I'm not a big fan of the shit being stirred up today. I'd rather we do it when everyone isn't being pissy.” How does he figure that that's our fault? Nathan was pissed the moment we walked in. Then again, he hadn't particularly said he did blame them. Max tried not to hold it against him; he had enough other strikes against him already as a result of being something of a bully and she could hold that against him as long as she so desired.

“Well, I say no,” Nathan declared, as if it needed repeating. “They’ll fuck things up for all of us.”
“Imagine that,” Hayden said to no one in particular. *That's four yes, one abstain, one no. We actually only need one more vote.* Sarah's vote was to shake her head and stay silent. Whatever her reasoning, she was not with them at the moment. That meant that the Victoria voting block was the deciding factor. *She's going to give in and vote us down, side with Nathan.* That was alright. Max had been committed to rewinding and now she knew a lot more than she expected to learn about the Vortex Club, its members and the politics within it. She would have no problem getting them in next time, she thought. Zachary was the unexpected key and Max figured that if she stressed things out between Logan and Nathan a bit longer he would fall in line just to spite Nathan. It was not the way she wanted to get in, but they needed to get in so that they could keep an eye on Nathan more often. *Just let Zachary get pissed off and it's all over.*

“I'll abstain too. This turned into a huge waste of time.” Victoria leaned back in her seat. Max's brain went quiet, again taken aback by a turn of fate she had not foreseen. *What the hell?* It didn't fix any of their problems but it certainly didn't bury them. In fact, Max realized, if Taylor and Courtney—who were now shooting panicked, confused looks at one another—voted the same way, it would guarantee them being brought into the Vortex Club, at least on a trial basis. Quietly, Courtney shrugged and informed them that she too abstained. Taylor matched eyes with Max briefly. Max saw the struggle in them. Part of Taylor wanted to flat out say yes, the other part wanted to simply follow the leader. *Don't do it,* she tried to tell Taylor with her eyes. Max's brain had just caught up to the fact that if Taylor just abstained the majority of votes actually cast would be yeses. They would be in and Taylor would not have to worry about going up against Victoria before she was ready to stand up for herself. The girl attempted to sound nonchalant.

“I'm with Victoria and Courtney on this. I don't care one way or the other.” Somehow, even though she was hoping Taylor would not put herself out there, it felt a little bit like a betrayal. On the thunderstruck side, Max turned toward Nathan who had just finished doing the math himself. Hayden let loose a single loud clap, not of celebration but to call attention to him. He stood up. This had been both more stressful and simpler than expected.

“Final votes are four to let them in on a trial basis, two not to and everyone else 'didn't care.'” Hayden sounded cocky as Nathan pushed himself from the table the taller boy had all but sat him down on and stormed out of the room, knocking chairs to the side as he did so as if to make a point. *Welcome to the Vortex Club,* Hayden told them, turning in his seat to expose a wide grin. His eyes trailed from their faces to Nathan's retreating form. The smile did not falter. Max didn't blame him. Somehow, this whole thing had just endeared Hayden to her further. Hell, she even felt slightly more kindly toward Logan. If he just stopped being a dick to most non-jocks, it would be easy to like him. Charisma only went so far.

“Alright,” Zachary declared as he stood up. “I need to get some reps in before lunch.” Hayden turned back to the table, head turning from side to side.

“We're just done, then?” Hayden asked, faux surprise in his voice. He was practically gloating. Rachel no longer held herself formally ahead of Max, and turned back to hug her tight with a grin. Max returned the hug as tightly as she felt she could while she watched Victoria rise to her feet.
“Oh, okay. I guess we’re done.” Rubbing it in a bit, Hayden.

“Don't fuck it up,” Victoria shot them as she passed. For Victoria, this salutation was practically friendly. As Rachel released her and turned to watch, looking a little stunned herself, Max answered.

“We won't.” Courtney followed Victoria out first, giving her the stink eye. Taylor didn't match her eyes and Max found herself alright with that. Her mixed feelings toward Taylor had been a little more intense than she had expected. She was going to need some time on that front. Max also wanted to figure out this Victoria mystery sooner, rather than later. Cockily, Logan flashed Hayden a thumbs up before turning his attention to Juliet. Max did herself a favor and decided not to wonder what Juliet was whispering into his ear that made the smirk appear on his face, but whatever it was, Dana laughed when he passed it on to her. Hayden and Dana rose together, exchanged something that Max couldn't hear and then the cheerleader waved goodbye to them.

“So, am I crazy or was that too easy?” Rachel asked her in a low voice. “I mean, the bit between Hayden and Nathan was kind of... tense, but you know.” Max laughed at what were, frankly, a pair of understatements.

“It was definitely too easy, or I've been stupid and missed something.” Max told her.

“If you have so have I,” Rachel assured the photographer in a hurry and then quieted as Hayden approached. He stayed quiet and grinning as Juliet, Logan and Sarah passed and when they were the last ones in the room, his eyes widened.

“Ho-oly shit,” Hayden declared, wiping his brow in an exaggerated manner. It struck Max that he might be trying to cover up for his earlier genuine frustration and feelings in relation to Nathan. If so, she did not find it to be a great coping mechanism, but it was no worse than her own tendency to use lame humor to shift the focus from something unpleasant. “So, Dana or I will let you know what you two are going to be doing for the Valentine's Day party. That's probably gonna be your test.” Max swallowed. That struck her as kind of a big event to test them out on. “It was a good move suggesting a test, but whatever you did to get Victoria's support, I'd keep doing it.”

“Support?” Max asked, “she abstained.”

“Nah, dude,” Hayden replied, laughing genuinely. “Victoria never votes against Nathan and since Taylor and Courtney never vote against her, he's basically a one-man powerblock. Only needs to harass or blackmail one person to his side. I guess today he thought it was going to be Logan, but Victoria basically told him to go fuck himself. Why do you think that is?” Rachel shrugged. Max
couldn't help but look at her as if Rachel was a little bit out of touch. Max couldn't be the only one to make the connections she had made today. *Maybe this is a discussion best left for later.*

“Either way,” Max told the boy as Rachel raised an eyebrow at her incredulous expression, “thanks for all your help.” Hayden nodded as if it was no big deal and gestured toward the door before he started walking. He clearly wanted to continue talking for a moment. As soon as they crossed from the cafeteria, she saw David watching them from where it let out into the hallway. *Is this a coincidence or is he following us again?* As soon as they were definitely out of his range of hearing, Max shot a look back at him and then spoke. “So, Hayden, did you get the okay to give me your connection’s number?” Rachel looked fairly interested in this and Hayden nodded quickly.

“I'll text you in a few,” he promised as he broke away from them when they hit the front hallway. “Good show today,” Hayden told them both, patting Rachel on the shoulder before going his own way. At the end of the hall, Steph and Chloe were sat against a wall and unaware of their approach as they talked. It took Max a second to get Rachel's attention and get her to slow down, but Max freed her camera from her bag, earning a grin from the blonde beside her. She lined up a shot of Steph and Chloe in conversation, grinning at one another, and was able to snap the photo before they were discovered. Even Chloe's recent tendency to feel inexplicably *tired* rather easily seemed not to be bothering her as the two talked. The photo going to come out really nice.

“Hey you,” Chloe called. “Get over here, we need to hear the story.” She seemed a bit anxious despite the excited words. As they joined Chloe and Steph on the floor, Max checked her phone and understood why. The whole thing might have lasted twenty minutes. *Wow, that was way too easy.* “So what happened?” Rachel settled down and Max felt her hand snake around behind her to rest on Max's left hip.

“So,” Max said, as if trying to find the best way to explain it. “We got in first try, but Nathan flipped out, pissed everyone off, got thrown around like a rag doll, and when it came time to vote—”

“Queen Bee abstained so her drones did, too.” Max shared a look with Chloe and saw a familiar thought process running through Chloe's eyes.

“Did you ever think Victoria might be a little sweet on you?” Chloe asked. Rachel, comically, looked a little surprised.

“You're imagining things,” she sputtered.

“Maybe,” Chloe said. “But I've always thought she had something going on. It’s the only thing that explains why she hates Max and I so much while usually not being pissy with you.” Rachel only
shook her head as if Chloe, and Max by virtue of nodding along, were being absurd.

“Okay, I'm done fucking around on campus for the day, it's getting surreal.” Max laughed. Maybe Rachel was giving more thought to their theory than she had let on. Steph, certainly, put a hand to her chin thoughtfully. If Steph was considering it, it was possible that they weren't imagining things. She was a sharp tack.

“Me too,” Max agreed. An awkward silence spread across the group. Being the only one there without a ride of her own, Max hated to be the one to make a suggestion, but sometimes the four of them needed a nudge to decide what, if anything to do with their time. “Should we get out of here and go somewhere? It's not even noon yet.”

“Sure, but first, not to distract from the 'getting down to business' theme of the day,” Chloe said, standing up and stretching her arms high above her head. “What did you think of the session last night?” Eager for a distraction from the moral quandaries involved in this whole plot, Max let conversation unfold around her and simply tried to work out the knot in her stomach left behind by Nathan's rage.

Chapter End Notes

There's P4 started, and on my birthday no less. Enjoy, folks.
Chapter Forty-Six: Deipnon

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Disclaimer: Anything familiar to you, I don't own. This is a work of fanfiction for personal amusement, fulfillment and a bit of self-therapy. I make nothing from any of it.

Chapter Forty-Six: Deipnon

January 25th, 2012 3:02 PM

“So,” Dana declared as Rachel waited uneasily for her to continue. “The next party is Saturday, February 11th.” Rachel glanced toward Max. The photographer looked conflicted. Rachel was, too. It was good to have a date and time but the eleventh seemed awfully close. Dana seemed to be trying to reassure them, but there was a certain edge to her voice. The girl was perfectly capable of remaining calm most of the time but when something genuinely upset her she either could not or did not care to obscure that fact. “The bad news,” she started and then Rachel came to understand the distaste in her tone, “you'll be coming up with the theme and decorations for the gym, which is where it'll take place, since it's gonna be a big one.” That's kind of a hefty task alone, Rachel thought. Immediately she decided that the only way to pull it off was not to take it too seriously. Overthinking was for the birds. She took one look around the crowded hallway they stood to one side of before leaning back against the wall. Max was not so relieved. The photographer had not yet relaxed her shoulders beneath the ragged, dark red sweatshirt that had once been Chloe's. The photographer was frowning. “Yeah, I think it's bullshit, too. You've got a week to at least come up with a theme but it'd be better have the decorations too. If you've got any questions you can talk to me or Hayden though.” Glancing toward Max, who grimaced, Rachel wondered just how much leeway they would be given on the 'asking questions' portion of the test. “One more thing,” Dana added as she reached up, as if to check whether the ponytail that was holding her hair back was straight or not. Her tone shifted now toward someone who was perhaps treading a little lightly around an awkward topic.

“What's up?” Max asked her. Rachel rather thought the brunette was trying to put their friend at ease and had to admit that Max had a fairly good grasp on the 'cool, calm and collected' voice at that point.

“Well, I guess I wondered why you didn't come to me about getting into the Vortex Club. No offense to Hayden, but I think I could've found a way to get it done that was a little less – messy?” Rachel laughed. Messy was a fairly light word to apply to pretty boy Nathan's meltdown and being subsequently put on his butt by Hayden Jones. The almost immediate exposure of all of the club's
inner politics, too, qualified as something a little more than 'messy.' Dana gave a wry smile at her laugh, as if to say it was the best word she could come up with.

“'It's my fault,’” Max promised. “'We thought about coming to you, but we figured Hayden was the better call, because Nathan was never going to be just a little annoyed. He was always going to throw a fit.’” Dana shrugged as if to say she couldn't argue the point in light of recent events. “'Besides, Hayden's the only one I've ever known to really handle the asshole. I didn't know they had so much history, though and I kinda feel bad now.’”

“'Don't,’” Dana and Rachel said at once.

“'Seriously,’” the cheerleader continued, “'don't. It's the weirdest shit but Hayden's been losing his patience with Nathan more and more. I think it's been coming since he hit Hayden with that first chair. But, you know what, I get it. I just want you to know I've got your backs and so do Juliet and Hayden. The committee's basically asking you to make decisions that we make as a whole. You're doing the majority of the brainstorming alone. It's kind of a shitty test, actually, but Nathan was pushy as hell.’” At this confession, Dana paused to look at Rachel for a few seconds as if looking for something. Maybe she just wanted to know if Rachel realized how big of a pain in the ass Nathan was going to be, maybe something else was going on. She didn't know. What she did know was that there was a certain head of bright blue hair bouncing down the hall toward them.

“'Hey,’” Max said, drawing Dana's attention. “'Seriously, thanks. We won't let you down.’” Dana waved a hand and then followed Rachel's gaze.

“'Oh, the old ball and chain is coming.’” The cheerleader once more checked her hair as if it was an absent minded gesture and then waved at Chloe and Steph as they approached. Dana took her leave of them before the others arrived, but it didn't stop Chloe from practically bounding up to them. For all that she looked eager, there was also a certain exhaustion in her eyes. Rachel was beginning to suspect the source of Chloe's recent irritability and frequent weariness might be depression related. Sometimes it looks so much like Max's bad days.

Just before the four were reunited, Steph tapped Chloe on the shoulder and whispered something to her, causing the bluenette to slow and look behind herself. Rachel followed both sets of eyes down the hall to David, who stood right in front of a set of double doors, arms crossed and almost definitely staring at them. She was again struck by Max's suspicion that he was keeping an eye on them all over again. The fact was that Max was probably the least aggressive of them all when it came to distrusting David. Now, whenever they spotted him looking their way she acted as she was now. Beside Rachel, Max squared her shoulders and held herself as tall as she could, eyes narrowing, face scowling, arms crossed. There weren't many people who Max disliked who did not also scare her enough to keep her from trying to stand up to them. Apparently threatening me or Chloe gets you on Max's shitlist. Who would've thunk it? Max's promise to Frank on the first day she had met either of them rang out. 'If you ever lay another hand on Chloe, or for that matter,
her, then you’ll get to be the one who tells all your hella scary friends how you got beat up by a little girl with a stick. You understand?’ Rachel wondered if, in the here and now, Max was still capable of swinging a baseball bat when threatened with violence. Would she still willingly fight back? Rachel hoped, but understood that there was a world of difference between that person and the one staring David down.

Apparently realizing he had been made, the man made a motion that was such that Rachel could almost imagine his grunt of frustration and then turned to look away. That seemed to be good enough for Chloe, who pulled her hat down over her head and turned to approach. Steph followed with her arms still crossed, looking put out. Rachel couldn't blame her. Steph had not taken kindly to the idea that David might have been watching her and none of them were stupid enough to think that David did not know, in a town this small, precisely where Chloe was living. It wasn't that long of a drive to check the entire town and Chloe's beloved Frankentruck stuck out like a sore thumb.

“Hey you,” Rachel greeted them. Max continued to glare past Chloe, but Rachel wanted things to move along. Shifting beneath her jacket which was beginning to feel a little warm inside the building, Rachel made a gesture toward the front doors. Steph relaxed a bit at the idea of getting away from David's prying eyes and returned the greeting.

“How goes, guys?” They put on a show of a friendly conversation as they passed through the front doors, but once they were shut behind the four of them the real topic du jour came out quite quickly.

“Um, so, are we being followed?” Chloe asked the group at large, refusing to turn. Rachel, on the other hand, had no such compunctions. She glanced back at the doors which showed no sign of so much as another student, much less David Madsen. Shaking her head, Chloe sighed. “I'm not sure if I'm paranoid or he is.”

“There's no reason to think he's back to his stalking shit,” Max chimed in.

“I just had really hoped David was not going to be a problem anymore.” Steph adjusted the strap of her backpack and hefted it farther up. Whether this was an intentional gesture or not it tended to indicate that she was very done with being on campus and was ready to go home. Rachel didn't blame her and they did have plans of a sort. “Let's just hope for the best and go have dinner. Rachel and I can sit on our asses and leave it to Max and Chloe.” Chloe grimaced, glancing sideways at Max as if she didn't know whether or not to be excited or concerned about cooking with her.

“Hey, don't be like that. I'm actually looking forward to it, a bit.” Chloe only shrugged beneath her thin, dark jacket and looked dubious. I'm not sure if she actually thinks Max can't be trusted in the kitchen or if she's just screwing with her. Either way, Max's face reddened slightly and it was somewhat on the cute side, so Rachel did not step in as they started the trek to the parking lot.
“Deal with it,” Max finally shot back, earning a smile that split Chloe's face from ear to ear. “I've got some second hand experience, anyway.” Max did often tell them that in the other timeline she and Chloe had tried to learn to cook better. In that Chloe's case, it had been a necessity as a result of work. Still, Rachel imagined that their Max held a few memories of cooking with Chloe. Some people enjoyed that kind of thing. Rachel was not one of those people.

“What do you mean second hand experience?” Chloe asked as she hit the top step of the staircase down into the lot. Rachel leaned in close and flicked her on the end of her nose in response. “Ow, what was that for,” the artist demanded, reaching out to steady herself on the rail so as not to lose her balance.

“To remind you to use your brain,” Rachel shot back. “You've got a big beautiful one, take advantage of it.”

“Awww, she loves you for your brain. You've got a keeper there.” Chloe only glared past Max to Steph. Rachel preened under the praise.

“See?” she asked. “Steph knows I'm a keeper.” Whatever Chloe mumbled in response was muffled by the hand rubbing at the end of her nose. Rachel had long ago considered that their relationship was going to lose an important aspect of it if the day ever came when they stopped giving each other shit. She was glad that, even in her occasionally less than agreeable state, Chloe still knew how to give as good as she got. “Alright, who's riding where?”

“Shotgun in Rachel's car,” Max declared.

“I'll ride with Steph,” Chloe replied, sounding a little grumpy. “Give you two time to plot against me.” Rachel dug out her key fob and unlocked her car with a couple of swift clicks. The tail lights flashed, just in case the locks themselves couldn't be heard. Chloe looked pointedly away toward Steph's car.

“You know you're all we ever talk about,” the photographer promised.

“Who could blame you?” Chloe asked them. Rachel took one last look at the artist's grin and opened the door to her vehicle.

Once Steph and Rachel had secured a coke for themselves, they had essentially been told to either sit down around the table or get out of the kitchen. The pair of them had chosen to do the first in
order to be able to talk to Max and Chloe, not to mention pet Pompidou as they spoke. The dog
turned his head eagerly from side to side as Max and Chloe went through what their options were
and began retrieving pots and pans. The girls’ words were almost drowned out by the sound of a tail
thumping rapidly against the floor. Rachel laughed and shrugged off her shirt.

“We've got everything we need for a decent pasta,” Max said. “I think we go for it. Quick and
easy.” Chloe's response was to nod and turn a dial on the oven, preheating it.

“I'm glad I pulled the chicken out of the freezer yesterday,” the bluenette responded. Rachel
popped open her drink as Pompidou turned his attention to Max, who was freeing said chicken
from the bottom shelf of the refrigerator. Rachel did like the idea of something big, carb loaded
and filling right about then. Besides, how hard could it be to do pasta right? Rachel couldn't say
she had ever cooked any pasta that didn't come prepackaged in squares before.

“So,” Rachel said once the conversation about what to make died down and the sound of pots and
pans being retrieved finished. “The Vortex Club has spoken. Max and I have to decide the theme
and decorations for the Valentine's Day party in early February.” Max grimaced a bit as she turned
back to the lot of them. Rachel tried to read the photographer and really only got frustration from
her. She did not look to be enjoying herself in the moment. Rachel rather thought it had little to
nothing to do with making dinner or even the Vortex Club. Max tended to get lost in her own
thoughts a lot more often, lately.

“It'll be on February 11th and we're in the gym again,” the photographer informed them as Chloe
began to fill a decently sized pot with water. Max turned away to resume what she was doing in
laying out chicken in the pan in front of them. “That means it'll be a lot of work putting the
decorations up. But we've got to come up with something that won't look like shit with plenty of
flashing lights and maybe a video screen of some type.” Rachel did recall Dana floating that idea
by the two of them.

“We'll need a theme first,” Rachel reminded the photographer, who moved to the sink to wash up
as Chloe set the pot on the stove and began to dig into Steph's spice cabinet. “I guess it better be
'love' related.”

“Any ideas?” Steph asked, drawing Rachel's attention back to the table, where Steph had her
sketchbook open in front of her and had just put glaring at the sketch in front of her on pause. From
where Rachel was it looked to be some kind of scene involving a pair of characters she didn't
recognize in front of a seaside scene. Chloe and Max briefly mumbled to one another about what to
do with the chicken as Rachel pondered a response. In the end she was forced to admit she hadn't a
single clue. While the other two decided to start the pasta after the chicken had cooked a bit, Steph
leaned back in her seat. “Well, in that case, I have a bone to pick with all three of you.” Something
about the way she worded that set Rachel and Max both on edge, because when Max turned back
to them, her jaw was set and Rachel felt herself sitting up a little straighter.
“Why is it that you've never tried to figure out why you're all metahuman and no one else is?”

“I'm not calling myself a metahuman,” Chloe insisted immediately, turning away from the oven to join the conversation, her arms crossed over her chest to show she was not kidding, here. “I'm a perfectly normal human, just not typical.”

“Then what about ‘atypical’?”

“Nah,” the punk shot back. “Sounds like some kind of psychological term and I feel like applying psychology to this wouldn't be very bright.” The sound of the coil heating beneath the pot of water interrupted the brief silence as Steph sighed and itched her chin.

“You're being difficult, you know?” she asked.

“That's alright, I'm having fun being difficult.”

“It's a valid question, though,” Max said, cutting across them. “I mean, there are some things we've got in common. All three of us have lived in Arcadia Bay.”

“If that's what it is,” Chloe chimed in as she crossed toward the refrigerator and dug a drink out for herself, “then we could narrow things down a bit.” Max motioned for one for herself.

“And how is that?” Steph queried.

“Well,” Chloe said, pulling up first one and then another drink. As she passed one to Max, the tattoo'd artist continued, rolling her sleeves up as if getting down to business. “Max has been in town since she was three, me since I was born and that tells us if something happened in Arcadia Bay the earliest it could happen was in 1998.”

“Actually,” Rachel said, leaning forward, “Think about me. I came to town eight years ago. I was ten.”
“And there's nothing saying it happened all at once,” Max argued again. “We actually don't know anything for sure.”

“Okay, but here's the thing,” Steph cut across them all, twirling a pencil between her fingers. “What was 'it'? And why only you three?”

“Maybe not only us three,” Rachel told her, nodding slowly. “I mean, Arcadia Bay is weird right?”

“What do you think?” Chloe asked as she turned back check the pot to see if it had come to a rolling boil yet. “Does David have a super power? ‘Super-Doucheholery’?”

“No, seriously,” Rachel said, suddenly rather intent on the idea that maybe they should give serious thought as to whether or not they were the only people with strange abilities running around Arcadia Bay. “Think about it. There's all kinds of weird shit in this town.”

“How much of it can't be tracked back to one of us, though?” Max asked her specifically. It was not an unfair question. Max and Rachel themselves had created a fair few weird conditions around them. Max, mostly in the way people reacted to her, but Rachel was capable of creating wind and rain and fire.

“Well, if you had to guess,” Steph tried, redirecting the conversation, “who else would you guess had some sort of power.”

“Samuel,” Rachel told her immediately. This earned a nod of agreement from Max. Chloe, on the other hand, snorted.

“Samuel's a smart dude, he's not superpowered.”

“He's smart,” Max agreed as she leaned back against the counter and turned to catch Chloe's gaze. “Have you ever seen the library he keeps on campus just for when he gets bored at lunch? But he also knows shit, like... have you ever talked to him and just gotten the idea he knew stuff he shouldn't be able to?”

“In the other timeline, he knew way too much.”

“I honestly just thought he was observant, I mean sure some of his work is intense but a lot of it has to be tedious as hell. Maybe watching people is how he keeps himself from going nuts when he's just sweeping the school or something? Someone who reads stuff on chaos theory and the like has to get bored pushing a broom around.” Steph's characterization of his work was not unreasonable. Sometimes, even Rachel wondered how someone like Samuel didn't lose lose his mind.

“Maybe we should talk to him,” Chloe admitted. Rachel was amused about the swing in Chloe's belief. Steph and Max were usually awfully convincingly convincing when they teamed up on someone.

“Maybe one day I'll catch him having lunch outside on a Saturday or something,” Rachel told her. “Either way, there's only been a couple of times he's said something that it's hard to believe he could see just by looking. But... there have been times.” Steph rubbed her chin.

“So what are we saying here?” Chloe asked as Max turned at the sound of the water beginning to finally boil. While a couple of boxes of angel hair found their way into the pot, Chloe continued. “Are we saying, Samuel has powers? Are we saying he's a mindreader?”

“At this point I'm not gonna say it's impossible,” Rachel shot back. “Steph's right: why would it just be us three? There's all kinds of weird in this town. All those stories about boat engines just malfunctioning in the North part of the bay for instance. Also the fact that there’s this little town here and no one is questioning why someone like Sean Prescott is fucking with it, buying all of it? Building shit outside of it? What’s that about?”

“Sean Prescott is rich for this town, but he’s a small frog in a big pond in places like Portland or Seattle. Oh sure he’s getting richer and all, but it’s going to take a while before he’s ready to fuck around elsewhere. It’s probably just that.” When Rachel shrugged as if to say Chloe had a point, Steph raised an eyebrow.

“How do you guys know that?” Steph asked.

“That’s the kind of thing that was on that flashdrive you hid for us,” Max informed her. Rachel felt rather bad that they had not yet filled her in on what it was she was keeping for them. “We’ve been keeping an eye on the Prescotts.”

“Like, that's all true,” Rachel tried to bring the conversation back to Sean Prescott. “But why is he trying to buy up the fishing rights and buy out factories and shit? It doesn’t make sense that he’s going to build all this stuff if he’s also going to shut down the things that keep people living here in
order?” Chloe was right. The Prescotts having all of that control over the town was not unreasonable and why they would stay in Arcadia Bay makes some sense, but what the hell was his endgame when it came to putting so many people out of work?

“So,” Steph said as Max pulled the pot from the burner and gestured toward Chloe, “there is plenty of weird stuff going on in Arcadia Bay. Do you guys think we should look into Samuel?”

“Samuel’s harmless,” Rachel insisted, watching as the two girls in front of her struggled with balancing a strainer and draining the pasta all at once.

“Five minutes on the chicken,” Max declared, glancing over the steaming bowl of pasta to the oven timer.

“Harmless, sure,” Steph agreed. “But he’s also pretty smart. What if he knows something? What if he doesn’t have powers but maybe he knows about them? If he’s been around a while and there are others he might know who.”

“Okay,” Chloe surrendered, throwing up her hands. “We should talk to Samuel. If he has answers that’d be neat as hell. But, I challenge all three of you to come up with a way to do it that doesn’t get us all committed.” There was no humor in this last comment. Instead, if anything, she sounded a bit genuinely frustrated. It made Rachel rethink most of the day and wonder how many times she had interpreted something Chloe said as a joke when it was a genuine gripe. The air in the kitchen shifted and it was enough, Rachel thought, that Pompidou noticed even over the pleasant smell of baking chicken. The dog placed his head down on his front paws and stared up at Chloe.

“Chloe,” Rachel started, “are you okay?” For a moment the girl merely turned to look at her through light blue eyes as if trying to get a measure of her and then Chloe sighed, removed her beanie and set it on the counter.

“I guess I’ve been on edge lately.”

“We’ve noticed, what’s going wrong?”

“I haven’t had a dream in about two weeks and it’s really unnerving. It’s starting to feel like I don’t sleep well enough anymore.” That would piss anyone off. Let it never be forgotten how annoyed Max gets with everything and everyone when she isn’t sleeping. The photographer looked Chloe over once, worriedly, as if she could detect some outward sign of whatever was causing the girl not
“How long are you sleeping at night?” Max asked.

“Six or seven hours,” Chloe told them. “You know what I need?”

“A smoke?” Max guessed as Chloe turned and began to pull the chicken from the oven a few seconds early. Max took this as a sign to go hunt down a knife and a fork. With a slight clatter, Chloe slid her oven-mitted hands away from the pan and let it rest on top of the stove.

“I need to be a shitty friend and have an after dinner nap with my girls,” Chloe declared, before glancing apologetically back at Steph. The brunette waved a hand dismissively.

About half of an hour later, Rachel found herself sitting up on Chloe's bed. Her back was straight, pressed against the headboard. Chloe, on the other hand, was stretched out, head in Rachel’s lap. The bed wasn't tiny, really, Rachel reflected as Chloe shifted her position and closed her eyes. It was just made for two people. As for the third, Max paused and instead of getting into bed beside them began to dig into her bag, no doubt for her camera. Considering that Max and Chloe were generally on the small side, the three of them could probably fit properly onto the bed as long as they didn't mind sleeping very close to one another. Like last year, in Portland, Rachel reminded herself. Perhaps this memory was why she grinned so largely when Max lined up a shot and snapped a quick photo of the two of them. Chloe opened her eyes a moment too late to catch it happening, but quickly returned to a resting state.

While Max dislodged her shoes and climbed up into the bed, Rachel stroked Chloe's hair. For the most part, Rachel didn't think anyone was likely to get any kind of sleep, there just wasn't a ton of room. That was alright, though. Rachel glanced to her left and caught Max smiling up at her. The photographer looked away when she was caught and instead paid attention to Chloe. There was value to this kind of closeness. It was the kind that Rachel was sad to admit they had been missing out on since late December. Oh, there were hugs, caresses, even a kiss here and there but the last time any of them had taken the time to simply sit and cuddle had been far too long ago. Max scooted a bit closer to the two of them, her head resting against Rachel's hip. She had missed this. When Rachel laughed a moment later, it came out like a giggle and she was not sure where it came from. Chloe opened one eye, groggily.

“How long are you sleeping at night?” Max asked.

“Six or seven hours,” Chloe told them. “You know what I need?”

“A smoke?” Max guessed as Chloe turned and began to pull the chicken from the oven a few seconds early. Max took this as a sign to go hunt down a knife and a fork. With a slight clatter, Chloe slid her oven-mitted hands away from the pan and let it rest on top of the stove.

“I need to be a shitty friend and have an after dinner nap with my girls,” Chloe declared, before glancing apologetically back at Steph. The brunette waved a hand dismissively.

About half of an hour later, Rachel found herself sitting up on Chloe's bed. Her back was straight, pressed against the headboard. Chloe, on the other hand, was stretched out, head in Rachel’s lap. The bed wasn't tiny, really, Rachel reflected as Chloe shifted her position and closed her eyes. It was just made for two people. As for the third, Max paused and instead of getting into bed beside them began to dig into her bag, no doubt for her camera. Considering that Max and Chloe were generally on the small side, the three of them could probably fit properly onto the bed as long as they didn't mind sleeping very close to one another. Like last year, in Portland, Rachel reminded herself. Perhaps this memory was why she grinned so largely when Max lined up a shot and snapped a quick photo of the two of them. Chloe opened her eyes a moment too late to catch it happening, but quickly returned to a resting state.

While Max dislodged her shoes and climbed up into the bed, Rachel stroked Chloe's hair. For the most part, Rachel didn't think anyone was likely to get any kind of sleep, there just wasn't a ton of room. That was alright, though. Rachel glanced to her left and caught Max smiling up at her. The photographer looked away when she was caught and instead paid attention to Chloe. There was value to this kind of closeness. It was the kind that Rachel was sad to admit they had been missing out on since late December. Oh, there were hugs, caresses, even a kiss here and there but the last time any of them had taken the time to simply sit and cuddle had been far too long ago. Max scooted a bit closer to the two of them, her head resting against Rachel's hip. She had missed this. When Rachel laughed a moment later, it came out like a giggle and she was not sure where it came from. Chloe opened one eye, groggily.

“Don't worry about it, close your eyes,” Rachel told the girl in her lap. Slowly but surely as Rachel stroked her hair, Chloe began to fade away. That was fine, too. Rachel found, despite the strange, giddy, heady feeling, she could think fairly freely. However Max spent that time, she spent much of it considering themes for the party in a couple of weeks and the rest regretting that they could not just stay there, in that bed, until morning. Someday, Max and I won't have to run off to school and leave Chloe behind. But for now, I'm just gonna have to steal that picture Max took and look at it
tonight. At this thought, Rachel decided that Blackwell rules could go and screw themselves: she was going to curl up in Max’s bed with her tonight. Someday, it won’t matter. Someday, they would be able to sleep side by side at night, have meals together, live together. It was going to be strange when it happened, but looking down at Chloe and Max relaxing in relative peace and quiet, Rachel found that she wanted it.

There was going to need to be planning to be sure that that would happen. If the girls are going through too much to start planning right now, I'm not. I mean, I can't plan everyone's future, but maybe it's time I start thinking about my own? How weird is it that you're thinking about some point way off in the future when you can live with Chloe and Max? Shouldn't you go do some wild shit, like- like I dunno, start fires or something? Har har, I'm fucking hilarious. Consumed by the possibilities of some far-flung potential future, Rachel continued to stroke Chloe's hair until the girl's breathing evened out and she fell asleep, by which time Max, too, was long gone.

It did not bother her to stay up while they dozed, but if she did sleep, Rachel was fine with that. She rather hoped that maybe she would have a dream and Chloe would join her in it.

Chapter End Notes

I know this might sound like a cruel tease since you lot have some way to go... but I just wanted to say that as of yesterday I have started work on the epilogue to Kaukasos. In essence, the story itself is written and I have been highly emotional about this fact. The story's climax chapter and falling action chapter were genuinely pretty moving to write and not necessarily entirely pleasant.

As for where you all are, now, I'm happy to say that the last couple of plotlines I've been setting up since mid part two are about to unfold. I recognize that at least one of them is going to be a little unpopular with some folks, but I hope at least, upon reflection, you'll see where I laid the foundation. Anyway, I hope you enjoyed Chapter Forty-Six.
Chapter Forty-Seven: Sunodia

January 29th, 2012 2:21 PM

Chloe stood with her back against the house, trying not to shiver. It wasn't that she was worried about anyone seeing her shiver, so much as being stubborn. Oh, sure, the air nipped at her nose and cheeks but if she couldn't go out back and have a smoke, this was going to be an unpleasant Sunday. Pompidou, at least, had few compunctions about throwing himself down into the grass and rolling about. Still resisting the urge to shiver, she grinned at the dog and took a long draw. It would be a lot less cold if there was a Max or a Rachel at her side. Or both, she thought. The girls were back at campus spending the day picking between their final two themes for the Vortex Club party in a couple of weeks and trying to settle on decorations. Chloe had no horse in the fight between the themes of “Eros and Ludus” and “Otherworldly Love.” Though she had spent the day before helping them whittle their ideas down to two, she was more than fine letting them spearhead this particular fight. Her already low interest in being an official part of the club had been halved upon hearing that this was how they intended to ‘test’ two new members.

The truth was, as Chloe crossed her left arm across her and shuffled in place for a moment, she knew exactly why she had not been taking an active role in things lately. If she was honest, it was simple because she was tired all the time. Between school and trying to find work I barely have any energy left at the end of a week. Opportunities for work around the neighborhood were finally drying up in the neighborhood. It didn't help that she was simply not feeling rested when she woke. What she had not told the others was that this was no recent thing: it had started back in October and worsened with the passing days. At first, she had thought it was relief: knowing Max’s secret, being open with Steph, being free of the Madsens; there was plenty to be thankful for. Now, though if Chloe had to put a word to the way she felt when she opened her eyes in the morning, the closest she could come would be ‘dread’.

Car crashes around every corner, a ticking time bomb in the boys' dorm and they still want to wait before we bring him down. Chloe admonished herself for the callous thought. It wasn't that simple. Everyone involved wanted Nathan stopped, maybe none of them more so than Max herself. She understood why, as a group, they held back: there was another threat in the school, now and the worst of it all was that it was down to the four of them to bring Nathan and Jefferson down. Chloe dropped the butt of her cigarette and stomped it into the earth.
They had all of this on their plates and still had to maintain grades, avoid David and not let anyone, especially each other, get hurt. When Max and Rachel had approached her about joining the Vortex Club, the idea of spending day after day with Victoria’s snide remarks or that sick fucker Prescott staring them down while at least half of the club talked down on those of the lower and middle class had made her want to claw her eyes from her head. Frankly, with all of this laid out in front of them, dread felt like a completely acceptable emotion to feel. The best part was that this was only temporary. If they survived all of this, there was still graduation looming a couple of years ahead of them and the journey into a great unknown.

Chloe was not a moron, she recognized that most of these thoughts were a byproduct of rough mental health. One of her first steps in attempting to fix this had already been taken in the form of a phone call and a little bit of bribery. She only hoped to get a return call some time soon. Chloe cracked her neck and opened the back door. With one brief burst of a whistle, Chloe summoned the dog to her and watched Pompidou leap the small single step between the house and the backyard. Little show off. It was pleasant to shut the door against the cold and stretch out in the warmth.

Set down at the kitchen table for a moment, Chloe had easier access to Pompidou, who seemed all about the personal attention he was about to get. Usually, the dog had a bit too much energy to convince him to stay still so soon after coming inside but today perhaps the cool had mellowed him, some. Unless one counted the wagging of his tail shaking roughly his entire hind end, he stayed in place and allowed Chloe to itch his chin, returning a quick lick across her knuckles in response. When Pompidou finally lost interest in the attention he shot off toward another room of the house, probably in search of Steph.

Setting aside her jacket, Chloe caught a glimpse of the tattoo on her right arm. Usually, looking at it very much improved her mood. It was a piece made to celebrate people and things. She could trace a finger along the ribbon and see the people most important to her in life push up against that ribbon: Max, Rachel, Steph, Mikey. They were all there, represented in bits and bobs. Sure, Mikey was gone for the moment but she doubted he was out of her life for long. The rest of them were still, around and she could see in their faces that they were all coming to realize the same thing Chloe had: Chloe was stagnating. If dad could see me now, struggling to get up in the morning, what would he think?

Chloe rose to her feet, kicked her shoes off and set them by the back door. She would have loved to lay down and dream. In that case, she could confront all of these feelings in her head. The truth was that when dreams came as of late, they were short and fitful and her attempts to control them were usually unsuccessful. She settled on the couch in the living room and listened to the distant sound of Steph talking to Pompidou. In her dreams, there were distant noises, too. They were dangers in the distance and not even realizing that she was dreaming dispelled her fear of them. Maybe she couldn't go vigilante like Rachel had and she really would rather stick needles in her eyes than join the Vortex Club, but that didn't mean she had to lay down and be useless when all the car accidents were waiting around the corner. I don't need to lay here and wait for the future to run me over.
At this point footsteps sounded from closer than she expected and Chloe lifted her head from one of the throw pillows beneath it. For the moment, Steph seemed to be entirely wrapped up in the book in her had, so much so that if Pompidou were as prone to being underfoot that day as usual, Chloe would probably have been picking her up off the floor. It seemed they were both caught up in something. She decided not to interrupt Steph and instead lowered her head back to the pillow as the girl walked into the room and settled into the La-Z-Boy she enjoyed so much. Chloe tried to turn her attention back to the problem of what she should be doing. After a few seconds of staring up at the ceiling more, though, she heard the book slam shut.

“Alright,” Steph called, prompting Chloe to roll over on the couch, lying on her side as she lifted her head and looked at the girl. “What's going on in your head?” Chloe pondered very quickly the best way to put it.

“I'm kind of lost in thought,” she oversimplified. Steph seemed fine with calling bullshit on that, because she sighed, sat her book aside and stood up almost immediately. “What?”

“My car, ready to go in five minutes,” Steph instructed, tersely. For a moment, the auburn-haired artist stared down at her, challenging her to argue. Chloe slowly sat up and tried to figure out how she was going to get out of whatever Steph was plotting.

“I don't know,” Chloe drawled, “I'm kind of-”

“You're frustrated and bored both,” Steph told her. Chloe did not contradict this because she knew it was true. “You need to do something and then you need to figure out what to do.” Isn’t that kind of backwards? She knew what Steph was saying and did not think being a smartass would get her out of this or dispute what Steph was saying. “So, five minutes, at my car. We're going to do something special.”

“When you say do something special, is it something expensive because I feel like enough of a mooch-”

“Shush.” With that dismissive wave of the hand Steph took off, whistling for Pompidou. By the sound of the faint creak of springs Chloe was going to guess he was, even now, jumping down from her bed. Without having really agreeing to give in to Steph's demands, Chloe now found herself obeying. Though it took more of an effort than it had any right to take, Chloe rose from the couch and retrieved her boots from the back door. Pompidou and Steph returned a before she had gotten her feet in both and Steph opened the sliding glass door. Pompidou had no issue with returning to the back yard where at least he had room to run around or lie in the sun. The problem lie in the fact that a curtain thick grey clouds hid the sun away. That wasn't doing anything for her
mood or the temperature outside.

Still, Chloe found herself in the front passenger seat of Steph's Cavalier within a couple of more minutes. Steph valiantly resisted her every attempt to pry any information about their destination out of her. By the time they were halfway out of the neighborhood Chloe had given up that line of questioning already. It was much easier to sit back and let Steph do what Steph wanted, something made all the more agreeable in that that was usually the right thing. Steph had guessed correctly that stagnation was starting to get to her. It felt like an ugly cycle to Chloe: she was tired and feeling a little hopeless so she did not know what to do but the lack of doing made her feel tired and hopeless.

“So, let's talk about it.” This was the simple prompt Steph offered as they left the neighborhood and made for one one of the main roads which led out of the city. If Chloe was a betting girl, she would place their destination as the city of Bruss. The next largest city was an hour and a half away from them. This trip, at least, would be closer to forty-five minutes. That left a fair amount of time for the girls to do as Steph suggested and talk about 'it' no matter that 'it' was complicated and multifaceted. 'It' was actually rather difficult to define in a few words. Thankfully, Steph was patient and let her gather her thoughts as she watched and waited for the mostly dead foliage to change to burnt trees.

Rachel was not fond of any trips that took her out toward the site of her last fiery breakdown. Chloe couldn't say she blamed the girl. To put it very lightly, the land had been devastated by the fire and as far as Chloe could tell, the closer one got to ground zero the worse the damage was. Come springtime a great rebirth was supposed to occur but Chloe had seen the intensity of the flames that started the wildfire first hand. Out of curiosity she had taken a break from reading up on Mark Jefferson one day, and searched out the effects of a fire. The more intense it was, the more damage it did to the soil around it and the less nutrients that would return to the land. She rather thought the sight of Frank's suicide was going to be a ruined patch of land for a bit.

Chloe sighed as she landed on a way to start the conversation at large.

“I don't think there's anything I can really do to help Max and Rachel when it comes to the Vortex Club and since we're not doing anything else about Nathan, I don't know what else to do. There's other stuff in life and I get it. I'm trying to do something about it but a large part of that is just waiting.”

“Does that mean you called Skip finally?” Steph queried. If Chloe focused she could vaguely remember explaining her plan to Steph. After Skip had gotten himself fired from Blackwell security, he began focusing on his music in the form of a band called PissHead. On the other hand, the man still had to eat and Chloe had spotted him working at town brake shop. Chloe had reached out to the guy asking him for a recommendation to his boss. Whether he was going to give it or not
remained to be seen. She hoped so, though. There weren't a ton of job opportunities for a teenager in Arcadia Bay that didn't make her want to roll her eyes.

“Yeah,” Chloe answered. “But I didn't get an answer form him yet. That's just that one part though. I want to do something to help take care of Nathan and Jefferson but I don't want to put myself in a situation where I have to be in a room with Prescott all the time.”

“Chloe,” the calmer girl intoned, “so do I. The thing is, Max and Rachel are right. All we can really do is sit and wait for a sign.” This earned a frustrated sigh from the bluenette in the passenger seat. One thing was for sure, she had forgotten about wondering precisely where Steph was dragging them. She decided to expose the heart of her frustration with this plan.

“That's just it, I've spent the last two years waiting on one thing or another. I don't want to wait. I don't want Jefferson looming over any of us, much less Max anymore. I don't want some horrible future event to hang over our heads for the rest of our time at Blackwell. I want this over. I don't want to have to worry about my girlfriends or my friends, not you, not Kate, not Brooke, not Stella. It seems stupid to leave Jefferson in place.”

“Max scrapped trying to get Nathan help because her last two attempts didn't work,” Steph led in. That, to Chloe, seemed like a hell of a way to remind Chloe that Max's attempts to neutralize the threat that was Nathan Prescott only seemed to end in him becoming volatile. “Are you thinking about that?”

“No,” Chloe said, and then made a confession that Steph probably needed to hear. “We also scrapped it because if it somehow scared Jefferson off of Nathan and he started acting out on his own, there's no telling what his M.O. would be. For all we know, he could be more dangerous and harder to catch without Nathan acting like a millstone. There's one other way, though. Max and Rachel aren't sure about it but...”

“But?”

“But I think it might be smarter?” Steph prompted her to continue, drawing a circle in the air with her extended fingers. “Get rid of Jefferson.” An uneasy look split the girl's face: her brows furrowed and she grimaced. The girl's blue eyes did not look directly at Chloe. “Okay, Steph – are you imagining me shooting someone right now because, if so, stop it.”

“Sorry,” she said, turning slightly red in the cheeks. ”That was shitty of me.” Really, Chloe thought, it kind of was. To say that shooting someone who was hurting those she loved was beyond her would've been a lie. Chloe had already asked this question of herself once or twice before
considering they were all repeatedly put into situations where she thought Rachel or Chloe might be at risk. “Chloe, I really am sorry.”

“It's whatever. I just mean that I'm thinking about asking Max to help me start a campaign against Jefferson. If we leak everything he's done to the school and the town and make sure people pay attention, it might be enough to get rid of him.”

“That could put you in a lot of peoples' crosshairs,” Steph counseled, nervously. It was true enough that Mark Jefferson was already incredibly popular with the student body at Blackwell Academy. Even Kate hero-worshipped him. Chloe could understand: there was someone out there who had done what you wanted to do with your life and at a pretty young age had accrued enough fame and fortune to retire to teaching. It didn't hurt that he was conventionally attractive. Chloe just had to hope that if people knew what Jefferson had been accused of already they might consider him enough of a threat to remove him from his position. “Max and Rachel are taking enough risk pissing off Nathan. You doing that could piss off Nathan and Jefferson and everyone else besides. Besides, Chloe, I know you. When you do something, you put your signature on it even if you don't mean to. Like, big time.” Chloe wasn't entirely sure what Steph meant but there was a decent chance she was right about that, too.

“I'll talk to Max and Rachel about it, but I wanted to run the idea by you.”

“All ears,” Steph told her, before focusing her eyes back on the relatively clear road in front of her. Few people drove out to Arcadia Bay for much of anything. It was seen by towns like Bruss as something of a shithole. Most days, Chloe wasn't in a position to argue, but Arcadia Bay did have the people Chloe loved, so it was her shithole.

“Well, Max has the mailing list for the school, both internal and external. She's had it for about a year. After that, all I need to do is tell people about the shady shit in Jefferson's past. At least six different women have accused him of not knowing the word 'no' without a restraining order and with the shit Rachel found the other day, it looks like he's really unpredictable. If I spread it to enough places, emailed some local newspaper or something, I could get Wells to fire him. If he leaves Blackwell he might not be able to hurt anyone here.” Steph did not immediately answer. Her fingers drummed against the pale grey steering wheel and though her face didn't change Chloe could tell that she was thinking.

“This is kind of like that conversation we had with Max about what happens if Nathan goes after someone else, isn't it?” Chloe hadn't particularly thought about it and she was left with a sour taste in her mouth at admitting it, but yes, that was familiar. “Should we stop it, can we stop it?”

“I don't follow,” Chloe lied. She mostly did so to prompt Steph to lay it all out in plain language. Sometimes you had to put it in 'Captain Dummy' talk.
“Well, maybe if we get Jefferson kicked out, he won't hurt anyone here, but he could hurt someone somewhere else.” Chloe had heard that argument too many times from Max. She hated that a bit of the frustration there came out when she turned to Steph but the annoyance in her own voice rang crystal clear.

“Maybe, but we’re not responsible for every bad thing that happens all over the world, right?”

“Chloe,” Steph said, “we’re not responsible for most of the bad shit that happens at Blackwell. But Max has always put that on herself and it looks like you and Rachel are too. I’m willing to do the same for you three and because I have friends here, but I just want it said: we’re not responsible for making this decision.”

“Someone has to be,” Chloe told her. “Maybe this was a bad idea. Next year I could totally take a photography class, but that’s next year. This year, I’m kind of shit out of luck.” Steph nodded.

“So what do you want to do? Want to talk to them about your idea anyway?”

“No,” Chloe sighed in surrender as she turned back toward the windshield and was forced to adjust the seat belt digging into her shoulder. “You’re right, we have to stop him while we have a chance.”

“I didn’t say that. I wouldn’t push you to think like Max and Rachel just because I agree with them.”

“Then I guess I’ve thought it through and I do, too. But you know what this means?” Steph shrugged in response. “This means that even if I don’t join the Vortex Club, I’m gonna have to help them out if I want to be able to be in the middle of it with them. Gross.” It was gross. The Vortex Club might throw parties but it was also the most epic example of privilege and power in wealth. The club was essentially invite only and half of its membership (before Max and Rachel had gotten aboard) was made up of the four richest families represented at Blackwell. To top it all off it had been essentially headed by Nathan Prescott. His power and privilege kept the school from asking any questions, it allowed them to do blatantly and obviously illegal things in broad daylight. It was just an exercise in the same power that protected Nathan from the repercussions of his behavior on a day to day basis.

“If you come up with another way, run with it. I mean, I’m not gonna start helping the club out. I don’t particularly want to spend a bunch of time with Little Psycho and Victoria and her people, but
whenever we need to plan something or do something I’m in. When we wanna drink and play tabletop I’m in, when someone fucks with my family and I need to egg their houses or keep you three from kicking their asses too hard, I’m in.”

“And that’s why we love you, Steph.” Chloe grinned widely at the girl beside her. “You’re willing to get down and dirty with us.”

“If this is you flirting, you gotta cut it out, someone's going to get the wrong idea.”

As Chloe had predicted, Steph's idea of something special was something expensive. They had a very early dinner sitting side-by-side around a hibachi grill alongside a group of strangers who seemed hell bent on talking to one another as much as possible during the meal. As Steph said herself, the only things missing were Max, Rachel, Mikey and Brooke. Next time, they agreed, they would plan ahead. In the end, though, Chloe had to admit that as they picked at their meals and mutually decided it would not be worth the risk to try their fake IDs for a beer, she felt a little more awake and alive. Steph had been right from the beginning: Chloe had just needed to do something. The fresh air, the sound of people enjoying themselves and a dinner that consisted of more than frozen meals or something that could be whipped up in less than ten minutes all did her good.

So, maybe it was time to see to it that she did something, after all.

Chapter End Notes

So, it's with really really mixed feelings that I announce that on my end, Kaukasos is finished and I'm beginning planning for my next project, a short sequel to Fools of us All which also happens to be a crossover with the audio drama Tanis. It is mixed feelings because, while this new story and the two I have roughly planned to follow (neither of which will involve crossovers) are going to be exciting to write, Kaukasos has been a big part of my life since its inception early this year. It is sad, in retrospect, to see it go. I've still not been hit with big time feels, but I'm sure they'll come when I have time to slow down and rest.

No idea yet when I'll begin writing the new story much less uploading, so in the interim, enjoy the last several chapters of Kaukasos.
Hey, folks. So, this is hopefully going to be a quick but important note and then we'll get you right along to reading.

First off I'm happy to announce that the first chapter of a story that is a more or less direct sequel to Fools of Us All went up today. It is called Aphelion and happens to be a crossover fic, involving a couple of characters from the audio drama, Tanis. I believe that you will enjoy this story. (It will end up being uploaded weekly at the MOST frequent, until I say otherwise. It's going to take me some time to get into the groove of things.) I have already enjoyed writing it. I can promise it will not be as long as Kaukasos, though. You do not necessarily need to know Tanis to understand or enjoy the story, but it's entertaining and I recommend the listen. If you are part way through Tanis, then recognize that this story would carry spoilers for it up to about season 2, episode 6.

Last but not least, after talking with a friend I figured I'd make an offer. You'll notice I am doing my upload a day earlier than usual. I wanted to ask, if you folks would enjoy me switching to uploading a chapter per day starting on the next upload day, Wednesday, until you are all caught up with my backlog. Kaukasos, for me, is finished. It was a great story, and it meant a lot to me. It continues to mean a lot to me and you people who came along for the ride warmed my icy black heart a bit, so, if this is something you folks might enjoy, I'd love to do it. If you want to keep it slow and steady, I understand, too.

I am also considering starting a twitter connected to this account, where I would post about updates, the writing/pre-writing process and upcoming projects. If you have any interest in that, let me know, too. I won't waste anyone's time with it if there's no interest. Thanks, have a great day, and enjoy Chapter Forty-Eight.

Disclaimer: Anything familiar to you, I don't own. This is a work of fanfiction for personal amusement, fulfillment and a bit of self-therapy. I make nothing from any of it.

Chapter Forty-Eight: Dokímion

February 1st, 2012 3:00 PM

There was a time, once, when this classroom was one of her favorite places in the building. Even with Nathan glaring holes into the back of her neck, she had always been able to focus on Mrs.
Drewer and her lessons. As Max stared pointedly down at her notebook, that time felt like it was a lot farther away than just over a month ago. Now, her life in photography class seemed to consist of paying just enough attention not to fail any surprise tests and staring down at the open notebook whenever she wasn't actively using it. As it turned out, this behavior had had the opposite of its desired effect.

Max had, at least, managed to avoid matching eyes with Nathan which was typically for the best for her mental health. However, upon turning in her photo to Jefferson at the beginning of class he had pulled her aside and informed her that he was well aware that she was his predecessor's star pupil and he expected her to begin participating in class. She had also been forced to stand at the front of the class while he praised her photo, a candid of Hayden laughing with Juliet and Dana in front of the school. Max had never asked what they were laughing about, but apparently the photo suggested that she had a 'natural talent for composition and an intuitive sense of framing and lighting.' Suffice it to say, all of this rang a little familiar to the part of her still tuned into the echoes of the other timeline. The start of class had been, on the whole, mortifying.

Now she could barely bring herself to lift her head and take in the sight of the classroom or its six huge tables and various posters and photos along the wooden walls, all of which was lit, for the most part, by the three large windows exposing the room to the courtyard. The good news was that Max had taken a table with Kate and she did a fair job of keeping Max from getting too nervous, even if she knew far too little to understand what was upsetting her. Max stole a glance at Kate, who was watching Jefferson intently, almost devotedly. The girl had not understood the change in Max's behavior during photography classes and she couldn't blame Kate for that, but at least she seemed to finally accept that things were not changing back any time soon. Max adamantly refused to tell Kate what was happening beyond the fact that she did not like or trust Mark Jefferson.

When the bell rang, an entire other world of problems rose up. She closed her notebook and slid the pen into the rings binding it. Looking around the room for the first time in several minutes, she first saw that Nathan was glaring her direction and second that Jefferson was not. Then she turned her attention toward the people more likely to indicate how the rest of her day was going to go. The vast majority of the Vortex Club Committee shared the class with her, after all. She first glanced toward Hayden who raised an eyebrow at her as the bell ceased to ring, his only sign of acknowledging that the day had come. Dana and Juliet, for their part, did not get into her face with excitement but Dana did wink back at her when she caught Max looking.

Max decided to leave Victoria, Taylor and Courtney's feelings on the matter a surprise. She wasn't sure how in depth they were going to have to go on this presentation to the committee, but she did not think she could go ahead with it if she looked up and saw that Victoria and her friends were going to suddenly become roadblocks. Whether she was moving particularly quickly that day or Max rather slowly, when Max walked out into the hall a moment or two after Nathan vacated the room, Rachel was there to hear Mark Jefferson stop Max from making a quick escape.

“Max, remember what I said,” Jefferson called in his confident, attention demanding voice. “I expect your participation and your attention from today on.” There was a moment where her blue
eyes met Rachel's hazel and Max knew her deer-in-the-headlights moment was evident on her face. “Max?” For just a moment she thought about not answering him. She considered embracing her inner Chloe and flying the flag of defiance and 'fuck you' but the potential ramifications of such an act were too great. In the hall, Rachel motioned with her hands for Max to do or say something. She swallowed and turned, her eyes not landing on Jefferson but Hayden, who was standing behind her waiting his turn to exit the room.

“Understood,” she told Jefferson over Hayden's shoulder. The man rubbed once at his goatee and then nodded, a small smirk taking over his features. Hayden grimaced as she turned away, as if he understood the tone in her voice for what it was: dread. *Probably thinks I’m worried about the presentation.* No sooner had the thought escaped her than she became worried. For his part, Hayden greeted Rachel when Max stepped out of the way and then, patting Max carefully on the shoulder, he strolled away toward the gymnasium. She took a moment to indulge herself in overanalyzing the gesture. As much as Max was not the greatest fan of the idea, she had come to suspect that she was sort of known as ‘that girl who could break down at a moment’s notice’.

“Hey,” Rachel finally greeted her, shouldering the old, pale-blue backpack that contained their 'sample' decorations. Max mustered a smile but did not speak until they were two or three steps from the door to the photography lab and well on their way to the center of the school, where Chloe was likely to be waiting on them. Even then it took her a second to recover her wits about her. “Max, are you alright?”

“I'm great,” Max lied, making no effort to disguise the fact. For a moment she found herself on the verge of a long-winded, sarcastic rant that would have successfully finished flushing her mood down the toilet. Then, with a sigh that sounded too shaky in her own ears, she let that rant go.

“I can tell,” Rachel responded, playing along even if the concern still lay etched into her face. “Are you going to be good to do this thing?” The most affection Max felt like she could bring herself to show in the moment was the soft bump of her left shoulder against Rachel's right. That would have to be answer enough. For the most part, Rachel took her meaning fairly well. They reached the vending machines at the center of the school only a few seconds before Steph and Chloe did.

“Good luck,” Steph called to them by way of greeting, before continuing off toward the front doors. Max was moderately surprised when Chloe did not follow after. Steph looked, if Max had to guess, a little harried. She wondered precisely what was going on with the girl. Chloe raised a hand in greeting, letting a small, crooked smile take over her face. If Steph looked like she was under a little bit of stress, Chloe looked like she was ready to drop on the spot. The artist's frequent exhaustion lately scared Max more than she cared to admit.

“Are you coming along?” Rachel asked Chloe, after tossing an arm around either of their shoulders and guiding the three of them toward the gymnasium.
"I mean, it's Vortex Club business and all but yeah," Chloe told them. "If they want me to wait outside, I will, but I'm coming with you." Max relaxed a little. There had been a bit of tension between the three of them since Max had decided that joining the Vortex Club was the most effective way to keep an eye on Nathan's behavior. It was good to see Chloe finally on board with the plan even if she continued not to want to be an active part of it. Max let out a long, slow breath and then gestured toward the back of the girl disappearing into the gymnasium ahead of them. Sarah was probably the first to arrive. As they followed her in, Max considered the girl. Something of a blooming fashionista, she considered herself pretty well above everyone around her. Max liked to explain her as 'think of Victoria on her worst day, multiplied by infinity and then given a megaphone'.

By the time that Max, Chloe and Rachel stepped into the gym the girl in question, still sporting her signature orange hair, was leaning up against the farthest, yellowed brick wall. Sarah lifted her head and raised an eyebrow at the three of them. Max wasn't sure if this was due to Chloe being with them or what, but she looked immediately bored and bothered. To cover this up or perhaps just to express her disdain, Sarah looked down at the telephone in her right hand without saying a word or giving them any kind of greeting. Max found herself rather glad that Sarah couldn't hear the unflattering things this caused Chloe to mumble under her breath. Before Chloe got to the part about seizing the means of production (or worse, the means of reproduction,) Max decided to distract her. In truth, it was as much for her own good as Chloe's.

Max shrugged Rachel's arm off, though she made sure to do so carefully and not to show any disregard. This was enough to draw Chloe's attention so that it was not so much of a surprise when Max pulled her in for a brief, tight hug. No one beyond the three of them could have heard Max thanking Chloe for coming with them, but she hoped that the artist did not mistake the genuine appreciation in her voice for anything else. When Max did not receive an immediate response she pulled away from Chloe to perhaps give her a chance to draw a full, unrestricted breath. It would have been easy, in the moment, to get lost in the girl's face and trying to read every glimmer in her eyes.

Thankfully, Dana and Logan came through the door at that point. Unlike her quick goodbye after class, this time Dana was more open about her support, even if it was in the perhaps tacky form of a finger gun. Logan, on the other hand, practically walked by the two of them without even looking. *Logan doesn't give a fuck.* Max had suspected for some time that his support was entirely down to upsetting Nathan after Nathan had gone out of his way to be a total dick to him when Rachel and Max were first trying to get admitted to the group. Speaking of Rachel, she was looking past Logan and Dana to see if someone else was close behind them.

Max wondered who the actress was looking for. She knew precisely who she was most curious about. To Max, the biggest mystery of the group was Victoria and what kind of a response she would have toward their idea. Theoretically, if the fashion-obsessed photographer 'abstained' indefinitely, there was nothing to worry about. Max had to admit that she and Rachel were banking on that more than they probably should have. Getting Victoria on their side seemed unlikely, but if one asked Hayden she had already come over. That made far less sense to Max than the idea that
maybe there had just been a hiccup between Victoria and Nathan and it would be smoothed over by now.

The worry continued to grow as the three of them grew silent and watched first Dana, then Hayden and Zachary walk in one by one. That was six of the ten members of the Vortex Club. *If we can impress all of them, Nathan, Victoria and the others won't really matter.* The truth was that Max held no hope about Taylor swinging things to their side. Maybe if Max personally put pressure on her, but that wasn't what she wanted. She didn't want to pressure Taylor into being friendly with her in public, she just hoped that one day very soon the girl would choose the route herself. As if summoned by the thought, Taylor and Courtney entered the room and glanced around it once, lost.

“Where's Queen Bee?” Rachel asked in a mutter as the two girls walked clean by them, not even turning their heads to look Max or Rachel in the eyes. “And why do I get the feeling they don't know.”

“Oh they don't have a fucking clue,” Chloe replied. Max personally had to agree. Even taking up a spot along a stretch of wall and setting aside their bags, Courtney and Taylor looked slightly as if they expected Victoria to emerge from some shadow without a warning. *Oh shit.* “The drones are never spotted without their queen in the wild.” Max opened her mouth to admonish Chloe for being a little meaner than strictly called for but shut it. The girl did make a valid point: Taylor and Courtney did follow Victoria around everywhere. She had been in class and the three of them had been among the first to leave the room, together. So, Max thought, *what if Victoria and Nathan are late because they're trying to decide how fast we're gonna be told to fuck off.*

“Well,” Max started, immediately intent on quieting that particular voice, “what was the rest of your day like?” she asked them both. She wasn't sure she minded who started talking as long as it wasn't her. Sadly, Chloe's exhaustion and Rachel's nerves were as immediately evident as the unpleasant creeping concern growing in Max's chest. The day had looked so promising only that morning: she had woken up to warmer temperatures and a clear, sunny sky. It was a shame that Jefferson and the potential reunion of Nathan Prescott and Victoria could put her back into a funk. Max nonetheless let Chloe lead the discussion until something else happened.

Almost ten minutes after their arrival, Nathan stalked into the room, oozing his frustration and aggression. For a moment, he stopped just inside the doors and scanned the room as if looking for someone. This was not all that different than when Taylor and Courtney arrived and Max wondered now if Nathan and the two wildly overdressed girls keeping to themselves at the back of the room might be looking for the same person. *What if Nathan wasn't with Victoria?* Max pondered this for a moment until the boy's eyes landed on her and he sneered before stomping farther off into the room.

“I think I'll volunteer to do some manual labor for you guys during your Vortex Club work,” Chloe told them, as if Nathan's glare was some kind of a signal. *Awww, she's feeling protective.*
“I could think of some manual labor for you to-”

“Keep it PG,” Max told Rachel, unable to resist rolling her eyes at the girl's antics. The blonde frowned at her but shrugged as if to say she would- for now. Max tossed aside the idea of giving her a little bit more crap when Victoria came in a moment later. Still dressed to the nines as she had been all day, the girl mimicked Nathan in giving one full, scan of the room. There was no particular explanation evident for why the photographer bearing the short, windswept hair was late. Victoria's eyes landed on Nathan before the three of them and moved on almost immediately. This did not go unnoticed by Chloe either, who nudged Rachel briefly and muttered something before being noticed.

“Alright, I can see everyone's here,” Victoria started, and then, focusing intently on Chloe, she seemed to be deciding what to do with her. The look on her face, the quirk of her lips, it was all akin to a warning that some snide comment danced on the tip of her tongue. Max frowned, then, when Victoria looked first at her and then Rachel in turn. Whatever the girl thought of saying about Chloe's presence faded and was replaced instead by a haughty, “So, what, are you trying to join, now, too?” Chloe's derisive snort earned her very few points with Victoria, judging by the frown it was met with. Max stifled a sigh only with great effort.

“No, I'm just here to offer to do some of the heavy lifting for the party next week.”

“Not interested, this is club business only. If you're not part, get out.” That was crossing a line, as far as Max was concerned. Grumbling, Chloe turned away and began to walk toward the double doors of the gymnasium. Chloe had been fine with the idea of waiting in the hall earlier, but given Victoria's attitude, Max no longer agreed that that was an acceptable option. She turned, balancing her bag on her left shoulder and with her right arm grabbed Chloe by the shoulder and held her in place, earning a confused look from the artist.

“She's here for us,” Rachel told Victoria, speaking loudly enough that the room at large could hear them. Max thought this was quite forceful and enjoyed the sound of Rachel imposing herself not just on Victoria but on anyone else who expected that Chloe could be talked down to like that while they were around. Some things are more important than the Vortex Club, Max reminded herself as she watched Chloe's smile return and, if anything, grow a little wider. Victoria shrugged and instead of arguing trotted off toward the wall where Taylor and Courtney now stood, nose a little too high in the air. Max was going to mark this down for comment when she noticed something far more interesting in the moment: Nathan was pointedly looking away from Victoria and she was doing the same to him. Trouble in paradise. The Platonic Power Duo still aren't talking.

“Right then,” Hayden said, “You heard the lady. Chloe stays. Let's get this show on the road.”
There was, at least, a murmur of agreement among the group on that point. Coming from disparate corners of the gym to be in easier range of Max and Rachel, everyone but Nathan himself eventually formed a half circle around them, though Victoria was doing her best to seem disinterested. When Rachel dropped her open bag and gestured for Max to speak—something notably the opposite of the plan—Max frowned. She wasn't about to argue with everyone watching them and Chloe's hand on her shoulder was, at least, comforting. “What's the plan, Max?” Hayden prompted.

“What's the theme?” Sarah asked, immediately. For the first time she seemed interested in what Max or Rachel had to say, though the fact that she was still holding her phone suggested that she wasn't sure how long she would stay interested. Max shot the blonde beside her a look. The theme had originally been Rachel's idea and she couldn't help but wish, as her stomach flipped in her abdomen, that Rachel would take over and explain it clearly. Look, she's already agreed to be your go-between if we've got to talk to Nathan. Take her advice and speak up. Rachel was right on that last point: Max needed to start raising her voice in larger social situations. She let loose one more long exhale and looked not at Sarah or Nathan but at Hayden, Juliet and Dana.

“So, for a theme, we chose Eros and Ludus,” Max started. “Rachel could probably explain a little better, but I'll give it a shot. The ancient Greeks had seven words for love. Eros was more of a passionate, sexual love. Ludus was more playful and probably a bit more careless.” For a moment, as Max began to explain, she thought she saw the idea immediately losing them traction with Dana, something about the grimace and the look of disconnect in her eyes. It faded pretty quickly by the time that she finished expanding on each of these concepts a little more. Hayden remained impassive and fairly neutral the entire time. Max did not know why. Does he already hate the idea? As Max's explanation came to an end, Rachel leaned forward and began to free the streamers from the pack at her feet.

“So, we're thinking silver and bronze colored streamers and something pretty similar for table covers, at least on any tables we have. We could set up two pretty bright lights near the doorway to make it all look pretty cool while we're waiting for the music to start.” Rachel tilted the still wrapped roll of silver streamers in her hand as if to show it catching the light filtering in through one of the windows at the top of the room. “Also, Max was thinking it was better to keep the table handling any 'refreshments' closer to the doors. It's a good idea really, people can see it when they first come in so they'll always know where to find it. Besides, setting it against the back wall in the past has made it so a lot of people end up spilling while they're trying to get back to their friends or get out into the hall so they can have a beer and talk.”

Rachel continued to make their argument as calmly as if she were having a simple conversation. It made sense. There was a reason she was one of the best actors the school had: she knew how to memorize her lines and make reciting them look effortless and natural. Rachel was a natural and, as Chloe often said, a force of nature in her own right. Hayden, for all his pretense at staying neutral a moment ago, pulled a briefly impressed face as if he hadn't quite thought of the spillage problem before.
“Honestly,” Rachel added, seizing on this as a point to ram home, “more spillage, more cleanup at the end of the night, bigger pain in the ass. As for the stage we’d have to adjust it based on what kind of lighting rigup we’re using but we could totally go with a bright bronze banner across the top.” For the next couple of minutes, Max and Rachel fielded a series of questions. Most surprisingly the majority of them came from Zachary and Sarah even if Juliet did chime in once or twice whether to ask her own or answer one of the others'. Whether the rest of the group was already satisfied, disinterested or intent on saying no already (rather like Nathan, Max thought) they stayed fairly quiet. Max found herself wondering precisely where Victoria fell on that scale. *Kind of surprising, that.*

Max glanced back at Chloe as a lull in the questions approached. She had been quiet the entire time, standing a step or two back. Now the punk had her arms crossed over her chest and was positively *smirking* at Max with pride in her eyes. It caught Max off guard enough that she felt the red creeping into her cheeks. This didn't go unnoticed by Chloe, either. The smirk merely transformed into a large smile. This was not the time for Chloe's teasing games. Max was forced to turn away from her to keep it together, though thoughts of vengeance began to sprout in the back of her mind.

“Well, I'm in,” Hayden announced when no one else had spoken. This seemed to be an impromptu and informal call to a vote. It played out familiarly: Dana and Juliet agreed almost simultaneously with Hayden on this point and Max smiled with relief. It was pretty cool to see how much each of them had their backs. When Sarah gave a vague shrug as her response, Max chose to interpret it as 'why not'. She was, however, surprised by Zachary's response.

“I hate having to get up early on Sundays and clean all damn day, you make a good point about the beer. “ He didn't say anything else but judging by the slight quirk of Hayden's lips, that seemed to be the equivalent of an endorsement. Max was surprised by his support, but pleasantly so. Nothing quite prepared her, though, for what came next. For the most part, Nathan had been silent in the back so she was not so deluded enough to expect to hear any kind of praise from him but Max was almost just as surprised when Victoria spoke up.

“Yeah, that sounds fine, *I guess,*” Victoria finally said, all eye rolls and reluctant admissions. For the entirety of their presentation she had been paying attention, though standing with her arms crossed over what was sure to be a five hundred dollar top or something outrageous of the sort. For just half of a second, Taylor smiled over Victoria's shoulder and then announced that she agreed. Courtney followed suit a moment later and there was no stopping the smile from coming to Max's face at the sound of how *confused* Courtney was, as if she couldn't quite believe she was endorsing one of Max and Rachel's plans and accepting them into the club.

Nathan's subsequent stormout sounded pitiful in the air of the large, old gymnasium with the yellowed walls and long abandoned basketball court. Chloe pressed a hand onto either Max's or Rachel's shoulder and joined them and the majority of the club in watching Nathan's petty fit, arms stiff at his side, feet slamming unnecessarily into the ground as he walked with big, exaggerated stumps. *Oh thank fuck, it's over.* Still, this meant there was certainly going to be some sort of long-
term trouble between Victoria and Nathan, judging by the fact that Victoria was the one person not staring at Nathan's retreating form, instead looking toward the floor.

“I really, really liked the idea and I hope you two bring out some more cool ones going forward,” Juliet told them as the meeting came to an apparent and abrupt end. Once Nathan was gone, Victoria slowly returned to her haughty self. While Max hadn't been thinking in this terminology, she realized as Sarah, Zachary and Logan began to break away from the semi-circle around them, that she and Rachel were now officially part of the Vortex Club. Instantly conflicted about this fact, Max reminded herself than there really wasn't room for prejudice from the other timeline to hang around in her feelings toward the club, not if she wanted to stay part of it and in a position to keep an eye on Nathan's activities as often as possible. That's the goal from now on, she reminded herself.

“It was a good idea,” Chloe told them, quietly as Dana approached and Juliet took off for her locker. “You didn't really tell me what you'd chosen.” Max smiled apologetically and even though Chloe waved her off, she thought she saw some discomfort in the artist's face.

“Nice idea, little risque, but awesome,” Dana informed them. Rachel shared a high five with the shorter girl, during which Hayden backed away from the lot and rewarded them with a thumbs up held roughly level with his waist. He was trying to step back and let us impress the others on our own. Eventually the rest of the group filtered away, including the infuriatingly inconsistent Victoria Chase and her shadows, leaving Max, Rachel and Chloe standing alone in the gymnasium. A few seconds after Taylor vanished from the room, the silence became uncomfortable.

“Let's get out of here before hell freezes over and takes us with it?” Chloe suggested. Max laughed as she tossed an arm over Rachel's shoulder and saw with some enjoyment that she was satisfied. Good enough, Max told herself and followed Chloe from the room.

Their idea of celebrating was a trip to McDonalds. Max had eaten from that place more often in the last few months than she could remember doing her entire life. That's what happens, she told herself as she settled into a seat with a tall coke, when the only other place to get a burger in town isn't somewhere you can really go, anymore. It wasn't that they thought the diner wouldn't serve them, but exposing Chloe to her mother any more than necessary didn't seem to appeal to the girl. There is damn sure a quality difference, though, Max though, unwrapping a burger.

“So, think we can convince Chloe to go to the valentine's day party with us?” Rachel asked Max, leaning across Chloe to do it.

“I'm right here and maybe you can ask,” Chloe informed the two of them, furrowing her brow.
“I’m not sure,” Max told Rachel, playing along. “She can be so stubborn sometimes.” Her next sentence was cut off by an elbow jabbed into her ribs.

“If you want to see stubborn, I promise you I can show you.” Max didn’t say another word. She rubbed at her side and then, pretending to be upset, grabbed hold of her drink and took a long sip. Chloe sighed. “Fine, I’ll go to the party. But we get to hang out on the actual Valentine’s Day. All three of us. Or else. And if that makes me silly and goopy and shit, so be it.”

“Awww,” Rachel called, far too loudly for Chloe's taste judging by the way the girl pulled her hat down lower over her bright blue hair and hunched over her sandwich wrapper. “She's turning into such a romantic,” the blonde said, again leaning past Chloe to look at Max. Chloe, for her part, seemed unwilling to match Rachel's eyes but from where Max sat she could see the slight pink tinge of Chloe's cheeks and thought that Rachel's teasing was having the desired effect. For her part, she was just taking the meal as an opportunity to relax, no matter how much she wondered what exactly the ‘beef’ in her hamburger actually was. “You're such a sweetheart, Chloe.”

*From now on, Rachel and I will have even more chances to figure out who Nathan's early targets are. Max's stomach churned at the idea all over again. She slid her sandwich away from her and Rachel and Chloe both took notice of this and fell silent. Max hoped they did not start worrying about her eating, all over again. She was doing her best to eat even when she did not feel hungry, even when she felt ill. The new moral dilemma threatened to resurface and fight her appetite off for a good long while, though. Is it better to let something happen and catch them both in the act or stop Nathan from hurting someone else? One of them left Jefferson out there and, by the sound of things, he was already a predator, himself. The other let someone get hurt, though, someone who didn't deserve it. How was either choice ethical?*

One guarantees someone at Blackwell gets hurt but Jefferson and Nathan might realize what each other are and get caught working together. The other means no one at Blackwell gets hurt. That was certainly more appealing but the problem was that Jefferson would still be there to hurt someone later, or after they left or maybe in a way they couldn't detect. There were no good options. All of this was, of course, predicated on the idea that Jefferson and Nathan connect when Jefferson realizes that Nathan was drugging and taking advantage of people at the school. That was just an assumption, not any established fact. *This would all be so much easier if I could just talk to them and find out what's going on. Even with my rewind I don't know how the hell I'd do that. 'Hey, Mr. Jefferson, you into drugging and photographing teenage girls against their wills?' Pull it together, Max. She no longer felt hungry or like celebrating. This is to take two dangerous people down. You tried to do this the nice, way and it got you hurt. Clearly that's not how this works.*

Max reached out, intent on busting the awkward silence at the table, and grabbed her sandwich. Not matching either girl's eyes, she took one large, emphatic and exaggerated bite from the Big Mac. *Now, go back to talking and shit.*
Chapter Forty-Nine: Mété́r

February 9th, 2012 4:19 PM

Rachel didn't care much for the filthy old carpet that lined the halls of the apartment building her biological mother lived in. Maybe it was a reminder that a woman she had come to care a great deal about was still living in a small apartment in a, frankly, shitty building. Whatever Sera might have been guilty of in her life, Rachel thought the woman deserved better, especially given how dedicated she was in her day to day life and at work that would have made Rachel seriously consider gouging her own eyes out at the tediousness. Just think of it this way, Rachel, she counseled herself as her hand wrapped once at the pale door of Apartment D3. She's come a long way from Bargain Zee's Budget Motel. Somewhere behind the door she heard the familiar tones of her mother's voice. She's come a long way from the Old Mill, too. While Sera repeated herself, still too far into the apartment to be really clear and audible, Rachel considered exactly how long it had been since the woman walked into her life. Almost immediately the math struck her as a bit of a pain in the ass and she set it aside.

“It's Rachel,” she called, when she thought that Sera might be close enough to the door that conversation would be reasonable. For her part, Sera had closed the distance, as she came through loud and clear when she announced that the door was unlocked. Rachel turned the knob and found Sera standing a step or two into the kitchen working a towel through her hair. I don't think I'm early, but... “I got mixed up on the time?” Rachel asked as she stepped in and stripped off her jacket first thing. Sera kept her apartment on the warmer side.

“No, I just lost track of time,” her mother explained, setting aside the towel as Rachel shut the door behind her. The woman approached and Rachel quickly embraced her before stepping away. The first time there had been any kind of familial affection between them had been a couple of months ago. It should not have surprised Rachel that it had come after a tense situation in which she had finally asked Sera why she had left in the first place, why she had let Rachel go as an infant. Most days she was even satisfied with the answers she received that evening. Most days. “Well, how was school?”

“I'm not going to lie, today I wanted out of there almost as soon as it started. Kind of just want this week over with.” That was the truth. It was strange how different she felt giving Sera the truth,
versus any given conversation with her mom. “But I think I knocked out a good grade on a history test. How was your day?”

“It was good, but I don't take days off very often and I think I liked sleeping in a little too much. There goes my sleeping schedule.” At that, Rachel was ushered through the kitchen into the living room. Sera's apartment was relatively unchanged after all of this time. Most of her furniture was pretty old, still very much second hand and in places looking threadbare. The good news was that she had gotten a small, if modern television. Secretly, Rachel suspected the woman had only done so to stop her from worrying about all of the time Sera must spend alone. As far as Rachel knew, there weren't any particular friends and certainly no partners in Sera's life. Not a fan of that, but not my business. “Proud of you for keeping it together during a crappy week, though.” Not so much crappy as, just a little stressful. The party on Saturday loomed ahead of her and while she would normally find the idea of a party fun, there were roadblocks: first, she was involved in making sure it went off without a hitch and second, her presence there was, at least in part, an excuse to spy on a classmate she knew to be a sexual predator. That was not exactly her idea of a great Saturday night, even if she, Chloe and Max had agreed to find some way to enjoy themselves at the same time.

“What all have you been up to today?” Rachel prompted. The woman shrugged and reached across to the table by her end of the couch, freeing a brush which she used to begin taming her hair. “Slept in a bit, worked on my secret project. You know, a bit of the usual.” Uhuh, Rachel thought, narrowing her eyes slightly at the woman, who actively refused to notice. Rachel gave her a second to pretend to be ignorant to the girl's probing and then spoke. She had not particularly come to bother Sera about her 'secret project' but she was very suddenly curious.

“So, when am I going to learn about this secret project?” she asked, making an effort to sound as casual as she could. Truthfully, she firmly expected the same response as usual, which was-

“Oh, I'll tell you when it's done,” Sera promised. “That's what makes it secret.”

“I'm just curious,” Rachel told her, feeling a little defensive.

“Well, that's alright, too.”

“Oh, but curiosity killed the cat.” Sera chuckled as she finished with the hairbrush and sat it aside.

“Rachel, don't you know the rest of that saying? Curiosity killed the cat, but satisfaction brought him back snap-ass happy. Just wait and see. Now, your text said you had some things on your mind. What's been going on, Rachel?” Sera was adept at this, talking her way around exposing some fact or another about herself that she was not interested in explaining. Normally, Rachel
would at least put up more of a fight but the honest truth was that the Vortex Club party on Saturday was not the only thing weighing on her mind. In fact, there was something that at least competed with it for the top spot in her 'I've got a bad feeling about this' contest.

“It's mom,” she admitted, leaning forward and clasping her hands together between squeezing kneecaps. “Later on today, mom wants to talk to me about going to see James in Oregon State Penitentiary.” Sera made a noise in the back of her throat that Rachel took to mean she was paying close attention to what Rachel was saying. “That's a whole can of worms I don't know how to react to. For some reason, the girls want me to do it and they're usually pretty smart about this crap. But I'm also worried about something else mom's been saying and I think she might be right.” This part she had not yet found a way to voice to Chloe or Max. Every time she tried, her stomach dropped until it rested somewhere firmly in the soles of her feet.

“What's that?” Sera prompted, apparently seeing that Rachel was experiencing more difficulty with this than even the concept of seeing the man who had put out a hit on her mother.

“I, um- I keep thinking about what's going to happen after school. I mean, yeah I'm going to have an extra year of it here at Blackwell, but-” she sought out the right words and finally, lamely, settled on, “it's not that far off.” Strangely, while this seemed like the even heavier topic to Rachel, Sera brightened up slightly and leaned back in her seat. All Rachel could do was work her two hands against each other and hope that the excess energy of nerves faded away with this simple action. Sera gave one quick nod.

“I was the same way. Started getting antsy early on about figuring out what to do.” There was a pause, brief but just long enough to be notable. These usually suggested that Sera was weighing the intelligence of a comment she was about to make. Rachel had long since invited Sera to speak her mind around her, though. “The fact is, overplanning or overstressing is pretty fucking stupid. Even about this. You also don't want to wait until the last second and then run around like a chicken with his head cut off, though, do you?” Rachel immediately shook her head. It was nice to have these two conflicting thoughts put into words by someone else. Hearing someone else say it made it at least sound more reasonable.

“Mom used to tell me she has a friend at UCLA who could get me into the theater department there. That means moving to Los Angeles, though, to pursue acting. Yeah, it's something I love doing but aren't people always telling their kids to choose more practical shit?” There was another difference: if she had let her language slip around her mother in that manner, at best she would have received a disappointed frown. Sera didn't blink. It was nice to be able to speak freely.

“Listen, kid, you're gonna hate to be told you're young until you're old enough you'll hate being reminded, so bare with me but: you're young enough to fuck up a few times in life, you get that?” Rachel shook her head to answer honestly: she did not 'get that.’ “Frankly, fucking up can be as beneficial as succeeding, sometimes more. Might as well take the risk of going out there and trying
“Your fa- I mean, James,” Rachel had to bite the inside of her lip, but she wasn't entirely sure against what. “James used to accuse me of having incurable wanderlust. He liked to pretend that because I'm sure it cured him of any hand in things. Honestly, not as much of it was his fault as I liked to pretend either but, he was wrong. Sure, I used to like to travel but, before I fucked up and got involved with shit that I shouldn't, before I started hurting the people that mattered, it wasn't travel I was thinking about. It was regret. I had goals and I let myself put them aside for love. You know what? Maybe that's okay for some folks. I don't particularly recommend it, though and I don't recommend it for you Rachel.” Still a bit put off by both the 'best thing that ever happened to me' line and the frank discussion of the things that led Sera to the heroin to begin with, Rachel took some time to reply.
“Do you, uh, do you think I should go to school to act?”

“You said it was your passion, just now. Is that what you think? Set aside Chloe, set aside Max, set aside your mom. Is it what you want to do for yourself?”

“Yes,” Rachel answered when she sure that the woman's dark gray eyes had matched her own hazel.

“Then yeah, kiddo, I'd say do it. If your mom's on board, more's the better.”

“You being on board matters too,” Rachel told her, though she felt embarrassed giving voice to that honest fact. Sera's crooked grin, so Chloe-like simultaneously comforted her and simple increased that embarrassment. Rachel looked away. “Chloe and Max would support me. Even if they were upset about me moving so far away.”

“That's the thing,” Sera broke in. “They're allowed to be upset about it, and so are you. The world's full of bittersweet and shades of grey. Besides, like I said before, I'm not saying not to try to find a way to make things work if these girls are important to you, so don't forget that part. Just, in the end, if you're faced with maintaining these relationships and pursuing your dreams, take a long, deep fucking look, because, and I hope you don't mind me saying, you have your father’s rash decision making, but you have my head of steam and that is a potent fucking combination.” Rachel begrudgingly smirked. They had not particularly spoken about James in any detail in quite a while. As far as Rachel was concerned it had not been long enough.

“Now I've kinda got to figure out how to tell Chloe and Max.”

“Yeah, that's always the rub, isn't it? Not the conversation itself, but starting it. Now, you hungry?” Originally, Rachel hadn't been comfortable answering positively to that question on Sera's part. It was pretty obvious that Sera did not make much money and she was working to save up to move away from Oregon when Rachel graduated. The passage of time had made her more comfortable with Sera and at that point, Rachel couldn't deny that she was. The fact that there was a dinner with her mom a few short hours into her future did nothing to quiet the fact that she was hungry and it certainly didn't stop she and Sera from eating the better part of eight hundred calories in pizza from the nearest little pizzeria.

All-in-all the air in the apartment calmed and she spent a couple of hours with her mother in relative peace. Conversation was only interrupted by food and the occasional moment or scene of note on television. It felt like, all told, a strangely normal experience. She could recall doing this kind of thing over and over again with Steph, Chloe and Max but before that no one had ever really
told her it was okay to spend a couple of hours vegging out on a couch, having a meal that didn't take place around a kitchen table. *Not to mention has almost no redeeming nutritional value.* That being said, Rachel felt nothing akin to *relaxation* when she sat opposite of her mom in her childhood home a few hours later.

Rose Amber had something on her mind and that much had been obvious from the moment Rachel walked in. Save for breaks, Rachel spent as little time as possible at home. Summer, in particular, was an absolutely pain in the ass. Everywhere she turned in the house was some reminder of James Amber. He was still present in pictures all over the house, his study remained mostly intact and in fact, her mom had done her level best to restore it to how it looked before the investigation Rachel herself had kicked off. Save for the lack of the man who had tried to have her mother executed day drinking and glaring at her, everything might as well have been how it was before Chloe and Max had come into her life at all. Being within these walls set her on edge in a way she was not sure she could put into words and the worst part of it all, Rachel thought as she settled into her seat, was that her mom knew it.

*And that's why we're meeting here,* she couldn't help but think. Rachel raised the glass of water in front of her and took a long drink. She loved her mom, but the woman wanted to get her own way on things and she didn't have too many compunctions about how she did so. Throwing Rachel off balance like this was the surest way to override her self-determination, her will. *I'm going to be seeing James in no time,* Rachel told herself. The tactic wasn't as common in the past. It used to be a thing that didn't work, especially because Rachel had been so angry at Rose for such a long time. Recently, though, she had been easier to guilt into things.

Rachel put the water down and instead of digging into the meal in front of her wrapped her arms across her chest and leaned back in her chair, feeling the padding that was the dark leather jacket she knew her mom hated her wearing. Judging by the sudden frown on her mom's face, this action was interpreted as hostility. Begrudgingly, Rachel uncrossed her arms and leaned slightly forward, toward the table as if she were ready to have a meal. As expected, the greasy pizza from earlier did little to dull her appetite, but the fact that her mom was waiting on her to start eating so she could let loose with her 'let's go see dad' agenda did.

“I just want us to *talk* about what I proposed last week,” her mom insisted, perhaps deciding Rachel was not going to eat until the topic was broached. The woman's severe frown did not lessen and Rachel decided meeting her halfway was going to be the best way to get things to progress. She seized one fork unceremoniously and dug into the salad on her plate. It was probably best not to fill up on everything else, given the meal earlier. *Okay, let's try this tactic.*

“I know what you want, mom, but there's nothing else to talk about.” There wasn't a chance in hell that this was going to work. When Rose Amber wanted something, she did not just let it drop after a rebuttal. Rachel wasn't entirely certain her mom knew the real definition of the word 'no'. She seemed to think it meant, 'no, but keep bothering me about it'. Quite suddenly Rachel thought that it would not have been so bad, after all, to have Chloe or Max with her. Part of her felt silly about having rejected their offers to accompany her. *Just think in this situation, WWCD?*
“You owe it to your family, but most of all to yourself to see him again and try to talk to him.”

“I find the idea that I owe James anything more than spitting in his face fucking offensive, mom.” The woman's face slowly shifted from a disapproving frown to a blank, stoney shell. Rachel felt like even a year ago she would have been able to say with complete certainty what that meant. Now, though, that remained not entirely clear. “And if you think that sounds hostile, you're right.” Speaking a bit frankly with her mom was likely to backfire and get her into trouble, but Rachel did not shift her eyes away when she stabbed her fork once more into the salad in front of her. Watching, she realized that the transformation of her mom's face was because she was going to be too busy pressing for Rachel to agree to try to bother her about her hostile attitude. She's learning, Rachel thought with some disappointment. She knows what buttons to push. “What is it you actually think is going to happen, mom?” Very quickly Rachel wished she had not asked that question.

Almost sickeningly sweet, her mom painted a picture with her words of mutual understanding, of reconciliation and of a happy family. It was, as Chloe would put it, more of that good bullshit. For a moment Rachel thought of interrupting her to suggest she seek a psychiatrist for the hundredth time, but her mom was not being delusional today. Rose Amber was self absorbed. It's okay, Rachel. It's gonna be okay. I'm going to be 18 long before he has a fucking chance of getting out of the can. This whole meal was going to be a wash if she did not find a way to use it to her advantage. There was no way in hell that she was walking out of the house without agreeing to go see James, even if she could stall it out happening for a little while longer. Make a deal with her.

“I'll make you a deal,” she said, and she did not feel bad at all about the idea.

“And what are your terms?” her mom asked her. Rachel watched the woman's eyes. They told the story of someone so disconnected from her feelings (whether as a survival mechanism or not, Rachel did not know, she only hoped she could continue to fight off the habits which tried to lead her to the same fate) that she didn't realize how calculating she was being. This was why Rachel had to do the same. She loved her mom, but their relationship had become, at best, a wreck.

“First, I'll go with you to see James. Second, I'll take your advice and attempt to get into UCLA,” at this last, some surprise showed on her mom's face. The most disturbing thing about it was that Rachel knew it was manufactured, artificial. “But, on my end, I can choose whether I am done with or not after the visit and you will have to agree not to push me to visit him.” The real, genuine emotion came as her mom heard this: Rose's lips pursed as if she had taken a bite into a fresh lemon. “And second, this summer is going to be really hard on Max and I think Chloe, too. I normally would never ask this of you, but if and only if we can afford to do it, I want to go with the girls somewhere for spring break.” This was the bigger request, the one she actually felt guilty about, to a degree, but this was for the other two as much as it was her. The question is, will she take the bait and fall for the bluff or just tell me to get my ass over it and go see James? Rachel put down her fork and folded her hands in front of her.
Her mom thought for a moment, a hard, intense thought, judging by the way her brows tilted downward and her eyes hardened. Then, face giving away that she thought the situation mildly offensive to her, Rose nodded. Rachel did not mind: quite frankly the whole situation was moderately offensive to her, too. What Rachel hoped was that the distaste did not come from her mention of her partners in the less than strictly traditional relationship. And it's time to start planning Spring Break. I'll need to call Veronica and Ryan.

Over the next few minutes Rachel agreed to go but stressed they will need to pick a weekend when school is being relatively kind and light to her, which it currently most assuredly was not, especially with the rapid approach of the spring play. Rachel decided to sit on her conversation with Sera for a while when it came to the girls. Rachel foresaw enough instability in the coming weeks she thought, as she stuck her fork into a bit of salmon. Rose continued to watch her across the table as if trying to read a particularly frustrating book. That look was, all told, more gratifying than either conversation either with her mom or with Sera had been.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this one, I felt like this one was incredibly important for Rachel and it has far reaching consequences for all three of the girls. Also, I'm now on twitter at LiSTTheOV. I would welcome you to follow it to keep appraised of updates, also, I'll probably just be nerding out there.
Chapter Fifty: Anemoi

February 10th, 2012, 5:41 PM

If you had asked Chloe what her biggest concern had been when she first began to birth ideas for her tabletop campaign, she would have responded that it was the thought that at some point, one of them would stop having fun with it. Chloe had not imagined that one day, looking down at her notes, she would be the one dreading the start of the session. The worst part was, despite the fact that the entire party was gathered at the table around them, Chloe could not seem to hide her feelings. She felt stretched thin and uncomfortable with just about everything. Even as she sifted through her notes for some fact she thought she might need for the session, she could not deny that she would much rather veg in front of a television until she fell asleep.

Max and Rachel had noticed her sluggish movement and her inability to really feel excited about or focus on anything first thing in the morning when she had joined the usual cast of the breakfast table. Steph, for her part, had noticed on the way to school. Chloe knew damn well that each of them had been on the verge of calling off the game just so she would relax, all day. She also wasn't the only one showing signs of not having the best day in the world. As the group sat around the kitchen table with snacks and drinks, Max was probably as quiet as she was. Even Rachel and Brooke, who seemed to be keeping the mood up mostly by themselves were starting to calm down and get more and more quiet as the time for the game approached.

Brooke, for her part, shot a concerned look at Chloe that made her immediately lower her eyes back down to her notes. Even Brooke knew damn well that something was wrong. Chloe lowered her DM screen again, letting it rest overtop her notes. I can't do it justice tonight. It felt, she reflected as she considered what to do or say and how vehement the apology on the tip of her tongue ought to be, like a part of her brain was just out of sync with the rest of the world. Max and Steph shared grimaces over their folded hands. Chloe did not miss that at all.

“I'm sorry,” Chloe started, and she hoped that they could tell she very much meant it. “I hate letting everyone down, especially this late, but I do not think I'm going to pull it together enough to DM a session tonight. I promise that in the future I'll say something sooner.” Chloe would never have said it out loud but she blamed this, in part, on helping with the preparations for tomorrow's Vortex Club party. When one was already out of energy, hauling chairs and tables and boxes of various equipment, climbing ladders and hanging streamers and banners just tended to result in being
pretty beat. Looking each face over in turn for signs of disappointment, so she knew who to apologize to later, Chloe saw Max's guilt on her face. “Stop that,” she told Max, a little more tersely than intended. “I offered to help because I wanted to.” Judging by the way Max immediately looked away and pretended to gather up her dice and character sheet sheepishly, Chloe figured she hit the nail on the head.

“Look, I think you've kinda gotta take care of yourself before tabletop is a thing,” Brooke told Chloe as she pushed her glasses back up along the bridge of her nose. This got a sort of universal agreement from the table but did not quiet the voice in the back of her head that said she had waited far too long to cancel, at the very least. Steph and Rachel's concern, at least, noticeably grew at this. Max was trying to smile reassuringly at her. Whatever was going on that was affecting Max, Chloe wished she could get to the bottom of it.

“Besides, this means only one thing,” Rachel declared.

“What's that?”

“Movie night,” Steph called. Chloe relaxed a little at this and began to fold the DM screen and refill her binder with her notes. Getting everything back in roughly the same order might not have been a priority to some people but to Chloe it meant she always knew where to look for notes on a certain phenomenon, city or NPC of note. Sure, she winged more of it than she probably ought to, but whenever an NPC or a city became truly important they needed, at least, a name. While she did that the others cleaned up their own piles of papers and dice which were, to the last, much smaller than Chloe's own. Chloe was the last one to finish organizing her stuff but when she looked up, Max was still at the far end of the table, hands folded as if waiting for her, even if the others had retrieved the snacks and drinks and made for the living room. Chloe couldn't hear what they were talking about in any detail but there was at least some chatter going on.

“Hey,” Chloe greeted when Max raised an eyebrow at her. “Are you okay?” For a moment, Max's lips pursed and then she clicked her tongue and pulled a face as if the question was a bit of a pain in her ass. Chloe understood, but let Max answer anyway.

“It's complicated?” Max told her. “I'm feeling conflicted. About our plan. About Blackwell. About everything.” There was a sort of trepidation in her words. Max watched with wide eyes, as if the admission that maybe their plan to catch Nathan in the act was maybe not the best might upset Chloe, even though she and Rachel had both expressed the same concerns at least twice that day. It frustrated each of them to no end that they weren't sure about what they were doing. It's like having no plan at all. “I don't know.”

“Well, I do. I get it, completely.” Leaving her organized gaming gear in spot, Chloe rose from the table. “I'm gonna go let Pompidou in.” It did not seem that Max especially wanted the two of them
to be alone at the moment, more that she had been waiting patiently for Chloe to join the rest of the group. Chloe appreciated that, even if a small voice in the back of her head whispered that there was a big, relatively new pillow waiting upstairs on a soft bed. Resist, Chloe counseled herself as Max crossed the room.

The brunette reached out, her hand closing lightly just above Chloe's left wrist, in a way that no one but she or Rachel could have done without causing Chloe serious bad vibes. The ghost of the damage David did to her wrist stayed with Chloe, in her mind each time someone touched her anywhere remotely near it. She had never given voice to this intrusive memory, but suspected that it was obvious to just about everyone around her. This time, Max did not look for it though. She simply leaned close and rested her head against Chloe's shoulder, her own left arm coming up to encircle the punk's back. It was brief, it was quiet and it was promise, Chloe hoped, of things to come. When Max finally let go of her, Chloe felt no more awake or pleased with the state she was in, but at least she understood that Max was trying to reach out to her from across the gulf of their mutual frustrations.

Chloe found herself on one end of the comfy, dark brown couch shortly thereafter, with the same brunette up under her arm. She smiled, despite herself as the group around them tried and failed to decide on a film. It mostly came down to the sheer amount of options and the lack of any one strong opinion. No one really knew what they wanted to watch. After several seconds, Chloe considered suggesting one of the various pirated films Steph kept physically in the house. This would be an excellent chance to bring Brooke to the dark side, Chloe thought. Then again, she had a feeling that the photographer looking up at her suspiciously from where she sat pressed against Chloe's side would put up a fight. Okay, so, meet somewhere in the middle.

“What about Firefly?” she suggested. For a moment the admittedly not-so-lively discussion quieted even further and eventually, Chloe got the feeling that perhaps the wind had been taken out of everyone's sails when the game was canceled. She tried not to let her guilt show on her face, but Chloe once more seriously considered going to bed. She had been hoping to receive a phone call but, theoretically if it was going to come it probably would have already.

“Never seen it,” Brooke admitted. That seemed to be all that Steph needed as a signal to begin loading up Netflix. Chloe, for her part, replied with a mock affronted look. “What?”

“Just you wait,” she counseled.

Firefly was enjoyable. With elements of comedy and gritty sci-fi, as well as a less-than-subtle sprinkling of themes reminiscent of old westerns and nods to American history, it theoretically had something for everyone and at least one thing that someone would probably consider to be not ideal. What the doctor really ordered, though, was the conversation that spread throughout the group. It quickly became clear that this was not going to be a proper veg session, but that was alright: she and Steph had plenty of those.
Chloe decided that the nerves making her stomach do flips were beginning to get distracting, so she jumped into the conversation and decided to direct it toward Brooke a little. It kept her mind off of the (hopefully) impending phone call. Given Brooke's aptitude in physics, Chloe was curious exactly what Brooke wanted to do for a career, if anything. She quickly ascertained that while Brooke wasn't entirely certain what she specifically wanted to do, she wanted to go into engineering.

“I just know I want it to be something that really helps people, though,” Brooke added when prompted for more specifics. “I want to ‘Make A Difference’™.” While humorously phrased, Chloe respected her for that kind of a lofty goal, even if Brooke wasn't entirely sure how to go about it. *I'd just like to figure out how to survive without losing my fucking mind until I'm so old I've lost it anyway.* That seemed like a completely laudable goal to Chloe, too. Though, the whole 'not losing my mind' part would probably require ease of access to and contact with Max and Rachel. “I mean, I'm studying all of this at Blackwell. I really should figure out what to do with it.”

“So,” Rachel started, and though her face changed not a bit Chloe imagined the girl squinting as she leaned forward. “Do you go to many of the Vortex Club parties?” It was a shift in subject but Chloe immediately got the feeling she might know exactly where Rachel was going with this. Brooke's response was to shake her head.

“I'm not the biggest fan of the scene. Too many people acting like jackasses. It was fun to sneak off to the science lab, though. Might have to do that.” Then, as if realizing that she was sitting in a room with a pair of Vortex Club members, Brooke backpedaled. “Don't get me wrong, the party is nice now and again and it's cool you two are involved.” Max snorted, marking the first time that she had so much as made a sound in several minutes.

“Calm down,” Max advised. “It's not really my scene either.”

“Enough about me,” Brooke changed the subject. “What about you guys? What do you want to do after school?” At this, an odd silence fell over the room. Rachel and Max stayed notably silent and would not look at anyone else. It hit Chloe that there might be a discussion or two about the future to be had with her girls. Then again, Chloe wasn't entirely sure, herself.

“I kind of want to work in animation,” Steph chimed in. The brief tension in the air was gone at that. “But I'd also love to do a comic some time. I'm kind of planning one. I just haven't let anyone see anything yet.” Chloe opened her mouth to admonish Steph for keeping this last detail to herself. “I'm not going to let anyone see it yet, either,” Steph said. Though she did not address this to anyone in particular, her eyes immediately met Chloe's. It did not need to be said that attempts to badger her into exposing her ideas would be met with resistance and, if necessary, vengeance. Seeing that Rachel and Max were suddenly *intently* focused on Hoban Washburne trying to pilot
the Serenity, Brooke looked next at Chloe. Chloe's response was to look around her once or twice, frown and then answer anyway.

“I'm not sure, but right now I'm waiting for a call back later about a potential interview.” It wasn't that she was expecting a call from the boss, either, but an employee she had asked to put a good word in for her. The brake shop in town was short handed, according to Skip, but he was dubious about his boss hiring a high school student, especially considering she would only be able to work a day a week while school was in. Still, even a full eight hours one day a week was more money than she was making at the moment. It was enough to begin saving up, even if the amount seemed measly, and when summer came- well, suffice it to say Chloe hoped she got the position.

“Actually, not later, so much as an hour ago, now?” Steph made a sympathetic noise in the back of her throat. “To be honest, I just want to be with Rachel and Max.” This time it was Brooke's turn to make a noise in the back of her throat: a faux gag.

“Oh come on,” Chloe admonished. “Don't try to tell me there's not someone you're into.” Chloe knew better. She was in the same physics class with Brooke and knew damn well exactly who Brooke liked to make googly-eyes at whenever he wasn't looking. Unfortunately for her, the brunet was, at best, oblivious. Warren's efforts to get Taylor to notice him without actually coming out and saying anything were among the most uncomfortable things Chloe had ever had to watch. In his worst moments, he reminded her of Eliot with discomfiting accuracy. I mean, at least I've never fucked up and hooked up with Warren. That's one difference. At least, he had problems with only falling for people who were both vulnerable and unavoidable. Chloe did not forget Warren's interest in Max early on and how quickly it changed when she began to open up to the school as a whole.

“There is,” Brooke admitted after several seconds. “But he's pretty oblivious. It's kind of annoying because he's obviously really smart, but he can be so stupid about some things.” For one quick beat, Chloe and Max's eyes met. She could see in the photographer's gaze that they were having the same thoughts. Quietly, carefully, Max formed a warning.

“Brooke, I really think you should be careful about Warren.”

“Oh, you poor fucking thing,” Chloe wanted to crow. “I don't know what you're-”

“Yeah you do,” Max interrupted, rolling her eyes. I guess feelings make fools of us all. “I'm not as smart as you, but I'm not stupid, either. Look, just, be careful. He seems to have some problems with commitment once he does get someone's interest.” The conversation quieted again at this. Still a little red in the face, Brooke nodded as if to say she understood and then turned back toward the television. Something began to buzz against Chloe's right leg. Coming to life all at once, Chloe eagerly began to dig into her right front pocket, earning a curious look from Rachel and Steph.
When she freed her phone, though, it was not buzzing, not ringing. Opening the phone turned up nothing, no messages and no missed calls. *False alarm, I guess?*

“Nothing,” Chloe explained, when she looked up and realized that now all four of the others were watching her. “False alarm.” It did make her realize how on edge she had been up until the moment and quite suddenly she was all the more aware of how heavy her eyes were, how little she had been paying attention to the antics of the crew of criminals on screen or their wanted passengers. Maybe Skip just wasn't going to call that night. *Or maybe his boss said no and I'm just fucked?* She gestured for everyone to go back to the show and promptly slumped against the back of the couch. The only benefit to this was that Max took it as an excuse to press closer against her. It was enough to push her closer to sleep.

In order to avoid passing out and screwing her sleep schedule (not to mention potentially missing the call which she still held some hope was coming) Chloe excused herself after a few minutes to go have a smoke. Joined out back not by Pompidou but by Rachel, Chloe settled onto the step just outside of the door and looked up at the rapidly darkening sky. The sun was on its way down, and quickly. Rachel did not seem to mind, though. Instead of sitting on the step beside Chloe and sharing a cigarette, she walked out into the middle of the yard and turned on the spot so that she was looking at Chloe with open concern.

Chloe, for her part, tried to do everything she could to convince Rachel that no concern was needed. She maintained eye contact, raising an eyebrow as if asking the girl what was wrong as she smoked, stretching her bare feet out into the cool, damp blades of grass in front of the step. It was always comforting to be able to go without shoes, even if she wouldn't particularly risk doing so much farther into the yard, what with a dog running around. Eventually, though, not even her 'everything's fine, look at me relax' gimmick was enough for Rachel.

“Are you *sure* you're okay?” the blonde asked her.

“I think I'm getting better, maybe? Tonight's just a bad night. I'm not sure what it is but I really don't like it.” Rachel nodded, though Chloe personally thought she hadn't given much of an answer at all. Maybe Rachel was holding back on pushing her. *Do I look like I'm that tired?* If something the thespian had seen on her face was enough to hold back Rachel, it was probably something that Chloe ought to be worried about. “I don't know.”

“Hey,” Rachel started, relaxing a bit but at the same time, allowing some sort of playful tone to come to her voice. “You wanna see something fucking cool?”

“Like?”
“I've been meaning to show you guys this for a while, but I didn't wanna upset Max.” Chloe frowned at her, a little bit concerned. Rachel was dodging the question, but then again, hadn't Chloe just done the same thing about her obvious exhaustion? What was really perplexing was that instead of explaining any further or showing her anything of note, Rachel turned away and-arms hanging at her side- lifted her head up. Chloe did not speak. She watched the girl in silence, waiting for some sign of what exactly Rachel was up to.

The first of such signs was so subtle that Chloe wrote it off the first time it happened. In the beginning it was just a soft gust of wind, which was not particularly unusual. Yet, as Rachel stood rooted in spot, she brought her hands into her jacket pockets and continued to say and do nothing immediately noticeable. After something around a minute and a half, Chloe rose to her own feet and that was when she realized that Rachel was not pulling her leg or having some kind of laugh at her expense. The blonde's long hair was beginning to shift in a wind that came from the north in one moment and the west the next. When Chloe looked up at the sky, she realized the already rapidly dropping sun was, alongside everything else that should have been suspended in the air in front of her, obscured by a suddenly coalescing cloud cover.

Over the next five minutes Chloe stood by the door in silence as, not making a sound of her own, Rachel conjured a small thunderstorm from thin air step by step in the February evening sky. At one point, Chloe found herself gaping in wonder as the first clap of thunder rolled over the area. On the farthest edge of the storm, the dark sky was split by a sharp, jagged forking light which trailed to the earth and for a fraction of a second, night was day. The rain came next. As if torn by the lightning bolt, the dark clouds which Chloe had just watched take shape before her very eyes began to loose a very cold, very hard rain. She took one look back into the house and found that the back door was open. Max stood framed in it, watching, clutching something in her left hand.

At Chloe's gesture, the photographer stepped out in the old, tattered red sweatshirt and stood beside her. Steadily, the rain and wind raced to see who would come the quickest and the heaviest. Even soaked, Rachel's thick blonde hair rose and blew around her head and the girl swayed as if the force of the storm was enough that she did not think she could stand. Speaking of soaked, Chloe thought, pulling at the wet mass of fabric that was her favorite beanie. She shivered as another loud clap of thunder made the windows just to her right rattle in their frames. Chloe doubted it had anything to do with how cold she was. Throughout all of this, Rachel did not open her eyes or free her hands from the waterlogged leather jacket. Chloe was glad Pompidou was inside.

When Max's right hand wormed its way into Chloe's left, the artist turned to look for any sign of discomfort on Max's face. Instead, the photographer beckoned her forward, into the yard. Another bolt of lightning struck Arcadia Bay, this one casting an almost pink hue over the photographer. Chloe looked down to see what was clutched in Max's left hand and recognize it as a polaroid which was developing. She rather thought, if the photo survived this sudden storm, she would want to see it. Together, they approached Rachel who remained a sentinel, unmoving at the center of a storm which Chloe thought might be growing larger and larger the longer it went on. This was beyond anything Rachel had ever even hinted at before, putting even her wildfires to shame with its beauty and its fury. And its danger.
For a moment as they walked, Max seemed to take a second to close her eyes and embrace the rain but by the time they were in range of Rachel, who likely heard absolutely nothing over the sounds of wind and rain and thunder, the photographer's eyes were open again and she released Chloe. Without looking elsewhere or giving the thespian any kind of warning, Max reached her arms around the girl from behind and leaned her face into Rachel's upper back, hugging her close. At this Rachel opened her eyes and lowered her gaze. Seeing Chloe beside her, Rachel nodded as if she understood who was holding onto her and then, slowly, her look of concentration transformed into a serene smile. A second ago, Rachel had looked to Chloe like some kind of heathen storm goddess out on the warpath. With Max hanging onto her from behind and her dripping hair growing still, for a moment, she might have been a valkyrie dropped into the ocean.

“I don't have to hurt people with this,” Rachel called between the low, long rolls of thunder. “I don't have to burn everything. I can make things, too.” The look on the blonde's face almost made Chloe want to tear up. It was the kind of relief that made a person want to laugh. The way Rachel's shoulders shook as she spoke, likely she was suppressing just such a chuckle. Again, they were bathed in light from a lighting strike. Chloe wondered if Rachel had been practicing this or if it had simply come to her. Either way, she could watch the tension fade from Rachel's body and feel it easing out of her own as the rain began to slow, the wind died and the cloud coverage stretching as far as the eye could see began to thin. The storm, as quickly as it had formed, broke apart before their eyes.

Chloe turned, laughing, back toward the house. Standing at the back door with a beer in her hand was Steph, who raised it very briefly before turning away and doubtlessly returning to Firefly with Brooke. The bluenette pushed the hair plastered to her forehead back and when Max finally released Rachel, did her best to do the same for Max. There weren't a ton of words she could come up with for the moment, when words were supposed to be her thing. Ever the performer, Rachel brought the storm to an end as, with its dying gasp, it loosed one last low rumble of thunder and then stopped.

“Holy shit!” Chloe did not care how loud the call was. Her voice echoed in the suddenly quiet air. Rachel and Max shared a brief, almost joyful hug, during which Rachel seemed to have her concerns about how Max would react put to ease. “That was... that was fucking incredible.”

“ You're fucking incredible,” Max amended, still locking eyes with Rachel. It was true. In comparison to what the two of them could do, Chloe's own strange ability seemed like an oddity, a dud. The people of Arcadia Bay might remark about the odd pop-up storm that came and went quickly, without explanation and most unseasonably. None of them would ever know that it had Rachel Amber just doing Rachel Amber things and bending the forces of nature to her will. After a second, Max turned to Chloe, excitement on her face. Confused, Chloe just stared back. The excitement should have been directed at Rachel. “Chloe,” Max prompted her. “Chloe, don't you hear that?” At this question, Chloe did hear 'that'. Her pocket was ringing. Still in a bit of a daze, Chloe pulled her phone from it and answered without looking.
“Hello?” Chloe started, then cleared her throat and repeated herself, more emphatically. “Hello?”

“Hey, Chloe,” Skip's voice came through loud and clear. “Holy shit, did you just see that storm?” Chloe blinked once or twice. Skip's place, as far as she knew, was on the edge of Arcadia Bay, whereas Steph's was as in the center as one got. Rachel really had just bathed the entire town in a storm.

“Yeah, I was out in it. It was hella awesome,” Chloe told him, laughing despite herself. Then she realized who she was talking to. The man on the other end of the phone call, who had once revealed to her that she and Justin were labeled 'high risk' students, had really only one reason to be calling her. “Oh- oh shit, Skip did you hear anything back from the boss?” This earned her a chuckle.

“Yeah, Chloe. He's a bit on the fence about hiring a high school student since you'd basically only be able to work about a day a week, but you've got your shot.” Chloe fist pumped, shamelessly jumping in place. When she came back down, it took all of her effort plus Rachel suddenly reaching out to steady her to prevent her from slipping in the newly formed mud. “Come in next Tuesday at five and give an interview. He's probably going to test you or something. He does it to anyone he isn't sure about.” No problem, she wanted to cheer. It really wasn't. The place was a brake and tire shop and didn't do much else of note. The absolute worst Peterson (the man who owned the shop) could do was ask her to diagnose brake problems or lug around some Overcompensator's big ass tire. She had done both before. “You there, Chloe?”

“Trying not to yell your ear off. I really fucking appreciate it, Skip.” Grinning as Rachel tried and failed to wipe strands of her soaked hair from her face and behind her ears, Chloe kept the conversation up with Skip until he suggested it was time for him to go get dinner and then let him go without another word. It took all of her effort to hold off celebrating until her phone was safely back in her pocket, but Chloe happily accepted a couple of hugs and Max's peck on her cheek. Fuck yes, Chloe cheered to herself. This is what I needed. Wet and in a couple of cases a little muddy, the three of them returned to the house. With Chloe at the front, they paused on the edge of the living room as first Brooke then Steph turned toward them.

“What the hell happened to you guys?” Brooke asked. “Were you just standing out there in that weird-ass storm?”

“Yup,” Chloe declared, feeling a sort of pride that she wasn't sure didn't come as much from Rachel being the source of that storm as anything else. “And it was a badass storm, thank you very much. But I got the call back. I've got an interview after business hours on Tuesday.” This was met with a brief, if heartfelt congratulations and then Steph making a declaration of her own.

“Go dry the fuck off before you sit down. And if you guys take too long, I'm going to come
knocking. This is no time for excess celebration.” Chloe stuck her tongue out at the auburn-haired girl and the implications laced into her comments.

“Fuckin' pervert,” Rachel teased the girl.

“Says the pot to the kettle,” Max added, as if defending Steph. Chloe grabbed each of them by the hands and, tracking muddy footprints across the kitchen floor she would need to clean up later, started to lead the girls toward the stairs where a good supply of clean towels (not to mention some dry clothing) might be found. Despite all of her best intentions, after returning to the living room in the company of Rachel and Max, Chloe did not tune into the show and watch for the rest of the night. Curled up beside Max, Chloe gave way to her exhaustion and went to sleep. At some point, and she could not be sure how much time had passed because she could not hear the show in the background and she was not about to open her eyes, Chloe was shaken awake by Rachel.

“It’s time for Max and I to go. Gotta let go of her.” Chloe made a noise that was as coherent of a denial as she felt like giving and wrapped her arms tighter around the brunette she realized she was holding onto. Chloe felt Max’s fingers passing through her hair which, while dry, was still a bit messy from the storm. This did nothing to convince her to let go of the photographer, in fact inspiring the opposite.

“No,” Chloe finally muttered. “Mine.”

“I mean, you could always try to sneak into and back out of the dorms in one night,” Max advised her, quietly. “With David around that might be a pain in the ass though.”

“Or let me put it this way,” Rachel said from her left, leaning close so that she could whisper to Chloe. “If you don’t let go now, Steph and Brooke will find out just how ticklish you actually are.” Huffing, Chloe released Max and opened her eyes as she lifted her head from the girl’s shoulder. She knew by the tone of the blonde’s voice not to challenge her. There were times when Rachel made a threat like that and she did not mean it; there were others when she meant it. Chloe knew the difference at this point in her life.

“Fine,” the artist surrendered. She looked up just in time to see Brooke rolling her eyes at Chloe’s antics. Let her. Brooke didn’t know how comfortable a Max pillow could be.
Chapter Fifty-One: Marathon

Chapter Notes

This is not the last note of the series (sorry, I know I can be a windbag) but it is the last outright warning like this. From this point on, we are in the home stretch. Chickens are coming home to roost. One of them might be a little controversial but it's not even one of the ones which are pretty ugly. From this point on, expect any and all warnings in the story's tags to be fair game for a chapter. I know that I have now decided to upload one per day, but I recommend anyone who feels that the themes of this story (in fairly rapid succession) might upset them, take some time, take the reading easy. Thanks all.

Disclaimer: Anything familiar to you, I don't own. This is a work of fanfiction for personal amusement, fulfillment and a bit of self-therapy. I make nothing from any of it.

Chapter Fifty-One: Marathon

February 11th, 2012 8:40 PM

The Valentine's Day party was in full swing. The blaring music seemed to pulse in the air of the gymnasium, which only came to life in snapshots, flashes of light birthing a world of people and places that were otherwise darkness. The long unused basketball court was occupied by what Max marked to be nearing a hundred and fifty people. For her part, Max had spent most of her time since the party started at seven sitting near the door and watching the room steadily fill with person after person, some she knew, most she did not. Many purchased a beer as soon as they arrived. Skipping on the drink herself, Max still occasionally went off with Chloe or Rachel to dance or Chloe took off to have a smoke with one person or another, but for the most part, she and Rachel took turns playing guard by the door.

Ostensibly they were being very dutiful in making sure that the first party they had ever helped to plan went off without a hitch. Realistically, though, when sitting by the door Max's eyes rarely strayed far from where Nathan sat, only a couple of feet apart from Victoria on the bleachers alongside one edge of the room. The two seemed to be trying to patch things up but every time Victoria looked away from Nathan, Max was certain she saw frustration blooming anew on his face. It looked, from where she sat, as if his attempts at reparations were failing, and miserably. Max had considered approaching and intervening, but she did not think she would be particularly welcome and at least this way she could keep an eye on Nathan while he tried to distract Victoria from Taylor, Courtney and their drinks.
As for other problems, there had been a handful of spills here and there and at one point a couple arguing out in the hallway that Rachel, Dana and Chloe had had to break up but otherwise all was well. In fact, Max thought as Rachel approached from the crowd with Chloe in tow, red faced and sweating, the party was going very well. Max figured she would be able to feel a little bit of pride once she was off Nathan-Watching duty for the night. As the girls approached, Chloe tried to yell something to her, but it was swallowed up by a bass drop which made Max's chair buzz beneath her and Chloe's face faded from view as the lights around the gym dimmed. Eventually, the taller girl was standing right over her, yelling practically into her ear.

“Go, get out there!” Max looked up, confused at Chloe, who rolled her eyes with a slow emphasis and then took hold of Max with her spindly fingers and pulled her to her feet. Max attempted to ask precisely what in the hell Chloe was talking about, but the music fell like a veil over her words. After a moment she was pushed, stumbling, toward Rachel, who had been standing with her arms crossed watching the two of them try and fail to talk. Those arms uncrossed and reached out to steady Max. It was her turn to roll her eyes at Chloe as the artist took her seat and gestured for Max and Rachel to go off. *I guess it has been about a half hour. I should stretch my legs.*

They were surprisingly more comfortable this time with pushing through the crowd of dancers, looking to disappear into the mass and from sight of most people who were not, themselves, dancing. Max focused on the feeling of Rachel's hand in hers. When they had found just enough space for their bodies and were again face to face, she looked pointedly into the blonde's eyes as Rachel first took her other hand and then began to 'lead' as much as one could be led in this manner of dance. Sometimes, in situations like this, Rachel just got inexplicably giddy. It was rather on the extreme side and Max saw signs of this emotional state forming in the girl's eyes when she looked for it. It wasn't that it was necessarily a bad thing, it was just unusual. Max wondered if it was a sign that maybe, just maybe, Rachel kept more emotions bottled up than she thought she did.

As if she could read Max's mind, the blonde released her hip, reached up and pinched the end of Max's nose briefly, trying to pull her out of her reverie. It succeeded, of course and Max rubbed angrily at her nose for a moment before forcing herself to pay attention to the moment and to Rachel. It wasn't particularly hard to be aware of the thespian's hands, her slowly widening grin which was already approaching 'goofy' or the way in which she moved almost as if to her own music and yet did not stick out too much. *I'm never going to get the hang of this,* Max thought. She simply did not know how to dance. *And Rachel's just going to have to accept that.* In the interim, though, even failing at learning how to dance had its benefits.

Thoughts of Prescotts, Chases and even the party in general took a back seat. It wasn't that she forgot about the reason they joined the Vortex Club to begin with, but she did do her best to let Chloe worry about Nathan. Max did not fall into whatever intoxicating trance held Rachel, but she did at least enjoy the music and being close with her girlfriend was never precisely unwelcome. Quickly, she came to accept that even if this was a *keep an eye on Nathan* night, it was alright that she had some fun. Maybe that should have been obvious, but Max's predilection for overthinking typically fought to rob her of her fun during times of stress.
Whenever she was close to straying off of the path and losing focus on where they were or what they were doing, Rachel would bring her back to the moment. Typically she did so in a far more gentle manner than before: her hand would shift up from Max's hip to her shoulder or around to her back, or perhaps she would simply pull a step away from Max and force the girl to lift her head more to match eyes with her. Simple gestures worked wonders in capturing Max's attention. Perhaps it _was_ a symptom of hypervigilance as Rachel so often suggested. She had certainly been on edge even a couple of minutes ago when Chloe and Rachel had last pushed their way out of the crowd and approached her. At one point, Rachel physically lifted Max's head a bit, this simple act enough to pull Max into the moment. That she took advantage of the moment to steal a quick peck from the blonde was of no consequence.

By the time that Max began to consider that they ought to take a break, the girl opposite of her was practically laughing at nothing. It was both a little bizarre and endearing. Max couldn't wipe the smile off of her _own_ face. Very notable, though, was the fact that Rachel's hazel eyes were being dominated by pupils the size of dinner plates. As with last time, Max would have had little trouble believing that Rachel was high as a kite. She wondered if Rachel was _warm_ again, the kind of warm that in the past had signaled the potential for a fire. It took a moment for her to communicate her intent to leave the 'dance floor' through facial expressions and hand signals, but eventually, giving her a poor imitation of a pout because Rachel could not keep a straight face, the blonde helped her shoulder a path through the crowd.

The full weight of the night and their reason for being in it hit Max as they emerged from the crowd and saw what was going on. By the doors to the room, Chloe was sitting not in the chair she had just been in, but on her butt in the middle of the floor, looking a little surprised. Nathan stood in front of the doors to the gym with one hand extended as if he had just physically pushed her aside. Pressed up against him with one arm around his shoulders was someone who could only have been Victoria Chase. Her head was bowed toward the ground beneath her, her right arm not visible from where they were standing. The picture the moment painted in Max's mind was dire enough that she pulled her hand from Rachel's and ran quickly across the floor, dodging at least two people who were similarly gaping at the scene in front of them and doing her damndest not to trip over the wiring taped to the floor.

Nathan and Victoria passed through the doors out into the hall and from the group immediately around it, Taylor and Courtney emerged. While Courtney stopped with her arms crossed over her chest, Taylor reached down to help Chloe back to her feet, only backing off when the girl batted once at the air between them, dismissively and more than a little aggressive. For Max's part, she didn't reach Chloe in time to help her up, but she did immediately take a moment to put herself between Chloe and Taylor so that she could check the girl's face for signs of any serious pain. Instead, the girl just looked _pissed_ and once Chloe realized who it was who had her by the shoulders and had quickly shoved their face into hers, the artist gestured once, insistently toward the doors and the retreating forms of Nathan Prescott and Victoria Chase.

"Are you okay?" Max yelled at Chloe, more concerned with her health than with someone she could chase down in a rewind. Chloe's response was again to gesture toward the door in silence. Glancing to her left, Max saw that Rachel had reached them and knew that she was running out of
excuses not to confront what was happening. *This is it. This is the moment.* Max released Chloe and turned to Taylor. As loudly as she could raise her voice over the music, she called out a question. “Where are they going?”

“Victoria got too drunk. He's taking her back to her room.” *Victoria Chase got too drunk in an hour and some change? Victoria, who only drinks like, a beer at these parties. Yeah, no.* Max stepped away from all four of the girls around her and out into the hallway. There was no immediate sign of the couple who had just left but, a boy standing near the door seemed to notice her looking for them. His eyes widened slightly, as if to indicate that he suspected the importance of the moment and then he tilted his head toward the center of the school and gestured with the phone in his hand. Max shook her head and hurried as directed. *This is it. I can't believe it's Victoria.* If Max simply stopped running and let the boy get away, Nathan would make his move. Why it had been Victoria, she did not know. Maybe he saw her betrayal as great and had needed to take back his power from her? That seemed to be how he thought, in terms of his own power.

Their backs were visible as Nathan turned them toward the hall that, at the end of it, would spit them out closest to the dormitories. *Just do nothing and it will happen. The story will get out. Jefferson will find out what's going on. They'll start working together and then next time, bam, you shut them down. It's all over and no one else will have to get hurt.* All Max had to do was turn away and pretend to assume the same thing Taylor and Courtney were assuming: that Nathan would take good care of Victoria, who had overindulged. All she had to do was look away from them. If she could just let this happen they would be able to put an end to all of this. Jefferson and Nathan would go down the next time they stepped out of line and she would rewind as many times as it took to make sure of it.

That had been the plan all along. Yet, as Max turned around and saw her own regret, her own discomfort, her own shame reflected on the faces of Chloe and Rachel, she knew that it was already decided. The rage and guilt that arose from that moment, that understanding would have been dangerous if Rachel were feeling it, Max would later think. Thought in the moment consisted only of how many steps it would take to catch up to Nathan and Victoria and put an end to this before it was too late. Not a single one of them had ever been able to embrace this plan and that should have been the first sign that it was never going to be a case of sacrificing someone for 'the greater good'. If, as every one of them had pointed out at one point or another, someone else got hurt because they intervened tonight, then they would have to deal with that. *God damn it!*

Some level of courtesy existed among the people out in the halls: while the walls were lined with couples or groups of friends not feeling the all encompassing din of the music, the middle of the hall was clear. With Victoria seemingly having difficulty walking, Max made two assumptions: the first that she could catch the two of them even if she chose to stroll leisurely (which she was not) and the second being that Nathan had fucked up his dosing. Ideally, Max thought as she reached Nathan, she would present him with an alternative that he could not turn down while keeping his cover, like telling him to let her help Victoria. The thing was, that might just set someone else in his path. She needed to anger and embarrass him, she needed Nathan to leave with eyes on his back, knowing that he would be watched closely if he came back. There were still some couples nearby, sitting along the walls when Max reached the pair.
“Nathan,” Max called. “You don’t have to do this. Just let her go.” For a moment it looked like he was going to ignore her, so Max took two quick steps and reached out for Victoria's arm. The waiflike blonde seemed to want to make some scathing rebuttal in her direction, but she was so high in the moment that all Max heard was a confused query as to who Max was. Nathan cursed, loudly, looking up at Max as she moved to stand in front of them. His marred features were sharp, angry and red. Good, he’s embarrassed. Max hoped some of the people around them were watching and taking note.

“Fuck off, dyke,” Nathan told her, insistently. The two continued toward the door and Max slowly backed up to keep space between herself and the pair. “This has nothing to do with you.” Over their shoulders, she saw Chloe and Rachel approaching. Taylor and Courtney were not far behind her.

“If you walk away with Victoria, this is all going to go really bad for you. Just like the fall before last.” At that, Nathan stopped moving. “It's going to be the same thing all over again. Don't you get it, Nathan? You're not all-powerful and untouchable. We're not playthings. We're our own people and we're not sent here just for you to use. None of us.”

“You don't know what you're talking about,” he hissed. “You're just like all of the rest. You think you know everything, but you're just a nosy bitch, sticking your nose in everyone else's business.” This was normal fare for Nathan when he was angry, but there was something new. Mentioning the first and last time that Max had been in Nathan's room had put the boy on edge. His voice shook. His face was almost the color of a stop sign. This time, when Max looked around, people were watching.

“Who yuh think yar?” Victoria asked, though she was not looking at Max as she said this. Instead, the blonde was glaring at the ground about five feet ahead of Max. She can't even lift her fucking head. Is this what I was like? Or is this some new drug? To hear Rachel tell the story, Max had been barely conscious at all when Rachel found her.

“Nathan, look, everyone can see what's happening. You slipped her something. She's high off her ass. If anything happened to her, they'd remember this. Look, I can get you your meds. We can get you help. You just need to want to get help. We can get you help, Nathan. Let her go and you and I could go right now and find someone, anyone who could help you. Anyone you want.” Confusion took his features. The sound of the people around them began to disappear under what Max thought at first was a particularly powerful, rapid bassdrop from the gym but quickly realized was her own heartbeat. That doesn't sound right. “Nathan, please, let me get you help. It's what Kristine would want. You don't have to be like your father.” Apparently appealing to his thoughts of his sister had been a big mistake. Or maybe mentioning Sean?

“Don't you dare fucking mock me!” Nathan went off as if he were a bomb. For a second she did not
understand *why* his muscles were tensing and then he shoved Victoria to the side. She hit the wall fairly hard, but someone, and Max did not think she knew who it was, caught the girl before she could fall to the ground. Rachel moved up behind Nathan as he made as if to lunge at Max and placed one hand down on his shoulder. The boy jerked around as if to shove her away and, standing so close to Rachel Amber for the first time in a year and some change, he recoiled. Max would have enjoyed the look of pleasure on Rachel's face were it not for the sound of Victoria crying out, confused and demanding to know why Nathan pushed her. The boy jerked free of Rachel's grasp, took one step toward Victoria who, barely standing, could not lift her face to look him in the eye.

“It's what you get for siding with that mouthy bitch,” Nathan told her, leaning forward and down to try to force himself to her eye level. “I should have known you were like all the rest of them.”

“Start walking,” Rachel told the boy. Max watched she and Chloe approach. Nathan seemed to come to his senses at the threat inherent in this behavior and realize that he was surrounded. There were something like nine people in the hallway and at least four of them were slowly approaching him. One of these was the stranger who had tipped Max off as to which way the two of them had gone to begin with. It was gratifying to watch the Prescott heir storm off like a petulant child again, but did nothing to quiet the voice in her head that warned her that this action would have consequences. Grave consequences. *Different phrasing, please, brain.* Max approached yet another set of strangers who were trying to help keep Victoria on her feet as she tried to fight them away.

“Victoria,” Max called, loudly and emphatically. The girl shook her head once, as if in denial and then looked in roughly her direction. It looked like it took a herculean effort, but Victoria did eventually match her eyes. “You're safe, okay?” The blonde was too lost to even look confused. Behind her, Nathan disappeared around the corner as if he was going back toward the gymnasium. The idea made Max's stomach churn but when forced to choose between making sure Victoria got out of there alright and putting an end to Nathan's bullshit, Max thought she had already made the choice. There was no regret, precisely, but she did feel some guilt as she matched eyes with the blonde.

“Max?” Victoria asked.

“Yeah,” Max promised her, “It's Max.” When there was no great outroar, she took Victoria's right hand and slowly threw her arm over her shoulders. “You need to get to bed, okay?” The blonde's head moved but it was neither a nod nor a shake of denial. Max couldn't be assed to try to interpret it. For her size, Victoria was surprisingly heavy when she was half deadweight. She looked once toward Chloe and Rachel, the latter of which was already following Nathan from the hallway determinedly.

“Go take Victoria somewhere safe,” Chloe told Max. For her part, Max did not look at Taylor or Courtney behind the bluenette. She was not sure she would be able to keep her cool if she did.
“Then come find us, alright?”

“Alright,” Max promised and, talking Victoria through each and every step, Max led the way from the school. Why and how there was a clear path to the dormitories, she did not know. All she knew was that while Victoria had calmed down upon seeing her earlier, with every step they got toward the dormitories, she seemed to be getting more and more confused and more and more upset. When Victoria had asked where they were going for the thirteenth time, Max gave her the same answer. “I'm dropping you off at your room, remember? It's okay.”

It was not, as it turned out, okay.

“Why do I feel so weird?”

“Victoria, I think Nathan slipped you something.” She did not have much trouble getting the front door to the Prescott Dormitories open. What looked like it was going to be difficult was the act of climbing the stairs up to the second floor because at Max's answer, the blonde insistently began to dig her heels into the ground instead of go anywhere.

“He wouldn't.”

“Okay,” Max told her. She wasn't entirely sure that Victoria would remember this or anything in the morning. Arguing with her seemed like a waste of energy for both of them, especially considering she was either going to need to search Victoria for her keys or coach her through unlocking her room in short order.

“Oh god,” the wealthy blonde murmured, and then, heart wrenchingly, sobbed once. Max was faced as she watched Victoria grapple with what was happening around her, with the morality of calling the cops on Nathan. *It all comes down to proof and again, I don't have a scrap of it. The only proof I've got is that they were sitting together at the party. That's nothing.* There was one more thing to consider, Max told herself as she all but hauled Victoria up the stairs and she questioned why, why he would do that. The other consideration was Victoria's desires. Nathan had tried to rob her of her agency once, of bodily autonomy, of free will. Did Max want to make decisions for her? Did she want to rob Victoria of her free will? She had not wanted Rachel to take her to the hospital when her time had come because she knew what happened if the girl *did.* In Victoria's shoes, though, Max rather thought her decision would have been the same even without the echoes of a fire in the emergency room, of gunshots and Nathan Prescott screaming in pain.

It took Max so long to convince Victoria to look for her keys that she very nearly did it herself. Eventually, though, Victoria gestured at her right front pocket and after one or two failed attempts
to reach into it, Max apologized to her and freed the keys herself. That was no small task while trying to balance the slightly taller girl against her shoulder, but eventually the job was done and she pushed open the door to Victoria's room. Max did not take any time to take the sight in. For all she knew, some kind of drama could be going down at the school at that very moment. She hated it, but she had to leave Victoria and get back. *Besides, she wouldn't want me here when she woke up, but I know who she would want.* There was a very brief struggle as Max tried to convince Victoria to lay down, and eventually was forced to leave the girl sitting on her bed.

Victoria did not say anything when Max released her. She had been wanting, just a second or two ago, to be let go of. Max expected some relief. Instead, it was as if the girl thought she was alone already. Sitting, hunched forward, Victoria Chase stared, blankly at the floor in front of her. Her brief spat with tears seemed to be over for the moment. Now, while stopping short of having gone completely flat affect, she was clearly still out of it. *I don't know what the hell he gave her, but it's some fucked up shit.* Whatever the case, Max did not feel right leaving Victoria without saying anything.

“Victoria,” Max called, softly.

“Go away,” this was the clearest, most 'Victoria' thing Victoria had said to Max all night, even if it came out at a mumble. “Leave me alone.”

“Victoria,” she tried again. “I'm going to send Taylor and Courtney, okay? You need to stay here where it's safe.”

“He was safe,” Victoria answered. “I thought he was.”

“Everyone did,” Max lied. The momentary cognizance faded and Victoria again seemed to forget Max was there. Satisfied (if it could be called satisfaction) that Victoria was not going to leave the room, Max stepped out into the hall and shut the door behind her, Victoria's keys still clutched in her palm. Her phone buzzing in her pocket was all that kept Max from standing there, spaced out herself. While she was glad that Victoria was safe, there were a lot of other feelings in competition for Max's limited attention span and energy reserves.

*Hayden*

*Juliet and I are w/ a few people in science lab. Chloe and Rachel brought Courtney and Taylor. They want you to meet us.*

Eventually Max did make it back to the school and even to the science lab. No one paid her any
special attention as she turned the knob. No one, it seemed, who had been watching the spectacle
that was Nathan Prescott, was still in the halls. Maybe they had not felt safe at the school and had
gone home or maybe, intent on drowning out the unpleasantness, everyone had gone for a drink
and loud music. Max did not know. She did not care. What she wanted to know was why Rachel
and Chloe wanted her to meet them there and what had happened when they chased after Nathan.

There was a certain air of relief in the room when the group looked up. Once more, a series
of small lanterns whose source Max still did not know lit a small section of the science lab. More than
one face seemed to settle into a more relaxed state upon seeing her, but Taylor and Courtney's did
not. She took a moment as Dana softly called out her name to look the group over. Chloe and
Rachel sat to Taylor's left. Hayden, Juliet, Dana, Steph and, strangely, Warren Graham were also
present. *What the fuck is he doing here?* Perhaps he had been part of the smoke circle which they
must all have been intruding upon? Warren was a bit of a mystery that Max had not really thought
about for a few months. *I think it might be smart to do so, soon.*

“Max,” Dana said again as she approached and settled down onto a stool beside Chloe, who
instantly reached out to take hold of Max's knee, squeezing it reassuringly. Max looked up at Chloe
instead of Dana and saw a grim smile settle into place. She lowered her head again. Max was aware
that she had dashed all of their admittedly tenuous plans that night. She knew damn well she had
done so unilaterally, too. The question remained as to whether or not Chloe or Rachel were upset
with her for it. “Max, Chloe, Rachel and Taylor say you just accused Nathan of drugging Victoria.”
Now, Max looked again at Chloe and saw guilt on her face. “I'd really like to know why you think
that?” Dana's voice was soft, coaxing. It made Max shiver on the stool.

“Where's Victoria?” Taylor suddenly asked from the other side of Rachel. Max still had not been
able to meet the thespian's eyes.

“She's in her room,” Max promised. “There's not even a bump from where he dropped her.” Max
reached out with her right hand, which had been clutching Victoria's keys so hard that she would
not be surprised if she had pierced the skin of her palm with them. “I know from experience that
she might need someone with her.” Max passed the keys to Chloe, who sent them sideways to
Rachel. At this, Max dared to look at the blonde two seats down from her and found the girl's face
stoney. It took one or two swallows to find her voice again. “She'll be a little confused and scared,
but most likely she'll sleep it off and not remember much of it. You should go.” Dana's question
remained unanswered. Max did not think she could look at the group at large.

“Did you see something, Max?” Dana repeated, just as softly. “Is there something you saw that
tipped you off that Nathan was up to no good?” Dana did not doubt her, she was looking for
warning signs, for evidence, something that Max wished she could give. Instead, looking down at
her own hands and, no longer matching anyone's eyes, Max decided to ask something, herself.

“Please don't make me say it. I'm not trying to make trouble for anyone. Not for the Vortex Club.
Not for Victoria. I just wanted to help. Please don't make me say it.” *That's not what you're upset about. That's not why you feel like throwing up. You know why.* She did. She knew exactly why Dana’s question made her shiver and why her empty stomach was churning. The only answer she could possibly give the girl was based on first-hand experience. That meant admitting something that she had not told anyone else. Rachel, Chloe and Steph knew because of their involvement in that night, but Max had not told anyone else, not even Kate, who might have been her closest friend at Blackwell outside of the other three girls.

“Max?” Dana asked, quietly. The hand on Max's knee squeezed.

“You don't have to,” Chloe told her, speaking up loudly enough that she could be heard by the room at large. A second hand, larger but soft, came down on Max's left shoulder and it was this that made her look up and follow it to its source. Hayden had reached out to her and was shaking his head, as if to say that Chloe was right and the choice was hers. She had kept this secret for over a year, scared of her parents finding out and demanding she leave Blackwell, scared of being smeared all over town, scared of Nathan's revenge. *Scared, scared, scared. Like a fucking bitch.*

Every set of eyes on her was connected to a person that Max had some kind of *feelings* about. Hayden had been injured in an attack meant for her and subsequently helped her get dirt on the friend who had tried to hurt her. Dana cared strongly when she was not wrapped up in her own problems, most of which came from a bit too much of a desire not to fall behind anyone else at Blackwell. Juliet was always watching, always listening to the school around her but seemed to have the good sense not to repeat half of what she heard. Warren, jesus, he was a whole bundle of questionable, one who had taken her by surprise with his behavior when she had first come to Blackwell, seeming to be almost the opposite of the caring, attentive boy the Other Max remembered from her school days, Taylor and Courtney were so much more than the roles they played for Victoria, but neither of them seemed willing to accept it. Then there were Steph, Rachel and Chloe. If there were three people anywhere near as important to her in Arcadia Bay, Max couldn't imagine them. The things she had been through with *any* of the three of them were enough to instill innate trust in the bonds between them.

Max exhaled. She had kept this secret for far, far too long.

“He did it to me when I first got here. The night of the Midsummer Night's Dream performance.” Max lifted her eyes to them again, in part because of the fact that both Hayden and Chloe had simultaneously given her one sharp, bracing squeeze that was probably a bit harder than either intended. Dana and Juliet were sharing a sort of knowing look that Max wanted to understand. Courtney looked dubious. Chloe, upon seeing this, looked enraged. As for the fire in Rachel's eyes, only time could tell what form it would take. Warren looked down at his hands. Steph's pride hurt to look at.

“We- I remember you two going off together,” Dana finally told Max. “You were really out of it,
but I didn't know what was going on. I didn't know who you were, then and I'm so sorry I didn't say anything to anyone, Max.” Max shook her head. She could feel her eyes beginning to sting.

“I don't think I'm the first. I think he knew just what he was doing, but I wasn't” she gave one heaving sigh and continued. “I thought I could do the smart and safe thing, say nothing, keep my head down, let it happen again.” Looking up at Chloe and Rachel, she tried to convey the honesty of the words to them. “But I couldn't. I can't.”

“And we couldn't, either,” Rachel promised her. “Why do you think we told them what happened? You did the right thing, Max. You made the right choice.” Max's stool rocked forward as she slumped down. There were no more voices for a moment, but she could hear upset and frustration in the breathing around her. Then, after several seconds, the familiar flick of a lighter met her ears and she smelled smoke. She wasn't sure where the blunt came from, but eventually Hayden passed it to her. Max almost laughed. It had been a while since she had been in enough supply to keep up with her own anxiety, much less everything else. She took a long draw from the joint which was almost interrupted as grief grew up inside of her at the feeling of Rachel, who had just climbed down from her own stool, wrapping her arms around Max's middle from behind.

“Max stopped it before anything happened to Victoria,” Rachel muttered, and then stopped in her next breath, following Max's eyelinel toward a lost looking Courtney, who was looking to Taylor for answers and did not seem to understand why Taylor looked pissed off. “Look, if you don't believe her you're welcome to fuck off, but if you've got half a brain in that head of yours, you're not going to leave any drinks out around Nathan.” Max offered the joint to Chloe on her right and when neither Rachel nor Courtney spoke, interrupted the tense moment. She had trouble feeling much empathy for either of them in the moment. In fact, she had trouble feeling much of anything.

“Is he back at the party?”

“No,” Rachel promised as she released Max. “We told him to fuck off and he listened. For once.” Max looked around the room, where few people were meeting each others' eyes. Courtney accepted the spliff from Chloe. Max wanted to ask them all not to say anything, not to repeat what she had just confessed to them, but did not know how she could do that in good conscience. Hadn't she learned just hours ago that she would do whatever it took to make sure Nathan did not hurt someone else? Growling with frustration, Max pushed herself off her stool and made to walk past Rachel, toward the door. Chloe rose with her. She wanted to kick and scream and yell, shut herself in her room and rage out at the wall but there was a party on and there were entirely too few members of the club there in case something came up.

“Max,” Dana started, “I think Rachel's right. You did the right thing. You also helped us throw what was otherwise a kickass party. I think you've done enough for tonight.”
“You saved Victoria's ass tonight,” Taylor agreed, though her voice was quieter. She was less sure of herself as she watched Max from beneath long, blonde bangs. “You should go back to the dorms if you want to.” When Max turned back toward them, it was to look past Chloe and confess a thought she had not even known she was having.

“I don't want to be alone right now.”

“You won't,” Rachel promised her, taking a step toward her and Chloe, where they stood near the door. “Taylor, Courtney. One of you should get some water and go sit with Victoria. This is probably really fucking scary for her.” That seemed to be Rachel's idea of a goodbye and Chloe saw so, too, because she turned away with a quick raised hand as the blonde approached. Max grimaced, looking between them and the others. She did not know who to speak to, but there were words needing said.

“I'm sorry,” she told the room at large, unsure exactly what she meant. Dana seemed intent on dissuading Max of the idea that she had something to apologize for, but Max had trouble focusing on her words as Steph, too, broke away from the ring of people passing a smoke about and approached. Rachel and Chloe moved out of the way when they saw who was coming, and allowed the girl to grab Max in a very tight, if brief hug. Max was strangely relieved to have Steph with them as they left the room and, eventually, the building, as if she provided just that last bit of safety that Max needed to willingly step out onto Blackwell grounds. “Did I do what I think I just did?” Max asked them once the doors to the school had shut behind her. Chloe was the first to really react. She dug her hands into the pockets of a soft, dark jacket and, turning to begin to walk backward as they made for the dorms, she spoke.

“Saved someone from Nathan? Hell yeah you did,” Chloe told her. Max shook her head.

“I mean, I just told a room full of people what happened. What if it gets around and he comes after me? He's dangerous enough as it is.” Self-loathing rose up within her as she realized she felt scared and small. Of course Nathan was going to come after her, he was never not going to after embarrassing him publicly in the middle of his escape with his next victim.

“If Nathan comes after you,” Steph said, “he's got a lot of people he's going to have to get through. Besides, Courtney and Taylor are going to tell Victoria what happened tonight.” What are the consequences of this? I can't even guess.

“I guess I'm a little nervous,” she admitted to the auburn-haired girl, whose lips curled into a frown.
“Max, we get that, that’s why we’re here,” Chloe told her. “It’s okay to be scared, but I’m gonna stick around as long as I can and Rachel can stay with you all night.” The group as a whole was back in the dorm building and on the second floor shortly, at least, three of them as Steph had said her goodbyes at the door. The hall was still dim when the door at the end of the hall locked itself behind them, putting up one more barrier for any intruder who might come looking for revenge. _Calm down, Nathan's not going to try to get up here. Too messy, too obvious. He'll wait. He'll find some way to hurt you that doesn't come back on him._

It was not _her_ door that her eyes went to first. Despite Chloe and Rachel in front of her, Max veered off the path to her own room. Numbly, she approached Victoria's door. Pressing her ear to it just briefly, she could not discern any clear, audible sound from the other side. _Taylor and Courtney are coming, Max told herself. They'll take care of her tonight._ She had to remind herself of this fact a couple of more times before she let Chloe or Rachel pull her away from the door and toward her own room. The silence of Victoria's bedroom disturbed her.

At some point, Max had given her own keys to Chloe, who let them into her room. It was the damndest thing, though: she could not remember having done so. Chloe and Rachel entered first, as if making a sweep of the room and then coaxed her in with care that she did not think she should have needed to be convinced to enter _her own_ room. Looking once around the room, Max settled down not on her bed or futon but on the floor, back against the western wall. Without a word, and though she was probably disturbed by this, Rachel dropped into a sitting position on one side of her and Chloe on the other. Max sought out their hands without giving it much thought and at the same time considered how best to say _any_ of the things on her mind.

“We’re gonna need a new plan,” Max finally settled on. “This was never gonna work, and I’m sorry.”

“Max, none of us liked this plan. None of us were okay with it. It’s alright that you weren’t,” Chloe answered. “It’s not time to talk about what comes next, though, okay? It’s time for you to calm down.” Max wasn't sure she wanted to calm down. She was not sure exactly who she was going to be when she 'calmed down' and was fairly certain she was not allowed to fall apart. _Not yet._

There was no one there to know the disturbing contents of the dream she gladly left behind. Chloe had been gone for hours when Max awoke, not for the first time that night, to feel Rachel's arm tighten around her midsection. When she shifted, it seemed to her to be slight enough as to be almost imperceptible to anyone else. Yet, the owner of that arm certainly noticed that she was awake even though the only thing Rachel must have been able to see was the back of Max's head. Rachel pressed slightly closer against her. Whether it was due to being uncomfortable or just wanting to be closer, Max was unsure until the girl spoke.

“Another nightmare?” Rachel asked her. Max grew still, trying to remember if she had let on either time she woke before that unpleasant dreams had been the culprit. _I don't remember saying_
anything. “You kind of jerked awake just now. Max, you don't have to pretend.” She did not pretend. Instead, slowly enough that she would not cause either of them discomfort, Max turned to face the blonde who lay, back toward the wall, watching her with concern and something more in her eyes. Max had to tilt her head so that she was looking into those hazel eyes and not at Rachel's lips and chin, though that was partially down to their height difference and not just the angle at which she had been sleeping moments before. “Hey, you.”

“Hey yourself,” Max said back as the blonde returned to stretching her arm around Max's waist. She felt somewhat safer at Blackwell with that arm in place. It was as if Rachel was a chain to the world. She was not about to fly off, or fall off of the dormitories, Max thought as she recalled the nightmare. The warmth inherent in pressing up to anyone, much less Rachel of all people, threatened to chase the nightmare clean away and Max did nothing to stop it from doing so. In fact, she reached down and pulled the blanket up farther over her. “Not sleeping?”

“Not really,” Rachel told her, honestly. “I'm worried about you.” Max closed her eyes. She didn't want to make Rachel worry. She didn't want to make either of them worry, least of all the girl whose emotions tended to bring about some occasionally disastrous effects. At this, Max's mind strayed to the storm Rachel had conjured a few days ago. Though she had fought the panicked side of her mind on that day, she could not deny that there was something if not scary then at least awe inducing about Rachel coming to understand her power to such a degree that she could make the storm. Had it really been a side effect of saving the other Chloe's life that had leveled the other Arcadia Bay or had it been the vengeful spirit of another Rachel Amber? Was her Rachel powerful enough to level a town? She had certainly drenched one and put on an impressive show for it. “Max?”

“I'm okay,” Max lied. She was anything but okay. She couldn't fathom what was happening in Victoria's room at that moment. Had she finally fallen asleep? Was she going through the kind of thing Max had gone through a bit over a year ago? I don't want to stay under the same roof as this fucking creep, Max thought, and she felt guilty thinking it. In a way it wasn't entirely Nathan's fault. Then again, he was aware of his mental illness and willfully chose to ignore it and even embrace it. Mentally ill or not, you were responsible for your illness, unless you were simply incapable of being. Nathan was capable of it. Max had seen what Nathan Prescott on medication was like. He was even capable of being reflective. He chose this and now Victoria has to deal with the consequences.

“I think you need to reconsider seeing a therapist,” Rachel told her. Max snapped back to the present. A hundred and one protestations rose up like a wall around her, intent on repelling the idea. “Hear me out, Max.” It took all of Max's willpower in addition to quite literally biting her tongue for that wall to fall. “You don't have to tell them about everything. Just what you told everyone tonight. You know it's going to come out, sooner or later, right? Even if no one, and I mean Warren here, gossips, everyone is going to hear about what happened with Nathan and start piecing things together.” Max swallowed. She had not thought of that in the moment, had not even considered it afterward. Now the very real possibility that the entire school would suspect what Max had admitted to a few people in a moment of stress was scary. “Just tell someone about this, and ask for help. It couldn't hurt anything.”
“If I confirm anything to anyone and my parents find out, they'll try to pull me out of the school,” Max told her. “You've met my parents. You know they know how to get what they want.”

“Unfortunately, that runs in the Caulfield blood,” Rachel finished, sighing in defeat. She looked away from Max, as if staring into Max’s eyes was a little bit taxing. “Just- just think about it, okay?” Max thought about it.
Chapter Fifty-Two: Aphorisms

February 12th, 2012 9:53 AM

When the banging began, Rachel had no concept of how strange of a morning it was. She did not realize that she had just awoken in another's bed. The only thing that stuck out to her was the insistent, slow, heavy banging of a fist against a door. It took the better part of thirty seconds for the bed to begin to shift beneath her, forcing her to open her eyes, when she had, until that point, been content to squeeze them shut and wish a painful punishment on whichever of her neighbors was being loud as the fieriest hell. Things fell into place a little more quickly once her eyes opened.

The bed was moving because the person who had been laying beside her, Max, was groggily attempting to make her body obey her. The jerking motions of her arms and legs as she fought to scoot across the bed and then stand made it clear how strongly sleep still held her. Rachel shut her eyes again and, processing the night before, considered that maybe she could get away with just going back to sleep. The steady, insistent banging which was not on a neighboring door but the one to the room she was in kept her from doing so as much as, if not more than Max calling out to try to ascertain who was at her door.

She did not get an answer, forcing Rachel to open her eyes as Max steadied herself on her legs once, blinked and then ran a hand through her hair to try (unsuccessfully) to tame bedhead. Rachel, who had slept far less than Max, had trouble convincing herself to rise until Max cracked the door open and announced exactly who was knocking. As soon as that happened, Rachel sat up all at once. Should I hide or pretend I've been up, already? The question was a moot point because before Rachel could kick the blanket down the bed and free herself, Max stepped aside and allowed the person standing in the hall to enter.

“Come in,” Max muttered, quietly. It was not sleep that muted her voice anymore. Rachel wasn't sure she knew exactly what it was. Victoria Chase came abruptly and quietly into Max's room. All
of that was strange enough as it was, but most unusually of all, she did so alone. Other than the day
the two of them had presented the party's theme to the Vortex Club, Rachel could not remember
the last time she had seen Victoria unaccompanied outside of classes that she and her friends did not
share. The girl took one look around the room, spotted Rachel and seemed to redden slightly. She
had not, as of yet, spoken. Max shut the door behind Victoria and gestured for the blonde to take a
seat in the old office chair beside her desk or on the futon. “Morning,” Max greeted. “But I'm not
sure how good it is.” All at once, this morning which had come too soon and with some Grade A
strangeness seemed like it would have required coffee to have even a vague chance of not being a
shitty morning, given the night before. Nothing's going to make this more awkward than sitting
here, not saying anything.

“Hey, Victoria,” Rachel greeted. Unable to come up with way to make the action less conspicuous
and not draw attention to the fact that she had slept there, Rachel took hold of the edge of the
blanket and forced it down herself until her feet were sitting on top of it and she was free of the
dammed thing if she wanted to get up. When she was finally sitting cross legged and Victoria had
not spoken, Max again gestured toward the futon.

“Victoria, sit down, relax.” It was strange to see the thin blonde not at the top of her game, not
smarting off. She was still dressed in pyjamas that likely cost more than the contents of the room
she was standing in. Apparently, this time the offer to sit down registered because Victoria shook
her head, lifted it and settled into a seat at the far end of the black futon, promptly crossing her
arms over her chest. Any other day, Rachel would interpret it as a haughty gesture. Any other day,
it probably would have been. Today it just looked like someone who felt a little bit unsafe. “Are
you, alright?”

“Hell no,” Victoria answered, her first words since arrival. There was a bit of her old fire in them,
but Rachel figured she was not the only one to catch slight shake. I'm gonna take that to mean she
remembers enough to be freaked. Max did too, it seemed. The brunette chewed her bottom lip for a
second. The way Max described Nathan and Jefferson's operation in the other timeline, people did
not remember much about their nights. Nathan must be using something different right now.
Scooting toward the edge of the bed, Rachel grabbed a pillow and rested it in her lap so her elbows
had something soft to lay on.

“Yeah,” Max agreed. “Yeah, I'd guess not.” Max, for her part, stood close to the door, one hand
rubbing the length of the other arm as if she was unsure what to do with her body or her hands.
Rachel considered calling her over to the bed to sit down as it would probably put Victoria more at
ease, but then maybe Max needed to stand. Slowly but surely, Victoria lifted her head again and
began to look at Max expectantly. Rachel was starting to get the opinion that Victoria thought Max
had answers for her. Without knowing what the questions were, though, how would the brunette
know what to say? Neither of them were communicating very well, but quite suddenly it felt like
this part of the conversation was most definitely a scene where Rachel had no lines. “I think I have
to ask what the last thing you remember is.” Victoria's defiant, expecting stare faltered as Max took
a couple of steps until she was standing right in front of Victoria and then knelt down. Rachel didn't
understand the gesture but she did see the effect it had on Victoria: she did not drop her gaze, she
did not look away, she held Max's eyes.
“I remember feeling wrong. I was tired, sort of disconnected from everything. I was dizzy. Nothing looked right, nothing held still. I’d only had like, a beer and I’d actually eaten kind of a lot for dinner. I knew I wasn’t drunk. I tried to tell Nathan I was going to be sick. I tried to get up.” Victoria seemed to be piecing the night together as if recalling an old story she had heard when she was a child. When the girl tilted her head and seemed to squint, it became clear things in her memory were breaking down. “Nathan had been talking to me for like an hour, for the first time in two weeks. I was so fucking happy. We used to be so close. We’d always talk. I was always there for him and lately... well, he’s been really angry with me because- well, you know.” At this, Victoria lost her fight to maintain eye contact. Though Rachel couldn't see Max's face from this angle she could measure heartbreak in the way Max's shoulders sagged. This was the only part of this conversation where Rachel knew better than Max or Victoria how delicate of a situation they were in; when Max's heart broke for someone, the photographer had only two routes forward: devastation or anger. Max prompted for Victoria to go on, when she was ready. The three waited there in silence for another three seconds. Rachel tried not to consider that she was in the shorts and tank top she preferred to wear to bed around someone who had, in the past, been adversarial toward her girls.

“I kind of remember you telling him to let me go, but I didn't understand. My head hit something and then a couple of hours later, Taylor was telling me what happened and I was back in my room.” Max gave a brief nod. “She told me you said he slipped me something. That he was trying to take me back to his room.” When Victoria's eyes met Rachel's, Rachel was actually relieved to see her looking at least as livid as she did hurt. Victoria's still in there, then. “She told me you two and Chloe stopped him.” Holy shit, did she just say Chloe's name? This, Rachel thought, was definitely a first. Before then it was usually Kari or Katie or even once, ‘Karl.’

“We did. We just don't know where he went after that.”

“I took you back to your room,” Max told Victoria, drawing her eyes back to the brunette as surely as if she had reached out and taken the girl's face in her hands. “Then I took your keys to Taylor and Courtney and sent them after you.”

“Except that's not all of it, is it?” Victoria asked. Again, Max shifted on one knee and then stood up. When she took a step or two away from Victoria, Rachel caught a glimpse of Max's blank face. Victoria's hardened in response to not being answered. “You told them something, didn't you? I know because they told me.” Max finally turned on her bare heel and nodded, once. The blonde photographer's hard face cracked slightly, thin lips turning downward, hurt seeping into her features. “I didn’t think he was like that. He was under so much stress. He was so fucking lonely.” For a moment the blonde stuttered as, still blank faced, Max settled onto the futon beside Victoria. “I just wanted to believe he needed help and he could get it if his family ever let off of him.” There was a reason this line of thought was painfully familiar. It was precisely the route that had led to Max's own assault at the hands of the piece of shit the two girls were discussing. Putting aside her embarrassment at how she was dressed, Rachel tossed aside her pillow and stretched her legs out until they were dangling off the edge of the bed.
“You're mostly right,” Max said, reaching out and taking hold of Victoria's right hand. The blonde immediately seemed to recoil at the touch, but she did not precisely pull back. She simply jumped as if shocked. Confusion etched Victoria's features. Max's face had not yet let go of its own stone mask, but Rachel could see it fading. “He is sick. He really is.” Her voice is calm, but her eyes.... Max's eyes narrowed, first. When the flaring nostrils, the frown and the slight increase in the rise and fall of her shoulders became evident, Rachel got her answer. Max had not chosen the path of being devastated. Anger it is. “When I first came to Blackwell I tried to help him too. But I pissed him off by pushing too hard. When he feels challenged, when he feels like someone doesn’t see him as the big shot, he snaps. He needs to get that power back. He did it to me and I don’t know how far he would have gone if someone hadn’t stopped him.” Rachel swallowed as the brunette's eyes twitched almost imperceptibly toward her. Like him or not, Rachel sometimes still regretted the physical damage done, the cost. She had not voiced this thought aloud, but sometimes when she saw Nathan she felt her eyes drawn to his false one. There was strong guilt at work, there. She hoped that after last night it would shut up.

“And you still put yourself in the shit?” Victoria asked. How eloquently put by the Chase heir.

“I wasn’t about to let you find out how far he'd go, was I?” Max muttered, and then released the girl's hand. “I thought for a second about saying nothing and just hiding more but... people can’t do that to each other. Nathan is better when he’s on all of his meds, but he doesn’t fucking take them right, Victoria. Half of them he’s not taking at all, just selling. The other half he only gets sometimes, when his father isn’t watching, isn’t judging.” How does Max really know all of that? The girl's knowledge of Nathan's mental health was a bit upsetting in and of itself. It wasn’t that Rachel gave much of a damn for the privacy of someone who had committed such a crime against Max, but the idea that Max was carrying that around as if it were some kind of responsibility of hers to keep track of was off putting.

“How do you know all this?” Victoria queried. At this point, Rachel both wanted Victoria out of her head and noted the haughty, demanding tone in her voice. She wasn't sure if this was just Victoria's resorting to some sort of coping mechanism or not, but it was certainly more Victoria than the girl who had quietly stood at Max's door and knocked for what must have been almost a minute and a half. This was way more than Rachel had ever known about Max’s connection to Nathan early on in her time in Arcadia Bay. There are some things Max doesn't like to talk about, but there are some things she really needs to. Her recommendation too few hours ago that Max see a counselor came back to her and Rachel had to consider that Victoria might think about the same thing. I do have my counselor's card, Rachel thought. I'm turning into that person, aren't I?

“Most of it,” Max started, lifting one leg up to cross it over her knee, “he told me in the first couple of weeks before I started to ‘annoy’ him by telling him to treat people better or to start taking his meds.” She really was just trying to get the guy to get help, to neutralize him as a threat. Rachel grimaced. “The rest, well, let’s just say when someone does to you what he did, you stop caring about his privacy when it comes to finding out if he’s going to hurt someone else or not. I knew it was only a matter of time.”
“Besides,” Rachel chimed in, “you were actually kind of nice to us. Nathan hates us. Max for the obvious reason, me because I stopped him from hurting her and he got hurt in the process. It was an accident, hurting him, but it still happened.” She wanted Victoria to understand that there was no fault on Victoria's shoulders for what had happened. What she had not planned to do was expose the truth of Nathan's injury.

“Got hurt, how?” the blonde asked, and then her face changed. Seemingly newly determined, she pushed onward. “His eye?”

“He was trying to kill me,” Rachel told her, summoning up resolve and confidence. It was important that the girl understand who Nathan was when he was backed into a corner. It was also important that Victoria not know she could make things overheat and explode. “This lamp he was trying to hit me with broke and part of it just hit him—right in the eye. I grabbed Max and ran. Well, I mean I tried to run. She wasn’t, in a state to run. She was a little bit worse off than you were. I think he used a lighter dose on you and honestly, Victoria I really don’t want to know why.” The look on Victoria's face wasn't a glare, or if it was it did not seem to be a normal one. She looked upset more than angry.

“You know, I thought I could help him.” The blonde's voice slowly faltered as she spoke, but her face barely changed. “I thought I could help him. I know he was into me, you know, but I thought I could be his friend and help him. I thought he'd forgiven me and everything was going to get back to normal. Someone needed to help him... but I don't want it anymore.”

“You acted like a decent person, instead of acting hateful, like him,” Rachel told her, taking over this role in the conversation as Max took a metaphorical step back. “If he couldn't forgive that, it's on him. None of this shit was your fault, none of what either of you got was your fault.” Max kept her eyes either on Victoria or the wall behind her instead of looking at Rachel as she said this. “He probably decided enough was enough and he needed a new scapegoat for all of the shit in his head.” This kind of talk was usually reserved for David Madsen. No wonder David was the type to protect Nathan, Rachel thought. Whatever she was going to say next died when Max stood and crossed to her computer desk. Rachel definitely saw Victoria's face darken when Max grabbed her phone from it.

“You're not going to call the cops are you?” For the first time in her life, she heard genuine panic in Victoria's voice. It was enough to make Max turn quickly and mute whatever fire had been building in the shorter photographer's head. Still holding onto her phone, Max turned back. She did not return to the futon or kneel in front of Victoria again, but Max's voice lowered.

“Not unless you want me to.” This earned a quick and emphatic shake of Victoria's head. “Are you absolutely sure, Victoria? This stuff is probably still in your system. How do you feel, anyway?”
“I'm sure,” Victoria insisted, not answering the last question. “I don't want that.” Max again started to raise her phone as if to call someone, but she stopped at Victoria's next. “He didn’t get to do anything, it doesn’t matter. I just don’t want to-, I don’t know. “ When Max spoke again, her voice was stronger, snappier, as if to make up for the very same fading out of Victoria's.

“Call them or don't,” Max told her, “that's your choice. But it does fucking matter. I figured that out last night the hard way. Don't do the same thing as me and try to write it off. He did something to you that was not at all okay.” Victoria shut her mouth and, looking uneasily up at Max, said nothing. Rachel considered that maybe this would be another time when she needed to stay quiet. She was, after all, out of her depth, here. Victoria did not move and though Max paused close to the futon, no one else spoke. Max seemed to take this as a sign that she could do whatever it was she was doing and began to dial again. Rachel decided that if the moment had passed, she needed to distract Victoria, who was still watching Max.

“How are you feeling?” Rachel asked her, echoing Max's last question. Slowly but surely Victoria pulled her eyes away from Max but before she could formulate a response, whoever Max was calling answered.

“Hey, Hayden.” Fear remained firmly in place on Victoria's face.

“Um,” the blonde said, eyes shifting between Max and Rachel. Victoria's right hand rose, as if to pull the phone out of Max's hand if she said something Victoria didn't like. The two were not close enough for this to happen, but it seemed to comfort her enough to answer Rachel. “I don’t know. My head hurts and I think I could drink a river.” Rachel nodded. The good news was that as Max slowly stepped away, making sure that Victoria did not react too negatively, Rachel rose and crossed to the mini fridge beside the futon. Four of six bottles of water were still inside and cold, so Rachel freed one of those and pushed it as softly as she could into the distracted blonde's hand.

“You never sent me the number for your connection in Edgeton,” Max announced. Something between awe and confusion took over Victoria's face as she grasped the bottle. Rachel could understand. Was this the time for Max to be looking to secure her connection? “I mean yeah, I'm almost out of grass but it's not about that.” Rachel raised an eyebrow as Victoria slowly, almost absently opened the bottle of water. Max began to pace. “Yeah, Risperidone and Valium.” At this, there was a longer pause than normal. Rachel could tell by the look on Victoria's face that these meant something in particular to her. The girl stopped with the bottle halfway to her lips. “Yeah, just like Nathan, Hayden. It's for him.” Hearing only one half of a conversation was always either frustrating or comedic and today it was not the latter. Rachel sat in silence.

“Yeah, well, I don't intend on letting him know that I got it for him. He needs to get medicated or shitkicked immediately. Preferably both.” For a moment that looked to be the end, but apparently Hayden unknowingly crossed a line on the other end of the phone because Max picked up the speed of her pacing, which was impressive when she had about eight or nine steps to cover. And
she's started speaking with her hands. “Hayden, I’m pissed off right now, I’m not in the mood for joking around. He fucked up last night and he has two options: get on his meds and calm the fuck down or the other one. The other one is very bad. Did I mention shitkicking? Yeah, okay, tell me what your guy says and I’ll get you the cash. Thanks. Yeah, I’ll meet up with you later, alright? Thanks.“

For the length of the conversation, she and Victoria had sat mostly in silence. Victoria had returned to looking anywhere but at either of them and drinking water. Rachel, who had been a little paranoid about Chloe's theory that Victoria was harboring some sort of crush on her had a bit of an epiphany on that front. If anything, when the girl looked up, it was at Max. Admittedly, Max was pacing back and forth in the small space afforded to her in front of her door absolutely exuding rage as if from every pore. Still, if there was any particular sign that Victoria thought of Rachel as anything other than a person who was in the room talking with her, she didn't see it. What she did see was that the sun was getting high in the sky and it sounded like she was going to be making a trip to Edgeton soon.

“Rachel, Victoria,” Max said as soon as she hung up her phone. “Go to your rooms and get dressed. We're getting the fuck away from campus for an hour or so.”

“What?” Victoria asked, taken about by this pronouncement. “Why?”

“Because breakfast is a lot cheaper than bail and I'm both hungry and pissed off.” The blonde looked around, lost. Rachel thought she understood what the girl was feeling, getting dragged up into all of this.

“I don't know what's going on anymore,” Victoria said, to no one in particular. “I've lost the thread.”

“It's been my experience,” Rachel told her, “that when I feel that way and Max doesn't, the smartest thing I can do is listen to her. Seriously, come on.” Looking confused, Victoria stood up as Rachel did, taking one look around the room.

“Actually, I really don't want to be in this building right now, after all.” Max opened her mouth as if to say something and instead only nodded, which Victoria noticed. Rachel led the girl over toward the door of the room. She really did want to get changed. Food didn't sound bad, either.

“There's nowhere to eat in this town, unless you want chinese,” Rachel warned her.
“I could go for chinese,” Max called past Victoria's shoulder. *Yeah, I fucking bet you could.* Rachel turned back toward the two photographers, one of which still looked a little lost as she glanced between the two of them.

“Yeah, okay,” the blonde replied.

And so Rachel had lo mein for breakfast.
Chapter Fifty-Three: Hippeis

February 14th, 2012 3:03 PM

The fact that Max had asked to wait for Rachel by the photography classroom for the second day in a row more or less took away any doubt in Chloe's mind about precisely what Max was doing. The way the girl glanced occasionally into the classroom and then quickly away from it and the fact that until yesterday she had been beating a hasty retreat from the classroom every day as soon as the bell rang were testament to the fact that Max was genuinely concerned about Victoria Chase being in a room with Nathan Prescott. Maybe Jefferson's presence made it worse for her. Chloe didn't know. What she did know as she adjusted her bag on her right shoulder and balanced the skateboard beneath her left arm, was that Victoria Chase had spent months being a dick to Max. Yes, that began to change around November or so and her cooperation last month had been vital on advancing Max and Rachel's plan to join the Vortex Club, but this was Victoria.

As if summoned by the thought, the blonde in question approached, followed by her cronies. Max visibly relaxed as Victoria joined them in the hall, her shoulders dropping, hands unclenching. Max even adjusted the way she held herself so that she stood a little taller, as if she had been ready to bolt after someone or away from someone a moment before. The moment slowed as Victoria seemed to realize they were there and all but paused outside of the door. Over her shoulder, Courtney was giving Chloe in particular the stink eye. Frankly, the girl already got on Chloe's nerves in a way that not even Victoria had managed with her 'Kari Price' routine. It was hard to place precisely why but Max's playful assertion that it was because Courtney, too, liked to keep her hair short and dye it had managed to genuinely annoy Chloe once. Once Taylor realized that Chlor was looking at the two of them and not at Victoria, she visibly grew uncomfortable, rubbing at one arm and looking away, but not moving around Victoria and leaving yet.

As for the thin blonde in front of them, her focus during this momentary pause seemed to be on Max. A look of recognition had settled into the features of either photographer. Victoria knows Max is looking out for her and Max knows she's trying to figure out how to deal with it. It was with only great restraint that she did not roll her eyes at the scene. After all, with great eye rolling power came great responsibility. A second stretched to two and then three before someone spoke.

“Hi, Max, Chloe.” Come the fuck again? Without a moment of hesitation, Chloe reached across her body with her right arm and pinched herself on the left. Nope, definitely felt that. The use of her
actual name was so out of character, so absurd that a part of Chloe had momentarily that she was still in bed, making all of this up in her head. Victoria, eyebrow raising, turned away from Max and shifted her purse on her shoulder. Finally, there came the familiar haughty look over her features which said, 'you're so weird.' “What are you even doing?” Max sighed audibly. To Chloe, it was all a little funny, even if it was disturbing to hear Victoria not insulting them for a second.

“Sorry, just, thought I might be dreaming,” Chloe replied, grinning smartly. Though it seemed to visibly frustrate the girl in what was probably a two hundred dollar top, Victoria blinked once, huffed and then shrugged as if to say she couldn't be expected to deal with this 'weirdness' and then, instead of walking away silently or making some sort of derogatory comment, wished them a nice day. When Chloe looked at Max, even she seemed slightly taken aback by this. Courtney and Taylor did not match Chloe's eyes as they passed. Chloe did, however, turn her blue gaze on Max, who was all but gaping at Victoria's back, as surprised by the cordiality as Chloe was. It was when Chloe joined her in looking down the hall that Chloe spotted Steph passing the blonde in question and approaching them with her backpack on. No Rachel with her? She must've needed to swing by her locker.

Steph, for her part, did not particularly make any sign to Victoria but did raise her hand in greeting upon seeing that she had been noticed by Chloe and Max. Chloe noticed immediately that while Steph was interacting with them, she was also moving quickly away and toward the doors. Steph had been wrapped up for the last couple of days in some project of hers that she was keeping, for now, a secret. The way the girl was all but speed walking suggested she was eager to get home and get to it. Chloe wasn't intent on leaving yet but the truth was she could not afford to be far behind Steph: she had things to do.

“I’ll be back to hang out at the house in a few.” Chloe called to her as the girl passed them. When she glanced back to follow Steph's path, the auburn-haired artist shot a pointed look toward Max and then toward the retreating form of Victoria Chase. Chloe only shrugged in response and, given that Max was still distracted, Steph chose the opportunity to call a quick 'be good' at the brunette before disappearing through a set of double doors from the hall out onto campus. At this point, Max shrugged, herself, and turned towards Chloe. Chloe wasn't sure precisely where everyone stood when it came to this new potential friendship. Really, we should send Rachel in to figure it out, since Victoria's probably sweet on her.

Max was just starting to speak when Chloe caught sight of Rachel rounding the corner near the vending machines and gestured once with a nod. As they watched and exchanged under their breaths theories about precisely where she had been that had taken so long, an exceptionally cute smile lit the approaching blonde's face. It was either a warning sign that Rachel was plotting something or that she was just in an exceptionally good mood that day. Neither option was theoretically impossible but Chloe had to admit that she, at least, had not been in a good mood since the weekend. She couldn't shake the idea that Rachel was up to something as she approached.

“What are you doing?” Max asked the blonde suspiciously once she was in range. Shaking her head as if affronted, Rachel attempted to put on an air of innocence. The thing was, now that she
was up close, Chloe watched how she was holding her backpack so that it hung down in front of her from both hands and saw that the smile on her face was, however cloying, genuine. Apparently realizing that neither Chloe nor Max were buying her innocent routine Rachel sighed.

“I’ll tell you when we get outside.” At that, Max reached out and took Chloe by the hand, trying to prompt her to follow so they could get to the bottom of the mystery earlier. Chloe, mostly jokingly, dug her heels in. That was only effective up to a point and when Rachel moved one of her hands from her bag and began to push Chloe along from the back, that point had officially been reached. She laughed at their antics, feeling a bit of relief for the first time all day. The truth was, Chloe thought as she blatantly ignored David Madsen skulking around in the background, glaring daggers at them, that she felt alright as the girls hustled her down the hall and toward the nearest exterior door. Sure, her eyelids felt heavier than they should, but compared to even last Tuesday she was doing better. Perhaps it was the promise of what the rest of the day had to offer her.

“Alright, alright,” Chloe informed them both, breaking free of either girl as she pushed open the glass door in front of her and stepped out into the cool February air. The ground was dry and cool, grass a sort of sickly, slow growing brownish-green. Try as Samuel might, Chloe thought as she hit the bottom step outside of the doors and stretched, there was no making the grass on campus look particularly nice. As Chloe pulled her hat down against the cool air and turned over toward Rachel, shifting her board so that she was holding it by its front axle, the blonde opened her bag and began to pull something blue from it.

Once upon a time, Chloe had been 'given' several of Rachel's shirts when the girl had implied her wardrobe could use a sprucing up. Nowadays it was not too terribly rare for her to occasionally wear one of Rachel's shirts, but she definitely recalled the one Rachel was shoving towards her. When it had made its way back to Rachel, Chloe wasn't entirely sure but she did grin as she took it. Typically worn like an overshirt, it was designed to look like a mechanic's uniform. Well, a specific mechanic named Hank. The cheese of the gesture, an hour and some change before she was supposed to show up for her interview at the brake and tire shop in town was not lost on Chloe.

“Aww,” Max called playfully as Chloe shook the shirt out with her one free hand and then, after examining it, threw it over one shoulder. “How sweet.”

“Hey,” Rachel called at Max to get her attention. As soon as she had it, she wasted it by sticking her tongue out at the photographer. Deciding to put an end to this before it devolved into something completely, inescapably goofy, Chloe put herself between the two so that she could, setting her deck down for a moment, give Rachel a large hug. Whatever the next stage of the two of them teasing would have been, Chloe chose to forego it and hold tight to the stockier blonde until such time as she stopped returning the hug. Chloe knew that her behavior over the last month or so had been concerning to them and the support both girls had shown her since she started looking for a position at that shop had been unwavering and enough that many times when she felt the most down about herself, it brought her back up.
“I promise to wear this today to make sure this guy's not some hardass who can't take a joke,” Chloe told Rachel, surprised at how serious she sounded. *I'm not gonna go get sappy and cry or anything am I?* A moment of searching herself for signs of being absolutely *ridiculous* later, she decided she was not. The truth was, though, as she and Rachel pulled apart and Chloe felt Max's hand briefly brush her shoulder supportively, Chloe was as nervous as she was excited. She *wanted* to find a job, sure but she vastly preferred working with her hands on something that she was somewhat familiar with. The other option was learning some new tedious skill that she would either have to stay in a job she might not like to make any long-term use out of, or completely abandon when her time at the job was up. However, she was not about to subject herself to another asshole, not for the sake of a brake shop in Arcadia Bay.

For the next few minutes, Chloe allowed herself to sit and chat with Rachel and Max before boarding over to the parking lot. While the two of them went to find Kate and study, Chloe had three things on her mind: shower, eat and then unwind. With far too little time before her interview to do all of that, she decided that her meal was going to be a sandwich eaten on the couch while she watched television, hopefully with Steph. For the most part, everything went according to plan for the next hour and a half and Chloe found herself sitting outside of Kenny's Brake and Tire Shop a few minutes early feeling, if not *good*, then at least better than she had expected to. She wasn't sure if it had been the longer than average shower or dinner in the form of a turkey sandwich loaded down with mayo and potato chips, but somehow, as the clock ticked down and what looked to be the last of the shop's employees left for the day, Chloe felt ready.

In the mirror she tried to put on a nice, wide, respectful smile but it looked immediately and laughably fake. She was capable of being respectful, but trying to look like the main character in a 1950s PSA on how to find a job was bound to backfire stupendously. She was what David would have called, a punkass. She kept her hair short and bright, did not care if her clothes were cheap and wrinkled, wore too much 'black shit' around her eyes (*'Hey, I like all that black shit'* , to quote *Ally Sheedy* ) and as of late had taken back to skating whenever she had the opportunity to walk. This last had led to a number of falls as she got used to navigating parts of town on her board all over again, resulting in, among other things, a nice scrape along her jaw.

All of this was to say that she was not going to be able to make herself look like someone fresh out of sunday service and she didn't care to try. Chloe made sure her hair was not sticking up anywhere she did not care for it to, set her beanie aside and gave the mirror one last look to make sure she had nothing on her face (mostly because, when she loaded a sandwich down with mayo, she *really* laid it on thick) and then climbed from the truck, slipping its keys into her right pocket. Before going any further she freed her phone from the left pocket and gave her inbox a quick once over.

*Max*

*You've got this in the bag.*

*Rachel*
Go kick ass, girl.

Me

I'm going in. Much love. Wish me luck.

With that, she muted the phone completely. She didn't want so much as a vibration to interrupt her focus. It was time, for a few minutes at least, not to worry about the big stuff and instead focus on the small stuff. Like getting a job. That's the small stuff? Jesus, what is your life? When she approached the low, squat and long building's front door, it was locked. She could, however, see far enough into the shop to tell that Kenny Peterson, the man who owned it, was waiting on her despite the fact that she was about a minute early. As she watched the man rose from his seat behind the counter and hobbled over to the door. He walked with a pronounced limp. Chloe thought back to the time Joyce had insisted she bring her truck to the shop for a lookover, citing him as an old friend whose work she trusted. (Kenny had looked the truck over himself and declared it to be a 'Miracle on Wheels' but also 'roadworthy to a point.') He had been limping even back then. Must have been an old injury, Chloe told herself, trying not to grimace at the slight look of pain on his face.

"C'mon in," the man grunted upon opening the door. As far as she knew, Kenny was not much older than her mother, but he had seen some hard times in his life and it showed on his face in the form of lines and the occasional mark that looked somewhat like an old scar. He shot her one look that she took to be at the pale blue overshirt, snorted a bit derisively and then limped his way back around the counter. Chloe stepped in as he bade and let the door shut behind her. There was no sign of anyone else up front, but from the back where she thought the office to be she could hear a male voice. While it certainly didn't sound like Skip or anyone else she might know, whoever it was seemed to be trying to order a part. "We're going to have to forego the sitting down at a desk bullshit and just talk," the man with the salt and pepper hair explained when he caught her looking toward the office. "Hope you weren't expecting it."

"Fine by me," Chloe shot back at the man as he looked ponderously at his chair and then instead leaned his body up against the counter as if to shift weight from his (left, I think) leg. As often happened on those rare occasions when she gave the man a look over, Chloe considered that he bore something of a resemblance to someone else she knew, but who that was she was never able to place. This was no exception. In the past, he had struck her as friendly enough to his customers but she only knew him from that side of the equation. As to how formal or informal he expected her to behave when trying to get a position from him, Chloe could not guess and she found not knowing a little bit uncomfortable. "I really do appreciate the opportunity," she told him. Though his response was to wave his hand once as if dismissive, nothing about his face suggested any ill will.

"So," the man all but grunted and when he inhaled a moment later it sounded just loud enough that she suspected he had some trouble with his lungs. "On one hand, I've got you being recommended by Skip, and while a good person, he can be something of a dumbass, so I'm not so hot about that.
On the other hand, the Caulfields- who actually used to steal work from me, if you can believe the ungrateful bastards- sing your praises and say you learned everything they and your father could teach you back before you could reach an engine.” There was nothing Chloe could do to hide the fact that she was caught off guard. Why in the name of hell would the Caulfields be giving input on her employment? She hadn't put them down as references or anything. Then again, judging by the good natured jab at the couple, (who come to think of it had run a small shop in town when Chloe was younger) the man seemed to be friendly with them and in Arcadia Bay just about anyone who had ever met her mother knew Chloe and Max. Did he call them? Or did Max- Oh. Oh that girl was going to pay when Chloe saw her next.

“On the other hand, you've got no official training.” Chloe nodded as if that was a reasonable statement but thought it was kind of odd for a little brake and tire shop like this. People who changed oil, rotated tires and even replaced brake pads weren't always what most people thought of as actual mechanics, after all. People would be surprised, frankly, at the amount of repairs they could do in their own driveways with as little as youtube as a guide. It was mostly about having the tools and the confidence. Chloe had access to both. “Then on the other hand again, that bucket of bolts out there is still running, and that's fucking impressive as is.” This time, Chloe failed to entirely suppress a frown. The truck was not in the best shape, sure. It also wasn't a 'bucket of bolts.' “So here's the deal. I'm tired, hungry and don't have time to fuck around anymore today, so let's cut to the chase. I'll pay you for this one job sitting out in the garage.” At this the man nodded toward a door leading out to the connecting garage. She could make the tail end of what looked like an older Mercury Sable roughly the color of vomit through the glass window at the top of it. “You do it, I put your ass to work on Saturdays until summer comes.” All in all, this had been much simpler than expected. All she had so far been asked to do was stand a bit awkwardly across the counter from this man, let him ramble for about a minute straight, listen to him call Skip a dumbass and then go do some work. Chloe could honestly say she had had a hundred conversations with David Madsen that were less fun than this had been.

“Point me toward the work and the tools,” she replied, feeling comfortable enough exposing a bit of confidence.

“Good enough,” he said, gesturing with one shaking hand's thumb toward the door in question. “My '02 Taurus is out there. Needs its tires checked. While you're in there, it needs an oil change and I had to pull off a wiper that needed replaced. Just show me you can handle this and we're done here.” Chloe nodded and then made for the door, though personally she thought that the tasks assigned to her were small enough that they didn't say much about her ability to work there even if she didn't mess up. The oil change, on the other hand, would take a few minutes and was an odd choice for someone wanting to get down to business so they could get home.

Chloe passed from the front desk into the garage and was instantly struck by strong smell of oil. Though it did make her wonder how great breathing that air was for a person it also did remind her of parts of her younger childhood, when she and Max would sit on a bench in her garage or Max's own and play games while their parents popped a few cold ones and helped each other on the more time-consuming car repairs. In retrospect, the families had probably saved each other a fucking mint in car repairs. She pushed aside nostalgia only with some effort and turned to the car which
was waiting for her with its hood up. It was after she had taken a quick inventory of the old toolbox open on the nearest bench and found that it had most of what she needed (not to mention the oil, filter and windshield wiper were lined up right next to it as if the man thought she did not know how to carry things herself) that Chloe turned around and, grinning, spotted what was going to make the oil change a far easier process.

The car was already in position over the lift, waiting to be hefted into the air. With the vehicle above the ground, it meant less crawling around on the cement and trying not to bump one's head on things. At least you're not laying in your driveway, she thought. Then, after admonishing herself for feeling quite so excited about the lift, she got to work. It was a quick thing to check the car's tires for their PSI and any wear and tear. Truth was, Chloe realized as she ran her hand along the tread of first one and then the next tire, the guy probably needed to go ahead and rotate these. They were worn as one expected from an old set of tires but it was getting to be a bit of an uneven wearing. Add that to the passenger rear being low (something she fixed in a few seconds without really asking) and the tires weren't in the worst shape in the world.

Chloe didn't know much about Tauruses, except that at one point the Caulfield family had driven an older model than this for a year. Still, she did not expect an oil change to be too long. For some reason, Chloe had noticed when she first entered the garage and looked the car over, the engine was still a little warm, as if the man had done it on purpose. Dude's taking it easy on me, Chloe realized as the car slowly rose into the air. She wasn't entirely sure how she felt about that, but decided not to look too far into it this one time. It was genuinely possible he wanted things to go as quickly as possible so that he could get home. It was equally possible, Chloe reminded herself, that this test was mostly to see if she knew how to handle the basic tools needed for the job and how to not otherwise fuck up and get herself or someone else hurt.

After hunting down the one thing needed for her task that had not been in easy reach (an oil pan) Chloe returned to the car to find that at some point while her back was turned, Kenny Peterson had come out into the garage. He was not staring at her work or at her but instead looked to be tidying up another bench entirely. Still, she did not think his presence was particularly unrelated to the fact that some punk kid had his car in the air. Chloe felt a little more cognizant of how amused she was to have access to a lift to make the process easier when she glanced at the man as he hurled a wrench over his shoulder into a tall rusted toolbox behind him. He glanced up at her with a raised eyebrow as if he thought she had a question and Chloe shrugged a shoulder, offering a reassuring smile before ducking under the car.

Despite the fact that the boss was watching she allowed herself a second to consider the sheer amount of weight resting just above her head, held aloft by a bit of steel and hydraulics and then, lining the pan up as best as she could with the drain plug, raised the socket wrench and got to work. The first roadblock in her path was the fact that the bolt was definitely on there tight. Whoever had been the last to touch this thing immediately struck Chloe as something of a jackass. The good news was that stereotypes about women being inherently weak little princesses in a garage were ninety-nine percent bullshit and Chloe didn't much care to meet the one percent. It took her a few seconds more than she wanted to admit, but eventually she had the oil flowing. With only a minor correction to the positioning of the oil pan, there was little she could do but wait and keep an eye
“So,” she said as soon as she ducked out from under the car. “I had to hit the rear passenger tire, it was a little low. Your tires could use rotating, though,” Chloe looked once over the nearest bench and approached to grab hold of a shop towel and wipe the oil from her hands temporarily. Just a bit farther down at the next bench, Kenny turned, still keeping his weight at least partially pressed against it and grunted to signify he'd heard her. “Want me to do that one today? It won't take too much longer.”

“So,” she said as soon as she ducked out from under the car. “I had to hit the rear passenger tire, it was a little low. Your tires could use rotating, though,” Chloe looked once over the nearest bench and approached to grab hold of a shop towel and wipe the oil from her hands temporarily. Just a bit farther down at the next bench, Kenny turned, still keeping his weight at least partially pressed against it and grunted to signify he'd heard her. “Want me to do that one today? It won't take too much longer.”

“Not today,” he told her. There was no sign of what he thought about her performance, but then again the terms had been pretty simple: do the job, don't fuck up, get hired. Stop overthinking it, Chloe told herself as the man turned back to his bench. He's just out cleaning up. It was hard, though, not to overthink him being in the room with her. She spent the rest of her time somewhat aware of him in the corner of her mind, aware of where he was if not so much what he was doing even though every time she looked at him he was either reading something or putting it away.

There wasn't much hurrying up she could do at this point with the tools available to her so she did her best to ignore him. The anxiety, if that was what it was, would have to go away on its own. For his part, he didn't seem impatient, though at one point she caught him grumbling to himself that he needed to buy this or that. Focusing on the task ahead, even if she mostly just repeated it to herself mantra-like while the last of the old, dark oil filled the pan beneath the car, kept her from being too worried. It took no time at all to remove and replace the old filter once the car was clear of oil about fifteen minutes after she had started. At one point, Chloe realized she had stopped paying much attention to the smell of the garage. With the bolt and new filter in place all Chloe really had left to do was lower the car, replace the oil and the windshield wiper. It was, all told, a fairly quick procedure and when it was done she did not feel so tired anymore. After three or four failed attempts to get her hands relatively clean with a shop towel and the time it took her to put away most of the tools laid out for her as best she could, Chloe double checked the oil level and shut the hood of the car.

“So I think that's it, unless you want the tire rotation. Sorry it took so long,” at this last, Chloe felt more than a little frustration with herself. Peterson dropped the catalogue he had taken to reading on the bench beside him and approached her. He was attempting to look serious and imposing as he did so but the effect was lessened by the limp and the small smile turning up an otherwise tired, lined face. The smile, Chloe would think later, had probably come from watching her smear oil across her own cheek, but she hadn't been thinking about that in the moment.

“So I think that's it, unless you want the tire rotation. Sorry it took so long,” at this last, Chloe felt more than a little frustration with herself. Peterson dropped the catalogue he had taken to reading on the bench beside him and approached her. He was attempting to look serious and imposing as he did so but the effect was lessened by the limp and the small smile turning up an otherwise tired, lined face. The smile, Chloe would think later, had probably come from watching her smear oil across her own cheek, but she hadn't been thinking about that in the moment.

“See,” the man said as he stopped just short of her. “Way I see it, kids these days are in a fucking rush to get everywhere.” Ah damn it, I was just starting to like this guy. If he was going to go on a rant about 'lazy ass kids', she was going to need a drink. As far as Chloe was concerned, it should have been a social convention that if you go on a rant about something that annoyed you, you gave the person listening a beer. “People want to say it's all about being careless and whatever, but that's bullshit. That's the world, kid. Everyone's always on the balls of their feet, going where they have to go as fast as they can so nothing goes wrong in between. Shitty, but not any one generation's
fault. When it comes to working on a car, though, you can't have someone rush through it. That's how stupid shit happens and maybe most of the time it's harmless, but the rest sure as fuck isn't. Harmless or not, stupid shit's bad for business. You took your time, did the job right and didn't fuck up. I wanted to see what happened if I walked in: if you'd try to hurry up, get sloppy.” Chloe nodded. She had, at least, been spared a rant about her generation being lazy. It had just been replaced with 'the world's fucked up', which she could hardly disagree with. “Don't get me wrong. I don't want slow, I just want the job done right. Speaking of, you start this Saturday.”

“Sounds good,” she told the man, offering her hand. He gave it one firm quick shake in his calloused grasp.

“Good. I'll see you at 8 AM every fucking Saturday. Sucks to train you on the busiest day of the week but, best way to learn, plus, not a lot of choice.” Considering the place closed on Sundays and Chloe was normally getting home from school about an hour and a half before the place closed at the earliest, Saturday was about her only option. “You're still under training until I'm sure you can handle most of what comes your way but you're on.”

“Thank you,” Chloe told him, having absolutely no compunctions about being considered in training.

“Sure,” he replied. “Just don't fuck it up. One thing, though.” Chloe, who had not moved away from him since he released her hand, simply fixed her eyes on him and waited. “It's pretty common knowledge you and your mother aren't having a great time. If she rolls in, I expect you to service her vehicle, no matter what.” At this Chloe nodded, but she raised her right hand as if to stop him from going further.

“Fine,” she said, “but if my ex-stepfather comes in, I don't want to touch it. If something went wrong and he wound up in some kind of crash, I wouldn't want to be accused of being the reason and bring shit down on the shop.” The man snorted.

“He that bad? Bit of a windbag but...”

“Yeah,” Chloe replied, not lowering her voice or at all playing herself off as deferential in this matter. “He's that bad. Bad enough he should probably have some jail time, but it's too late for that.” Kenny fixed dark eyes on her for a few seconds, squinting and then shrugged.

“Hmph. Fine. You've got a deal there. Now there are some punks sitting in the back of that junk heap you call a truck who told me they're waiting on you.” Oh, oh shit, Chloe thought, blinking as she rested a hand against her side. The man, somehow, took the gesture for a sign of amusement
and his face hardened just slightly. “Go tell ’em not to pull that shit again, and, I don't know, to take you out for dinner or something to celebrate. If that's the Caulfield girl with her camera, tell her to have her parents call me... and get out of here.” Chloe took the dismissal as being mostly playful, but figured it was in her best interests to first find out if those punks were her girls and then vacate the parking lot before Kenny actually got mad.

She excused herself after thanking the man once more and then strolled calmly out of the building. Sure enough, sitting in the back of her truck with the gate down passing something to drink back and forth as if they were pregaming for a football game were Rachel and Max. Kate, still dressed as if for class, leaned up against the side of it, talking to them. After a moment as Chloe approached, forcing her expression neutral to inspire at least some curiosity in the others, each of the three lifted their head to look at her in turn. Max and Kate at least were waiting with bated breath. Just before getting close enough to them to talk, Chloe raised an oil-slicked thumbs up. Rachel wolf-whistled loudly.

*David will probably have a conniption the first time he rolls up on a weekend and sees me in here.* Then again, summer was coming and that would mean even more chances to give him a heart attack when she moved up to a full time position. In the end, Chloe reached them and only allowed them a couple minutes of talking in the lot before they mutually agreed on fries and a burger from McDonalds. Before splitting to get into her truck while the others went for Rachel's car, Chloe was stopped by Max, who came in close for a kiss. Though she tried to keep a straight face after pecking the brunette on the cheek, she could not entirely manage it at the sight of a dark thumbprint along Max's chin.

In that moment, watching the others pile into Rachel's sedan, Chloe felt like like a lucky girl.
Considering how disastrous the last February party had been, Max was far more relaxed than she expected to be as she leaned back in her chair. Maybe that was because the party was almost an hour in and Nathan was so high he was sitting alone in the bleachers, smoking a cigarette instead of pursuing anyone else. Maybe it was because she was back in possession of just enough weed to get her in serious trouble if David found it and everything about the world felt a little more relaxed after sneaking out somewhere she couldn't be seen with Chloe and Steph and having a smoke. Whatever the cause was, the world-drowning music did not bother her as much as it occasionally could and she felt like there was a decent chance that Nathan Prescott was going to spend the night listening to it, high off his ass in a corner alone. In short, it meant that Max was grinning when Rachel came back down from the bleachers where she had been, not so surreptitiously, watching Nathan alongside Chloe, who had not yet returned.

The music was still too loud to ask about Chloe's absence, even as Rachel reached her, so Max raised one hand, seized the girl's and tugged Rachel to her. The girl visibly 'oof'ed as she collapsed onto Max's lap, laughing about it. It took Max a second to get over the surprise of the sudden weight atop her, but she took advantage of the girl's clumsiness to wrap her arms around Rachel's midriff and lean in to peck her on the cheek. Max didn't think Rachel was in much of a rush to get back up, judging by the arm she curled around Max's shoulders. While it was not ideal for long term cuddling and even still a bit lit Max was still not a big fan of grand public displays of affection, she pressed her lips a second time against Rachel's cheek and then tried not to think too much about it, releasing her only when Chloe descended from the stairs.

Chloe was tired. That was evident even from where they sat almost on the other side of the room. She walked a little bit slower than normal, looked as if she was not particularly fond of her surroundings and did not look at anyone around her, even as she walked past Victoria, Taylor and Courtney who were all sitting not too terribly far away from Max and Rachel. She was also pantomiming something, pointing repeatedly to her palm. Rachel got up at that point and began to dig her phone from her pocket. Max did the same. While Rachel turned up nothing, Max's search showed a text from Chloe declaring that Nathan Prescott had passed out in a corner. It was probably, thus, safe to assume that he was out of commission for the night. Which means, Max thought as she watched Victoria's eyes follow the path Chloe was taking back to the stands, we're
kind of free for the night.

Holy shit, we're free for the night.

The only downside to this development that Max could see was that as Chloe approached, Rachel was looking pointedly between the two of them and the crowd of dancing party-goers. In short, there did not look to be an excuse anymore for Max to not let Rachel lead them out onto the dance floor. If Chloe was still awake and with it enough to do so, who was she to say no, just because she couldn't dance. For the most part it was simply an almost socially acceptable for excuse for the three of them to be closer to one another than normal. Not to mention, though Max would never admit it, there was something about the music and the crowd obscuring them from others' eyes that proved cathartic and made her feel more secure in their relationship each time it happened.

By the time Chloe reached them, Rachel had somehow already convinced her to come out onto the dance floor, whether through hand signals Max missed or during a prior conversation. It was for the best, frankly, because of the two of them the only one who had any chance of really learning to dance from Rachel was Chloe. As the blonde led them both between the arms of two separate dancers and into the mass of bodies, Max watched the back of Chloe's head and wondered just how much longer the girl was going to stay out with them. She didn't think it would be much longer before Chloe went to join Steph and the others and then excused herself. Though the artist's exhaustion (which Rachel and Steph both had attributed to depression) was theoretically improving, this had been Chloe's work day. Frankly, if the girl who even now stopped and reached across the space between them to pull Max closer had chosen not to come, Max would have understood.

Allowing the other two to direct how things went, on this occasion, Max tuned out most of the people around them. Hell, doomed to look ridiculous attempting to dance to this kind of music anyway, Max all but tuned it out, at least as much as one could tune out a force that seemed to make up ninety percent of the world within the walls of this old, neglected gymnasium. There was also the matter of it being kind of difficult to ignore the other people when on occasion an elbow would find its way into her side or Rachel or Chloe might bump clean into a stranger. No one looked back to see who they bumped into, either, unless it was a particularly hard hit.

It was not too difficult to get a glimpse of Rachel even with Chloe roughly between them. Rachel always started these nights at a dull roar. Her mood might be good beforehand and all but it was never anything like the giddy, laughing girl she ended up leaving the 'dance floor' as. Not to mention she was typically all over Chloe, Max or both, as if she desired some form of touch, no matter how inane it might appear to the outside world. Max didn't particularly mind it, but it often felt like an odd, extreme behavior especially considering she rarely had more than a drink. In retrospect, Max had probably had more to drink than either of the others at one of these parties the first time she came. Tonight, Max hoped for prolonged closeness. It tended to take away the pressure that Max could swear was building behind her own eyes. One day, she feared, that pressure would burst and take her brain with it. Occasionally looking past Chloe she spotted the smile blooming, widening across Rachel's eyes, she saw the wild dilation of her pupils and could
literally watch the thespian relinquish her worries.

Max didn't entirely understand it, but that night, even as her fingers settled against the rough edge of Chloe's blue jeans where they rested at her waist and the bluenette placed a kiss against Max's cheek and remained close against Max, she badly wanted whatever happened to Rachel at these parties to happen to her. If it wasn't worrying about Nathan or who is next victim would be (or when, for that matter), it was trying to come up with a plan to handle him and dealing with Jefferson on a daily basis. She saw the man twice a day every weekday and try as she might she could not get him to leave her alone. Having resorted now to pretending she wasn't paying attention to his class, her frustration at him repeatedly calling on her as often as or more than anyone else felt a bit like being robbed. Rather than risk his ire by not answering, she typically did and then had to endure his praise or, even worse, that barely perceptible and shudder inducing nod that suggested he was 'proud.' Contrary to her sincerest wishes when Jefferson first arrived, none of these things had gotten any better. She didn't know how to tell Chloe and Rachel that sometimes looking at him when he smiled summoned up thoughts, impressions of a dirt-covered blue tarp that contained something horrible inside.

The tightening hand on her shoulder drew Max back to the present, to dropping bass and the unfortunate smell of sweat from the crowd around her, to Chloe's hands and her girlfriends' concerned faces. For a moment, Rachel's all too keen concern was blocked from her view as Chloe lowered her forehead and pressed it against Max's. It was, if the look in her bright blues were to be trusted, a gesture of concern. *I think I lost track of the music. I mean, more than normal.* She hoped she had not slowed or stopped all together, but Jefferson and Nathan were vexing problems that, had she not been freshly in supply of her favorite—not to mention most effective—treatment for excessive anxiety, she wasn't sure she would have been able to think straight in the moment. Her only hope in getting by was to think of them as little as possible unless she had to either when confronted with some problem one or the other created or when she finally decided what to do with them.

Max did not pull away from Chloe as she moved but she did keep her eyes locked on the girl's, even when the back of Rachel's hand brushed her shoulder. In Chloe's eyes she saw flagging energy reserves, confliction and most of all, an inordinate amount of whatever it was Chloe looked at her with. Ideally, Max would like to believe it was love and not just some teenage crush. She chose to do so. However, the one thing she was clear on for sure was that unless they got out of the crowd soon, Chloe was going to be making an escape from the party well before Max and Rachel left the gym to seek out the smoke circle which again had gathered in the science lab.

It was rather a wonder that the lab didn't smell of the indulgence the Monday after a party. *It might be less risky if we found somewhere else to smoke?* She knew there had been talks about where else to host a party: the gymnasium and cafeteria were getting a little bit stale. Max thought it was only a matter of time before someone brought up the pool building, but she was going to be the one to bring it up if no one else did, soon. There was plenty of space around the edges of the pool, a couple of rooms for the party to spill over to and, not to mention, it would be easier to follow Nathan around in that building with its relatively open layout.
After a few more minutes, it became very obvious that Chloe was getting sluggish and losing both her enjoyment and her will to remain upright. Apparently, Max thought, it was a shitty day at the brake shop. For once, Max took the initiative herself. It did not take much work to reach around Chloe and take Rachel's hand in her right, Chloe's in her left. What was more difficult was not getting elbowed in the head by people as she passed by them making for the largest gap in the wall of bodies she could find. Jostled by an elbow here, a shoulder there and nearly knocked on her ass by a completely unintended body check there, Max did manage to make it out with both girls still following her. There was a reason Chloe or Rachel typically led the way, but of the three of them, Max had done the least work that day. Who was she to say no to leading once in a while?

Making right for the doors, Max smiled briefly at Victoria and Courtney, who were not even trying to talk over the music but sitting together, eyeing the crowd as if they wished they were on the dance floor. There was nothing saying that friends could not go out and dance together, or that one needed to have a partner out there. Max wanted to tell them that. She was not sure how well the comment would be taken even if being heard in the gym was practical. Max looked back to make sure neither Chloe nor Rachel seemed overly upset about leaving the gym and, receiving no objections, paused as they reached the table by the doors.

There were only about half a pack's worth of red solo cups sitting behind the table in front of the keg. Also behind the table, waving absentmindedly to them as they passed, was Trevor, who seemed to be busy on his phone and having what she hoped was not a free beer. Chloe slowed her a bit so she could yell something to Trevor. The boy shared something with her in a loud voice which Max still could not hear standing halfway out of the doors and then they were out standing on the pale, tiled floor of the hallway. I'll try to remember the cups after Chloe's off. Frankly, she thought she might have one of her own.

Inside, the gymnasium was still packed to a degree that it dwarfed either of last month's parties. That was part of why it disturbed her when she stepped out into the hallway and realize that the party had spilled out into the halls. Oh, sure there had always been couples sneaking out to find a dark place to mack or groups who wanted to talk who sought out the far ends of the school as Max intended to do so she could see Chloe off. This was different, though. There were at least thirty people hanging out in the hall closest to the gym, where talking was still impractical at best, impossible during the worst moments.

Apparently, Max marveled at them a bit too long. Rachel walked around her and began to make for the hall that contained, among other things, the science lab. As they got farther and farther from the gymnasium the crowd thinned out. It just did not do so as significantly or as quickly as Max would have liked. On the other hand, they eventually came to the point where Max could hear something other than the music blaring from speakers throughout the gymnasium. Chloe let loose a low whistle as Max glanced back at her.

“Okay, so, I'm sorry,” Chloe started as soon as Rachel had turned to look at her too. The girl pulled absentmindedly on the end of one sleeve of her shirt and went on. “I'm super tired. I really gotta get outta here and get to bed so I don't fall asleep behind the wheel.” Momentarily, Max considered
teasing Chloe about staying in her room and sleeping. There was, however, a vague chance that
Chloe might have bit on the idea and Max didn't really fancy the girl getting caught trying to sneak
into the dormitories that night.

“Don't go apologizing for nothing,” Rachel chided her, crossing her bare arms over her chest. Her
attempt to scold Chloe was rendered ineffectual when she snorted and began to laugh to the point
where she had to bury her face into her hands. *It's actually really bad tonight,* Max thought, before
glancing away from Rachel. Seeing her girlfriend laughing and happy was not entirely unpleasant,
even if it almost seemed as if she had taken some sort of drug that had come on a little strong.

“We're just glad you came out for us for a while,” Max followed up. “Do you want us to walk you
to the truck?” At this, Chloe waved a dismissive hand.

“I'm a big girl, I can make it home. I *do* think I need a kiss for good luck, though.” Rachel laughed,
a little too long and a little too hard. She had been on the verge of laughter at absolutely nothing for
several minutes. At this, Chloe turned her head, waggling her eyebrows suggestively. “Might have
to make it two. I'm *awfully* tired.” *And she calls me the dork,* Max thought, not bothering to roll her
eyes in the low light of a hallway which was barely lit at all. Max was the first of the two of them
to lean forward and place her lips against the girl's cheek. Once they both had, Chloe seemed
content to turn and make for the doors at the end of the hallway on her own. With Little Psycho
unconscious in the stands and Big Psycho theoretically not on campus, Max had few compunctions
letting Chloe go off on her own. She was, as she said, a big girl.

“You know something?” a new voice queried. “I think that's the first time I've seen her walking
outside of school hours in like two weeks. It's a good thing she still can.” While it *was* true Chloe
had taken to her skateboard again like a fish to water, that was a bit of an exaggeration, if only a
bit. Turning, Max and Rachel were met by the sight of Victoria and Courtney approaching.
Courtney's hands rested firmly in her pockets. She was not looking *away* from Rachel (who had
stepped closer to Max at the unexpected voice, and still looked to be on the edge of giggling) or
Max herself, so that was a step in the right direction as far as Max was concerned. Victoria, on the
other hand, seemingly oblivious to how off put her friend was by the blonde being friendly to Max,
Rachel and Chloe in the least, greeted them by name. It truly was as if Courtney thought this
tendency Victoria used to have of being, frankly, an asshole to Chloe and Max was some sort of
key component of her personality and the shift over the last few months *disturbed* Courtney. One
day, Max hoped the girl knew what to do or say in a civil conversation. She was not usually a quiet
person and the way she so often crossed her arms over her chest and glared away from them came
off as obvious and not at all unlike a petulant child in Max's mind. “Max, Rachel.” There was
something both formal and a little too serious about Victoria greeting them that way. Max became
freshly concerned.

“What's up, Victoria?” Max asked. She found it pretty unlikely that the girl was approaching them
so seriously over something small like the fact that they were running low on solo cups by the keg.
*How are we running low, anyway? Just keep hold of your cups, people. Jesus.* Beside her, Rachel
cleared her throat and did her best to make the snort that followed immediate after sound like a
“Yeah,” Rachel said, swallowing once in the middle of her sentence, “what's wrong?” When Victoria got closer, nerves could be seen in her features, though she was clearly trying to maintain her typical look of haughty disinterest.

“I was just wondering if you'd seen Taylor anywhere. She slipped away like ten minutes ago and I couldn't hear where she said she was going?” In that context, the concern made sense and Max decided to put it at ease in plain language. There was no one else near enough to hear them.

“Nathan passed out in the bleachers like, twenty minutes ago. Taylor's probably fine. Have you tried to text her?” Though relief washed over her features blatantly, Victoria answered her question.

“I sent a text just a minute ago, but I guess I was worried... you know.” Max did know. Everyone present knew precisely what Victoria was thinking, including, she thought, Courtney. Try as she might, as she stood behind Victoria, the shorter blonde could not hide her own sense of relief. Max watched as Rachel once more tried to get herself together and say something.

“She's probably in, you know, ‘the circle’,” Rachel suggested, punctuating the line with a single soft chuckle.

“What are you on, Amber?” Victoria asked her.

“Fuck if I know,” Rachel answered. “As far as I know, nothing.” When first Victoria and then even Courtney turned to raise an eyebrow to her, Max held up her hands as if to say she was innocent in the situation.

“She just gets like this sometimes,” Max told them. “Frankly, I'm fucking jealous, my girl's in a good mood.” Throwing one arm over Rachel's shoulders resulted in Victoria immediately looking away which Max felt guilty for. Maybe there was credence to Chloe's theory about a crush on Rachel, after all. “Which,” Max said, trying to redirect the conversation while Victoria toyed with the pearls around her neck, “is probably what Taylor's trying to get into right now. Let's go check the science lab.” They were, after all, maybe ten or fifteen feet from the door. Tonight at least the circle was going to be down Chloe and Brooke, but she suspected she would find Stella there since it was quiet and Steph had gone to the dorms for the sake of retrieving her shortly after arriving at the party.
If Nathan was going to do his level best to not be a threat, the idea of sitting around the circle and having a smoke sounded good, even with Courtney's occasional passive aggressive bullshit and Rachel already cackling as if she were high. When Max removed her arm from the shoulders of the blonde in question, Rachel immediately wrapped one of her own around Max's waist as they walked. It was pleasant enough but it did make walking slightly more complicated. At least the girl's pout when she was forced to let go of Max so they could enter the classroom in question was adorable.

Max was surprised that Victoria had not put on any kind of show about not caring if she and Rachel came along to look for Taylor but as she pushed the door to the lab open and Victoria and Courtney followed them in she could have sworn she sensed some tension in the air between them as she glanced back. She just wasn't sure what it was all about. After all, Victoria had calmed toward them as of late and in fact actually greeted them most of the time. Hell, that morning Max thought the blonde had even smiled at her from across the cafeteria. It was clear she wasn't entirely comfortable doing the whole 'being friendly with Chloe' thing, though she was trying. The door to the science classroom was unlocked as expected and as the door opened several sets of eyes rose to watch who was entering.

Those small, blue portable lanterns were gathered on one table today, around which stood or sat several people who were still looking Max's way when her eyes adjusted to the slight uptick in light. Hayden was the first to say something as they entered and Max responded by raising her hand in greeting. While Rachel, Victoria and Courtney followed her in, Max gave a quick sweep of the room. Hayden, Taylor, Justin, Dana, and Steph were all the room held. There was no sign of Stella. Not even Warren Graham was present. It was, all in all, an empty circle to be in. On the other hand, it wasn't necessarily the least pleasant group. It was missing Chloe and maybe Juliet, but that was just the way life worked out. One of them needed her rest and the other was likely off somewhere fooling around with her boyfriend, a burly jock from a school in Edgeton.

“Hey-den,” Rachel greeted, before chuckling at her own joke just loudly enough for Max to feel a little mortified for her. The sound of her face meeting her palm was enough to set Rachel off on another brief cackle and then the blonde tugged her along toward Hayden. To Max's knowledge, Victoria had never particularly joined this particular crowd before. She suspected that that was part of why Taylor did. For all that Taylor claimed to love Victoria like a sister, there were some major unresolved problems between them. Max didn't want to even try to count the number of nights something callous Victoria said had set Taylor off and out of fear of losing Victoria, Taylor had kept it to herself, causing the girl some serious and very literal unrest. The wealthy Seattleite sighed a little more audibly than she probably wanted to when she spotted Taylor over Max's shoulder. Max decided not to look back and potentially embarrass her. It would be interesting to see what Courtney or Victoria did next.

“So, where's Stella?” Max asked as she approached the table with an empty chair retrieved from one of the other islands around the room. Rachel seemed content to stand. Steph, who had just finished elbowing Hayden in the side and whispering something into his ear that Max suspected was about how goofy Rachel was acting, looked up at Max.
“Took off a while ago, said she was gonna go by the gym and then head back to her room.” Max nodded as if to say that made sense and then plopped her chair down just to Steph's right. Rachel took up a position on Max's as she sat down. Eventually, it became clear that the only tension in the room came from Victoria and Courtney so as soon as the blunt offered to Max met her fingers, she took one long draw and gestured to the two girls who had stopped a step or two back from the circle. Looking past her at Taylor, Victoria was the first of them to shrug and step up to Rachel's right. Max passed the smoke to Rachel as she held her breath and dug into her left front pocket. From where it sat wrapped up in a small plastic bag, Max produced another joint. If they were essentially doubling the size of the circle it only seemed fair to contribute, especially since Hayden (who looked a little more tired and had been thus far more quiet than usual) was the only reason she had a connection at all. The assembled group was talking about some news event that she had not really been paying any attention to, so when the conversation started back up, Max stayed quiet, though Rachel partook.

Speaking of partaking, Max watched with absolutely unshuttered curiosity as Victoria took the joint from Rachel and inhaled. Almost immediately, Max knew what was going to happen. A look of tension crossed her face and not long at all after passing, the girl leaned forward at the table and began to cough. Max could not help but grin slightly but was taken aback when Victoria glared at her. She wasn't surprised the girl didn't care for her smiling at Victoria's expense, but it did surprise her that Victoria was paying attention to her even though she had to look around Rachel to do it. The girl didn't have a chance to admonish her for laughing for a few seconds, by which time almost everyone had forgotten about the moment. Judging by the way Rachel's hand resting on Max's upper back shook slightly, she was trying not to laugh. Max thought it might have been schadenfreude in Rachel's case. In Victoria's, well, there was something priceless about seeing Victoria surprised.

“Look,” Victoria shot back as soon as she had found her air again. “I usually vape or- or bake if anything.”

“The hell do you mean bake?” Max asked her, trying to keep her voice playful and light. “Because I promise, everyone in this fucking room but us is probably baked, and I will be in two or three minutes.” At this, Justin looked up from across the table, and made what she thought was supposed to be a crossed face.

“Hey,” he said, as if offended. “Oh, wait, right, yeah, I'm pretty fucking baked.” The boy looked back down at his phone. Max liked him, for the most part. He played up the stereotypes of a stoner a bit much but she thought he did so mostly for the sake of bringing people amusement or ending tense moments he might or might not have had a hand in creating. Then again, sometimes she suspected he might have genuine memory issues, though she was fairly certain that if that was the case it was either unrelated to the ganja or he must have stayed baked 24/7.

“I mean edibles, I guess,” Victoria told her, then looked up at Rachel, who laughed. Max thought she was going to get mad, but upon realizing that Rachel was reacting to Justin, the girl dropped it. “I just think it's more fun that way.” Max hadn't vaped in a long time, but there was a small
vaporizer hidden in the back of her closet at home waiting on her the next time she had some privacy. “Other than that I really don't do anything unless N- um, nevermind.” For a second, Max didn't catch what had happened. She was too busy paying half of her attention to Victoria and half to the joint that was making its way to Steph's fingers. When she realized what Victoria had almost said, Max grimaced slightly and nodded, looking away to give the girl time to think and maybe see if Rachel, who was talking over her head to Hayden, was calming down. As she did so, though, something in front of Justin caught Max's eye. Sitting to the right of his phone was a small, familiar looking pill. It was familiar in that she had seen a bag of ones that looked precisely like it last before passing it off to Hayden to drop off at Nathan's door.

“What's that?” Max asked, as Justin brought the pill to his mouth absently. He blinked up at her, his mouth hanging half open and then swallowed the pill before answering.

“Yellow Vs,” he told her. Valium. God damn it, Nathan.

Rachel had gone silent in the middle of a line and looked down at Max, suddenly looking a little serious. In fact, if Max looked around the table, it seemed like everyone there except for Courtney, Justin and Taylor caught onto the implications. Justin wasn't here the night Nathan hurt Victoria. “I can tell you where to get them if you want.”

“I know where you're getting them,” Max assured him, sighing a little. If Justin understood what was happening he didn't let on. If that shit was in the school, chances were decent that Nathan was selling the stash that Max had had left in front of his door several days ago in an attempt to give him a chance to get better. Max shared a look across the table at Hayden, who had been nice enough to have drop them off for her. The look of frustration on his face told her he had done his part. Max shut her mouth at that, but could sense Victoria's discomfort and Rachel's tension. Even Steph looked as if her mood was souring at this revelation. She passed Max the second joint, freshly lit, without taking a hit. Well, Max thought as she took a long draw and passed it on to Rachel, I did my part, too. More than. Time to watch Nathan closer. She had been wondering why there hadn't been any sign of change in his behavior considering how significant the change had been when he last went on his medication. Now she knew.

Max leaned against Rachel quietly when no one engaged her in conversation and was rewarded with an arm around her shoulder. She had no problem sitting quietly and letting the rest of the room talk. It was actually somewhat comforting. The tension between Victoria and the room at large seemed to be dying, occasionally she even joined in on the conversation, especially as she started to loosen up and get better at holding her smoke. Courtney barely partook at all, but there was a limit to how far Max would go to worry about that girl. She was going to have to get over the idea that Victoria's identity (and thus her own) was tied to acting like they were better than someone, frankly anyone else. Whatever Victoria's faults, and Max believed there were many, Courtney was the one who had started to weigh on Max's nerves, started to add pressure to that balloon waiting to burst behind her eyes.

The next half hour passed fairly peacefully, especially once even those standing had settled onto stools and into chairs and just talked about school, and life. Sometimes, Max regretted not being
more engaged with the school's football team, she thought listening to almost everyone there save Steph and Justin recount their antics after the last game of the season. She used to go to all kinds of things with her father, though his interests lay more in the realm of hockey. It wasn't that she cared especially for any particular sport over another but there was no denying that some of her favorite memories about her father involved sitting in the stands at a hockey game amused and a bit in awe of the people performing below. Even if you weren't a fan of sports, there was value in the community, she considered. Maybe she needed to go next season.

“What are you grinning about?” Rachel asked her at one point, causing Max to all but jump at being caught. She was embarrassed and so answered with her voice as low as she thought she could while still being heard by her girlfriend.

“I think I feel like I'm finally part of Blackwell?” Max confessed. To her immense displeasure, Victoria chimed in from Rachel's other side before Rachel could answer with anything beyond a hug.

“That's the spirit, Caulfield.” Max did not look her straight in the eye. Instead she turned out to the rest of the group and raised a hand as she broke from one-armed embrace and made as if to stand. It was immediately evident that she was completely and unquestionably baked. Steph lifted her head.

“I need to go make sure Trevor doesn't need anymore cups in the gym.” Max had intended to text someone to help Trevor out on that front but it had slipped her mind. Now it felt like an excellent excuse to get her away from a momentarily mortifying situation.

“Want I should come with?” Rachel asked.

“No, no,” Max assured her, grateful that her red face was not as clear in the dark room. “Stay here, have some fun, enjoy yourself.” Lightheaded, Max turned to step away from them all, aware of Rachel, Dana, Victoria and Courtney watching her. Steph was not. Steph had stood and stretched her arms high above her head about the same time that Max had. Before the photographer could make a clean retreat from her embarrassment, Steph announced she was coming with and Max had to slow and glance back. She did, however, wait until she got out of the room and it was ostensibly just her and Steph out in the hallway to breathe an exaggerated sigh of relief. Max jumped as the auburn-haired girl tossed an arm around her shoulders.

“Max,” Steph said, “it's gonna be alright, you dig it?” Max chuckled.

“I 'dig it, man,'” she promised Steph, throwing up a peace sign in the low light. Teasingly she asked, “who's the hippie now?” This earned a shrug from Steph, even as her free hand rubbed at
her eyes.

“You must be rubbing off on me. Damn dirty hippie.”

All in all, the rest of the night went well. When Max and Steph went back to the gymnasium and ascertained that they were going to need to bring out another package of cups from the cafeteria kitchen, she also took a second to head up to the bleachers. Nathan was gone which, frankly, Max couldn't have been more relieved by. She hoped he had had an annoying trip back to the dormitories and tripped on his way there, metaphorically or literally. Max had been glad to drop off the cups and return to the science lab, delivering the news of Nathan's absence as casually as she could. What she didn't understand and never found out an answer to, was why him being gone worried Victoria.
The door shut behind her and cut off the sound of voices, of people walking to and from their lockers. Rachel watched her breath manifest in front of her as the long-ended school day was left behind along with everyone else who was still in the main building of Blackwell Academy. Looking past this wave of vapor as it escaped her, Rachel watched Chloe and Kate step down from the bottom of the stairs onto the path. The morning had been so much cooler than expected, but even then, Rachel wouldn't have believed she was going to see a snowfall in mid March. At least, not one like this. Beautiful, fluffy flakes eased their way down to the ground in such numbers that the walls and paths of the edges of campus were blurring. There were sights much closer than that she found far more important, like Chloe and Kate spinning in the snow, laughing as it continued to accumulate around them. Unseasonable weather or not, they were both dressed as one might expect from them: Kate in her dark cardigan and long blue skirt, Chloe in her torn jeans and a ragged old tee that used to belong to her father.

Neither of them were anywhere near dressed for snow. In her new, thick sweatshirt Max, still paused on the bottom step, digging into the dark messenger bag at her side, was probably the warmest dressed of them all, even if Rachel counted the dark leather jacket over her own shoulders. A few steps away, Chloe ducked low as if to reach down for a bit of the accumulated snow. Kate cried out in protest but, laughing, made no move to stop Chloe, who came up with a snowball even as Max came up from her bag with a camera. Chloe arming herself seemed to be enough for Kate to try her best to do the same, but it was simply too late. Rachel heard the familiar snap of the old camera (which, come to think of it, had once belonged to William Price, too) even as Chloe loosed her snowball. Her aim was a bit off, but Kate retreated at the near miss, making for the doors behind Rachel.

Rachel didn't blame her. A skirt did not provide a ton of protection against the cold. Chloe, waving a hand at her as she passed, turned and noticed just in time that she was in Max's viewfinder as the girl snapped a second shot. I want to see those, I bet they look amazing, Rachel told herself as Kate pressed up against the door beside Rachel but did not head inside. The dirty-blonde was still grinning with the same near starry-eyed look that Chloe wore as she turned toward Max and caught her lining up a final snapshot. Rachel let the two of them have their moment and gave Kate a quick once-over. She had freed her phone from her pocket and was typing away on it, the light in her eyes slowly fading to concentration and then concern.
While the large, fat snowflakes around them continued to descend, harder than before, while Max and Chloe held each other in the snow, Kate's good mood soured. Rachel had seen the girl upset before, the way she squinted or pursed her lips if someone said something she didn't like. What she hadn't seen before was a sudden transformation from some kind of wonder to devastation. Bad family news? Rachel kept her eyes to herself as Kate continued to read whatever it was she was looking at. It wasn't her place to nose in where she wasn't invited but she couldn't help but look the girl over occasionally, especially as she became more and more concerned until finally, the normally quiet girl spoke up, fairly loudly and lifted her head.

“Um,” Kate called and then, seeing that Rachel was looking, continued, “I think something bad is happening.” As Chloe queried as to what the problem was, Kate all but shoved her phone into Rachel's hands. On the screen was Kate's school email inbox, full of what was mostly spam and announcements from staff, as well as one email entitled 'Approval for Extracurricular Organization.' Rachel homed in on the message that Kate had pulled up to one side and frowned as she saw who it was from. Stella, who had not answered her door that morning much to Kate's concern, had apparently written Kate a message during the school day. I guess I don't really check my email often, either. Why didn't she just text her?

From: StellaH@ BlackwellAcademy.ed
To: KateM@ BlackwellAcademy.ed
Subject: Sorry

I'm really sorry Kate. I tried but I don't think I can do this. I don't have anywhere to go but I can't be here. I'm afraid he'll hurt me. He thinks I don't know what happened after the party but I do and if he finds out he's going to hurt me. I wanted you to know that I heard you knocking that I'm sorry I didn't say anything you and Alyssa are my best friends and I'm so sorry I did this. Bye Kate

Stella

Okay, Rachel told herself, lifting her head from the phone and passing it off to Chloe. That's not good.

“We've got to go,” Rachel told Kate, reaching out and grabbing her by the hand. The girl jumped at the sudden contact, at the shift in Rachel's personality. She did not know what to say to get Kate moving but she had to try. “In case- I don't know, in case something bad happened? In case something bad's about to happen and we can stop it. We need to go.” In case she's going to hurt herself. Or maybe she just ran off. Either way, we have to know.
“What's happening?” Max asked, voice suddenly lower and more serious, dark blue eyes narrowing. Rachel did not have time to answer because understanding settled into Kate's features and she nodded. It was impressive how fast the large, heavy snowfall turned from a sweet sight to see her girls sharing a moment wrapped around each other, laughing, spinning in to a detriment. Not only did Rachel trip and fall on her ass twice as she ran for the dormitories, she managed to bring Kate down with her once. With Chloe and Max behind them, though, they got back on their feet each time. Occasionally a student or two would be playing in the snow near enough to see it happen and Rachel felt more than heard their snickers. For the most part, though, the path was clear of people.

Deja-fucking-vu. Almost five months ago, she and Chloe had come sprinting back to the dormitories, threatening David to get out of their way so that they could check on Max. Wow, it's really been that long. It was crazy to consider but in a lot of ways their relationship had changed since then. They had all gotten a lot closer without so many secrets between them, emotionally, mentally, even physically. Imagine that, talking to each other is a good thing. Who would've thunk it? Rachel did not speak as Chloe and Kate tried to explain to Max what was happening. In fact, she didn't say anything even when Max somehow got hold of Kate's phone and began to read the email out loud. As the line about the party hit, Max audibly choked. The brunette was not able to finish reading as, at that moment, they reached the door to the dormitories and only a few seconds later Rachel was barreling up the stairs to the second floor.

What followed was actually kind of excruciating to Rachel, especially since it reminded her so much of trying to find Max the night of the second forest fire. Except this time, it was Stella's door that was being surrounded and as Kate had no way into the room, the hall was filled with the sound of her fist against wood. Given the peculiar snow outside, Rachel did not expect the dorms to be occupied yet and, sure enough, they were not harassed as Kate called Stella's name time after time in a pained, panicked voice. Rachel turned to Chloe and Max. A few minutes ago Rachel had been laughing off Max asking her if she was responsible for this snow while secretly wondering if she could find a way to make snow.

Now, as Max and Chloe's faces darkened, she could see that they were asking themselves the same question she was. What were the odds that, two nights ago, Nathan Prescott had realized he was being watched and faked intoxication to the point of passing out to throw them off his trail? In retrospect, none of it seemed that far-fetched. Have we been underestimating him this whole time? Thinking that so much of what he has done was just down to illness and not everything else? How fucked up is that? Nathan was, himself, a force to be reckoned with. There was all the potential in the world that this email was a sign that Stella had learned that the hard way on Saturday night.

Eventually Kate was forced to give up. Though she turned in a panic to the three of them, Rachel watched her rubbing softly at the underside of her fist, as if she had hurt herself knocking. The idea that Stella of all people might have ended up under Nathan's tender mercies was enough to make Rachel sick to her stomach. The effect it had on Max was disturbing. Though she had been a bit absorbed in her thoughts, Max had also been in a good mood as of late. Now, the way she clenched her jaw and looked through or past the three girls in front of her was enough to momentarily rob
Rachel of her words. Thankfully, Max had plenty of her own.

“Go to your room and try to call Stella's parents. We'll be right behind you in a minute.” Rachel wasn't even sure if Max registered Kate shaking her head in denial. Kate was clearly unaware as to what thoughts were going through their heads, but remained dubious.

“I'm not sure what you know, but Stella's parents aren't very... good people.” At this, Max cursed loudly.

“Fuck, I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking.”

“It's okay,” Kate promised her, though her voice was still higher, more urgent than normal. “I-I just-”

“Maybe you should go to your room, write Stella an email and send a text both.” Chloe spoke up for the first time since they had pulled to a stop in front of the pale wooden door to Stella's room. Feeling a little lost for words, still, Rachel turned toward her even as Kate did. Max stared through Chloe toward the wall some feet behind her. “That way if she doesn't check her email she might get the text? Or maybe she'll get alerts for both. Something to get her attention, alright, Kate?” For a moment the blonde's eyes shot between the three of them and then, hands clenching and unclenching, she reached out toward Max, who handed her back her phone immediately. She did not seem to realize that Chloe and Max were trying to get rid of her in the moment so that they could speak freely. Rachel had trouble feeling much, but she did feel bad about that. Kate deserved better, but there was truly no telling how she would handle even a quarter of the things that they could tell her to inform her about the situation, or at least the situation Rachel was coming to believe they were—no, Stella was—in. Once Kate's bedroom door had shut behind her with the devout girl completely unaware of the details of their deepest fears coming reality, Max took one or two steps further from Stella's door, further from Kate's.

“If what happened is what we think happened, we have a problem.” No shit? Rachel thought that that statement went without saying. Stella was, best case scenario, missing. Apparently their friend's disappearance was not what Max had in mind because as the brunette shifted her shoulders beneath her new sweatshirt and took a step to distance herself from Chloe's hand as it reached out to comfort her, Max sighed. “At this point my ability to just... rewind moment to moment goes back about 28 hours. If Nathan did something to Stella after the party, it wouldn't be enough. The best I can do is rewind and stop Stella from leaving.” Rachel thought that that seemed like a pretty good idea, but did not say anything before Chloe, of all people, shook her head dismissively, shouldering her backpack high enough on her right side that the back of the board sticking out of it bumped against her head.

“That might not be worth it. For all we know Stella's okay. Stella heard Kate knocking this
morning, remember? We should try to figure out what's going on and then, well,” Chloe's angular face twisted into a grimace, “if we find something horrible, that she did something to herself you can just do your voodoo and stop her from leaving to begin with.” This time it was Max's turn to shake her head, but it was slow and her features became mournful, regretful. The girl's lips turned downward and her arms tensed at her sides, eyes watering briefly before she blinked at them and swallowed at nothing.

“That's not how it works,” Max told them. “If someone is, um, if someone is dead,” the photographer continued as if she did not quite want to give voice to the possibility, even as Chloe had not wanted to moments before, “then trying to bring them back is, uh, bad.”

“Well how bad can it actually be?” Chloe asked her, all but huffing. “This is Stella's life we're talking about.”

“Giant-Fucking-Tornado-Killing-Everyone-You-Know' bad,” Max snapped back, her features tightening, knuckles white. The girl's cheeks reddened and she looked down at the carpet. “I wish I could but I can't.” Change the subject, Rachel counseled herself as she filed that information and reaction away for later analysis. Get us back on track.

“So if this was Nathan, this means he's active, doesn't it?” Rachel asked. She instantly wanted to kick herself. That was a stupid question, considering what he had tried to do to Victoria. If he's at the point where he's going to try to pull a victim in every fucking party, people are going to start talking, right? She really hoped she was right, at least. The sooner people stopped trusting this guy, the better.

“Right,” Max agreed, though her voice sounded hollow.

“What we need to focus on is Stella,” Chloe interjected, sounding hard and a bit frustrated. “We should go look for her in town.”

“I'll take Blackwell's bus into town. It'll be by in half an hour. I can check out the diner and that used bookstore on Beech Street that Stella likes.” As soon as the idea was out of Max's mouth Rachel shook her head to veto it.

“I absolutely don't like the idea of you waiting out in this cold, not to mention all the time you'll be waiting,” Rachel told her, crossing her arms over her chest. Max sighed, perhaps a bit exaggeratedly and then closed her eyes. When she reopened them, they were focused and she looked as if she were a tiny bit more put together. Rachel tried to see any sign that this was some side effect of time travel, but none of the signals she had been told to look out for surfaced. While
Max looked upset, she did not look to be disoriented or in pain. In fact, when she opened her eyes, she looked clearer headed than she had been since she had read Stella’s email.

“I'll check the diner after I drop Max at the bookstore and swing by after to pick you up,” at this point, Chloe turned away from the both of them, perhaps to cut off any questions about how she felt about seeing Joyce again after such a long time of little more than a couple of curt text messages in the way of communication. Frankly, Rachel wasn't sure she would have been alright with letting Chloe go to the diner if it weren't an emergency. They had not bought so much as a burger from the place since Chloe's big falling out with her mother. Or to put it in other words, when Joyce fucked up.

“I think I'm gonna go grab Kate and check the bus station, then take the main road out to Bruss.”

“Then Max and I will drive over to Edgeton. Whoever finds her, text someone else and pass it on. Like hell are we leaving Stella out on her own in this fucking cold. Especially if Nathan did something to make her scared to stay at Blackwell.” Rachel took a moment to bask in the surety Chloe seemed to have that one of them would find Stella. She only hoped that when they did, the brunette was alright. It was cold outside and Stella had never been a big fan of the cold, or slick conditions. Today most certainly qualified as both. Or then there's the fact that we don't know what Stella's doing. Is she alright or... well, is it bad? A moment or two of silence passed before Max abruptly turned and started for the stairs. It was alright: there was nothing to say. There was no need to say that they were all worried enough about Stella that words were running a little dry.

When Rachel shot Chloe a look of warning and then glanced at Max's back, the 'take care of our girl,' was implicit. The only answer she received before Chloe followed the photographer out of the dormitories was a slight nod. The thing was, Rachel regretted she couldn't go with the two of them, but the more she thought about it the more her plan made sense given the idea of watching the routes to the two nearest towns. If they wanted to cover the two main roads out of town, it was going to take two vehicles. Rachel crossed the hall back to Kate's door in room 222, relieved more than anything by the fact that no one else had returned to the dorms. She struck the door a couple of more than knocked on it.

“Kate, get your shoes on. We're going to check the bus station then we're riding out to Bruss.” There was no immediate response to the proclamation but Rachel stayed close enough to the door to eventually hear the 'Okay!' which did not come out in Kate's usual quiet voice, instead ringing clear as an expression of concern. For the moment there was nothing Rachel could do but flex warmth back into her fingers as she waited.

“I'm coming,” Kate called after almost a minute more, a minute in which Rachel shifted her weight from foot to foot, eager to get downstairs and across campus to her car. When the girl emerged from her room finally, she understood what had taken her studious photographer friend so long. As if the day could not get any more abnormal, this marked the first time Rachel had seen Kate in a
pair of pants that weren't meant to be pajamas. *Probably would have been sensible during the winter but, fuck it. Winter seems to want to hang onto every last second.* As the two of them descended the stairs, Rachel kept her finger on the pulse of Kate's emotional state. What she saw was a little surprising. Despite her apparent concern about whether they were going to find Stella or what state she was in, the girl whose hair was still up in that large, ornate bun was actually *smiling.* Smiling was the last thing on Rachel's mind. In fact, the longer she thought about the whole situation, the deeper the pit that had once been her stomach felt. Something threatened to rise from its depths, too, whenever her mind strayed to the potential involvement of Nathan Prescott.

“What's the smile about?” she finally asked, as non-judgmentally as she could. To her surprise that changed nothing about Kate's appearance or behavior. As they slipped past the gate guarding the path to the dormitories, Kate looked to consider the best way to express her thoughts and then shrugged.

“I was just thinking that I'm glad I'm not doing this on my own. I was wondering what Stella would think if she saw you three helping to look for her.” This did nothing to help Rachel's mood. It wasn't that she was at all upset that she could be there for either Kate or Stella: they were her friends. That was undeniable. What was upsetting was the idea that maybe Stella didn't realize that. For one ugly second, she almost asked Kate about that and then instead reached out, settled an arm around the girl's shoulders, squeezed once and said the only thing she could think of to reassure Kate a little bit further.

“Well, if you decide you want to, you can tell her all about it *when* we find her. And we *will* find her. Chloe and Max are checking a couple spots in town and then driving the main road out to Edgeton. We're gonna do the same to Bruss. If Stella's out there and not sitting somewhere warm and safe, we'll find her.” Kate gave a solid nod and though the smile faded from her face, she looked a little more relaxed if anything. Rachel thought that was probably a fair trade off.

“I know we will,” Kate told her. “With the four of us looking, if she's in any trouble, *we'll* find her. I *know* it.” Rachel released her and continued to focus on walking on the suddenly slick path. She could still see vague indentations in the snow from where she and Kate had fallen in a haphazard mess a few minutes before. Her knee no longer hurt from the impact and in a few minutes if the snow continued at this pace, it was going to hide the evidence of their fall, but she still felt a tiny bit guilty about rushing around like a reckless idiot. Love them as she might, Chloe and Max had really hammered home the importance that she stop doing that, which she thought was *awfully* hypocritical of them and had ruined a few conversations by telling them so. It wasn't that they were wrong as much as it was that Chloe and Max had a habit of going off half-cocked at the slightest sign of trouble. Admittedly Chloe had not quite reached Rachel or Max's level of stupid risk taking yet on that front, but she *had* come close.

Once in the car, Rachel's first action was to crank her engine on and her heater up to full. She did not miss the small, relieved sigh that escaped Kate as she did this. In fact, she quite mirrored it. If she was going to be honest, she felt cooler than she had expected to, certainly cooler than she had on the way *into* the dormitories. *You know,* Rachel thought as she turned the car out of Blackwell's
parking lot and found herself instantly gripping the steering wheel too tightly, the whole 'can't be used to stop people from dying' shtick is good to know about Max's powers. She aimed her car for the tiny bus station on the south side of town and hoped that the heater warmed her up before the cold and nervous energy could combine to ruin what was left of her optimism.

She wasn't sure that the cold had anything to do with it when they got back into her car outside of Arcadia Bay's bus station which really amounted to one booth with a space heater sitting in the center of several benches. Dejection had finally set into Kate's features. This is starting to look ugly, Rachel told herself and she wasn't sure if it was in response to the increased snowfall, rapidly slickening roads, the sleet that seemed to be mixing with it all all of the sudden or just the idea that Stella might not be in Arcadia Bay after all. Either way, she was starting to think she was going to have to kick some Prescott ass if they didn't find Stella. Hell, she thought as the car started, maybe even if we do. Whether he did this or not, he needs an ass kicking.

“Kate,” Rachel started. She could not find it in her to tell the girl to buck up. She had wanted very badly to find Stella waiting there, as well. Kate did not look up from the folded hands in her lap. “Oh, fuck it, we're hitting the road. Edgeton's the quicker walk or hitch, so maybe Chloe and Max will find her, unless you can think of anywhere else in town we should look?” Kate shook her head no and then, just as Rachel was beginning to resign herself to the idea that she might have no one to talk to during the entire trip when Kate spoke.

“No, she just goes to the bookstore, the diner and the general store if she wants drinks or snacks or something.” With a sigh, Rachel put the dark sedan into reverse.

“Then let's blow this popsicle stand.” The snow had begun to make the roads dangerous. This meant that the trip to Bruss was going to be a lot slower than she wanted it to be. This means I'll have to see what I did. She did not want to be distracted while looking for any sign of Stella out walking in freezing rain, snow, sleet. Why is the weather doing this, anyway? The answer occurred to her about the time that the businesses and houses of Arcadia Bay started to give way to less populated areas. The reason that they had gone from an unseasonable snow to brutal, freezing rain probably had something to do with her. I wonder if it's going to go back to normal or stop all together in Arcadia Bay when we get far enough away?

With the heater and defrosters going full blast, her headlights on and the speedometer reading something around 10 miles per hour under the speed limit Rachel and Kate began what was sure to be a comparatively long trip to one of the nearest towns to Arcadia Bay. With Kate not speaking much, she wasn't entirely sure what to do beyond squint through the windows and hope to see some sign of Stella before the light started to fade. Snow continued to accumulate on the ground around them. As that happened, it was going to be harder and harder for Stella to cover ground if she was no foot. She kept her eyes out for a sign of Stella as much as she could but keeping them on the road was more important than ever. Then there's the matter of whether or not I'm influencing the snow, Rachel told herself. Over the last few minutes the sensation of tiny pinpricks spreading across her skin had become more and more pronounced and distracting. This was the kind of feeling she had experienced each time she had pulled the moisture in the atmosphere down
to the earth in the form of rain. If she was doing such in that moment, it would explain the increase in snowfall and other weird behaviors.

“Kate,” Rachel told the girl five minutes into their slow trip, “I hate to do this to you, but some of Chloe's shitty habits have rubbed off on me and if I sit in silence any longer I'm going to lose my fucking mind.” She slowed the vehicle slightly but kept her eyes on the road as she reached down with her right hand and flipped on the radio. It whirred for a moment as it began to read the CD in the player and then the dulcet tones of a band Rachel was willing to bet Kate wouldn't have been allowed to listen to began to impose themselves upon the air and the thoughts in the cab. She was reaching under her armrest for a cigarette and a lighter when she spotted the change in Kate's face out of the corner of her eye. She had gone past frowning to pursing her lips. Rachel couldn't say she much cared whether the girl approved of her taste in music, but the transformation was notable and jarring. It's a shitty day, don't read into it. Even still, she stowed the smokes back under the arm and did not speak.

The pleasure is to play, makes no difference what you say

I don't share your greed, the only card I need is the Ace of Spades

The long dead trees around the edge of Arcadia Bay gave way to desolation. The earth was still cinder black in some places and the same could be said for the remnants of those trees which had not been cleared away, stretching up and out of sight to the north. Disturbing as the sight was, she focused her ears on the music and her eyes on the road as much as possible. For the next few minutes she did not look at Kate. She did not try to do anything except drive and hope to see the shuffling form of a person walking along the side of the road. If the silence from Max and Chloe was anything to go by, the girls had not had any success so far, either. Stella, she knew, had a horrible home life. Whether her family was abusive or just neglectful, Rachel wasn't clear on and didn't want to ask. What she did know was that Stella had often echoed Max's sentiments that Blackwell was like home. If something had happened to make her feel unsafe at school she was probably devastated. If she's going to run off, it has to be the worst kind of bad it can be. Nathan is just that kind of bad. Admittedly they had no proof that that was what was going on, but she also couldn't help but wonder what would happen if she broke into Nathan's room and stole his camera or laptop, or both. What would she find?

When Rachel's handiwork in the way of devastated earth and flora began to give way to the cleaner land around Bruss, she shut her music off. Without so much as a sign of footsteps along the roadside, that they could see, it seemed less and less likely they would find any sign of Stella in this snow, which was still pouring, even as the skin across her shoulders and neck continued to tingle. It was as they passed the last burnt tree that the man she had been trying not to think about surfaced, puncturing her thoughts about Nathan Prescott, Mark Jefferson and even Stella. Frank. That's why Max never tried to save Frank. She just couldn't.

Kate's apparent disdain had faded by the time the first buildings just outside of Bruss city limits began to pop up. Frankly, Rachel was relieved. The last thing she needed was Kate to fall into a
worse mood. I guess I'd better keep my music to myself from now on. On the other hand, she still wanted a smoke. There was just something about doing anything to move her hands from the wheel that felt fairly unsafe in these conditions. Her own spirits were much lower a few minutes later as they hit the main road into town. Kate's hands rose at one point and, clenched between them was the chain of the crucifix usually hanging around her neck. Rachel shut her mouth firmly and made as little noise as she could as the blonde beside her bowed her head. On her end, Rachel scanned sidewalks, parking lots, anything that looked like a potential spot for Stella to stop at but saw nothing that immediately jumped out at her. It was conceivable that Stella could be in one of the fast food places or somewhere else, but they couldn't search the town building by building. She could, however ask at the bus station.

Getting to the bus station required going a couple of blocks off of the main road through Bruss and when they finally found a parking spot near it, Rachel was out of the car even before Kate. Together the two of them pushed past unfamiliar people into the equally alien bus terminal. They approached the ticket stand set into one wall and the woman behind it set aside her phone to pay them attention. Kate's photo of Stella was up on her own phone screen before they even reached the counter and without any other form of greeting, Kate slid it through to her.

"Please," Kate started, enunciating the word, as if to emphasize her admittedly completely legitimate desperation for some sign. Rachel pulled her own phone from her pocket and checked for any new messages or missed calls. There were none. The background of her main screen, Max and Chloe curled up on Steph's couch, was clear of any kind of alerts overlapping it, but brought her some comfort, anyway. “Have you seen my friend? She ran away from our boarding school and we're really worried about her.” Almost as soon as the woman (somewhere in her late twenties with bags under her eyes that suggested sleep was a long lost friend) leaned down to squint at the phone, her face changed. It bore a pensive looking frown and then the woman called out for the person to her left to 'Look at this!'

“Oh shit, that could be the girl,” this second person, Janice, said the minute she was shown the phone. Glancing up and paying them attention, the rather androgynous individual made an unsure face. “I saw a girl who looked like that about three hours ago. She didn't have any glasses on or anything.” Why wouldn't Stella have her glasses? The thick rimmed frames were rather iconically Stella. “She wanted to buy a ticket out to Portland, but didn't have enough cash on her. We had to turn her away. Honestly, she looked so out of it I thought she was trying to run away from somewhere. I almost called the police but I didn't know... that can sometimes be worse for a person, you know?” Rachel did know, she thought as she considered what would have happened had Joyce Madsen brought Chloe back to the house the day David had made another attempt to injure her.

“Do you know where she might have gone after?” Kate asked, in the same earnest, please help me voice. “It's very important. Something bad happened to her and we want to help. She needs to know she isn't alone.” For all that Kate had acted a little out of character earlier in the car, this reaction was genuine, this desire for Stella to know she was not alone made sense. Rachel rather hoped the girl found that out soon, too. Unfortunately, no one there could give them anymore information, Janice informing them that she 'saw too many people every day.' It was with some regret that they
returned empty handed to Arcadia Bay a few hours later, having exhausted a good part of a gas tank searching the town for any sign of their friend.
Chapter Fifty-Six: Homologeo

Chapter Notes

In this chapter, a plotpoint I've been trying to set up since early P3 finally comes out in the open. Oddly enough, I feel like this is the one that will piss off the most people.

Disclaimer: Anything familiar to you, I don't own. This is a work of fanfiction for personal amusement, fulfillment and a bit of self-therapy. I make nothing from any of it.

March 14th, 2012 3:35 PM

As much as none of them were in a particularly good mood to begin with, the end of the school day had brought some relief of suffering, at least to Chloe. That was why, as she leaned up against the wall on Max's right and listened to her and Kate talking, Chloe glared at the man approaching them as if the glare itself would be enough to turn him away. It was not. Even beneath his winter coat, David Madsen still looked like he spent far too much time lifting weights. The security cap perched perfectly straight on his head looked chosen to bring out his square jawline and the sense of superiority emanating either from his eyes or his 70's copstache. The worst part of it all was that as Max attempted to calm Kate down, she still stood rigid and clearly upset. Kate had seen David coming before any of them and Chloe could not blame her.

They had gotten very little out of Kate about her conversation with David the day before, but they did know enough to believe he had accused her of having something to do with Stella's disappearance. Oh, fuck it. Chloe thought as she pushed off of the wall and placed the foot which had formerly been flat against it on the ground. She turned back to her girls, but Max had gone silent. Her face was beet red, her eyes wide, nostrils flaring and pupils constricting. I've seen Max in a rage before, Chloe thought as she swallowed involuntarily at the sight. Kate fell quiet as well, perhaps seeing the same thing. Rachel hadn't spoken since Kate had pointed out David's approach but she, too was stepping forward. I've never seen her like this. Last night she got very graphic about how best to kick David's ass.

In short, his approach was among the most unwelcome sights they could have been confronted with, second only to Jefferson or Nathan doing the very same thing. Clenched in David's right hand was a pen, his left a small spiral bound notepad. Detective Dickstain on the case! The man, whether it was due to sensing the photographer to Chloe's left sweating hate or not, stopped short of them. Chloe looked at his face, ignoring the big show he made about flipping a couple of pages in his notepad and clicking his pen. Even when he spoke, she stared directly into his eyes, drawing
them to her a couple of times. *Come on, genius, realize that this is a capital B, capital I Bad Idea (TM)!* The man's jaw clamped shut for a moment and then opened again.

“Rachel, Max, could you step over here for a moment and talk to me?”

“I don't think we're on a first name basis, Mr. Madsen,” Rachel told him. When Chloe glanced back, it was clear by the slight uptick in Max's irritation that the thespian had spoken over something she was about to say. David looked stumped for a moment, then grumbled. When he did not speak again, Rachel took a step forward. Chloe and Max followed.

“This isn't your business,” the man immediately snapped toward Chloe. “You can wait with your friend.”

“My friend over there is okay,” Chloe told him, looking back toward Kate who offered a weak nod of agreement. “My friends here might not be.” Lifting her chin, Chloe kept eye contact with the man. She could see that his blood pressure was already sky high by the way his eyes bulged slightly from their sockets. She would have privately mocked him if it weren't for the fact that Max was clenching her fists hard enough that her knuckles were white already. David was not the only one who was starting this conversation with his attitude turned up to 11. She would have laughed if it didn't suggest there might be danger in this conversation for David, Max or both. *Meanwhile,* Chloe thought, *eyes sliding briefly toward Rachel and then back. This is a dangerous can of worms we're opening today, girls.* As usual, David took not being unquestionably obeyed worse than Pompidou took her sleeping in on a Sunday. *He even looks like he's going to start barking like Pompidou, too. Self-righteous fashy fuck.* After what felt like an extravagantly long time, the man sighed through gritted teeth.

“If this is going to be you three obstructing my investigation and acting out about petty problems, get it out of the way now.” *Petty problems? You put a spycam in my bedroom and nearly broke my wrist, you creepy fucker.* Chloe told herself that it had not just gotten warmer in the hallway and that the sound escaping Max's throat was down to her clearing it, not some sort of growl. Even still, she wasn't sure what she *herself* could say or do that wasn't going to cause more trouble than anything else. Chloe glanced back at Kate to see her pretending to be on her phone.

“You're not starting this conversation off very well, are you, David?” Rachel almost sounded as if she was teasing David with false pity. *If I look in her eyes right now, am I going to see an inferno?*

“Come to think of it, should I get out my phone and record this? You know, just in case you decide to yell at us and accuse us of shit, like you did with Kate.” Max's query was dripping not with mockery but vitriol. This situation had all the makings of a bad day. When the man made as if to respond to the girls, Chloe decided the safest decision here was to draw his ire herself.
“Honestly, David, if this is about stroking your hateboner, you can go fuck yourself. If this is about helping Stella then we're open books.” His irritation dial turned from 11 to 12, David furrowed his brows together and cleared his throat about five times over the space of thirty seconds as he tried to contain whatever enraged retort was bouncing behind around that apple red face of his. *Okay, so he's back on me now. That's for the best.* It really was, too. If Max was pissed off and Rachel was getting there, then no matter how mad Chloe was, they were going to be leagues beyond her in short order. A quick glance around revealed neither any teachers nor Principal Wells. Most of the students were also out of the building or at a club meeting. This was, all told, a conversation likely to be witnessed by Kate only.

“Two days after a Vortex Club party, which you Ms. Amber and you Ms. Caulfield are partially responsible, a student disappeared from school grounds.” David stared down at his pad for a moment as if he needed it to recall the details of the situation. *Is this even technically in his job description, anyway?* David seemed intent on beginning his questioning with a history lesson, as if none of them had spoken to him. “The email she sent Kate Marsh says that something happened at or just after that party. Is there anything that you know that might be relevant to the investigation? There have been plenty of rumors about what might have been happening.” He looked at Max before shifting his gaze to Rachel and then Chloe, as if he had not enjoyed what he saw in the eyes of the person before. *Then again, I wouldn't want to look into Rachel or Max's eyes if I was him, either.* Chloe thought she could read on either girl's face alone that they were wishing him nothing but a painful demise. “One of those rumors was that she was on drugs at the time of the party.”

“Yeah, well, you know what they say about rumors,” Max told him.

“That they come with a grain of the truth,” he retorted. She snorted, derisively.

“Yeah, sure. Look, we've heard the rumors, too. If we had any reason to believe any of those rumors for sure we'd tell you. Stella's our friend and when she went missing we looked everywhere. While others looked no farther than the first teenage girl they could accuse of something.” *Oh shit, Supermax isn't pulling any punches today.* Chloe glanced at the suddenly vindictive girl. It was clear from the scornful and distrusting look on David's face that the True Detective had finally gotten back on the horse, but even so, Max was already at one of her more advanced stages of anger and she clearly did not care about escalating the situation, not with David. *Not after what he said to Kate, what the fuck does she know that I don't?* Chloe could not quite imagine what escalation would look like between the two at this point.

“When was the last time any of you talked to Ms. Hill?”

“The day after the party,” Rachel answered for them. Max did not contradict this statement and Chloe only nodded along in agreement.
“And were there any signs that she was planning to run away? Did she say anything or perhaps seem to be preparing to leave?” When Max responded with a curt 'No' he grumbled and scribbled down something unclear in his notepad. “If you're hiding something from me Max, I'll figure it out.”

“I said you have no right to call me by my first name,” the photographer informed him. She was now speaking loudly enough that were anyone else nearby, it would probably be enough to draw their attention. Chloe cut across the conversation as David's voice rose and he prepared to respond. Judging by the curling upper lip, it was going to be simple chest thumping. Chloe wasn't in the mood.

“David, you're being a moron,” Chloe told him, drawing his rage away from Max. She told herself that the shiver resulting from meeting the man's eyes and seeing just how fed up he had become with this conversation was barely perceptible. He could not have seen it. Chloe also knew what it looked like when she lied to herself. “We want our friend back. She's not hiding shit from you.” Strictly speaking this was entirely untrue, but Chloe was not about to tell David that they thought the person who hurt Stella was Nathan. They had no proof. Besides, Chloe thought at him, mostly to distance herself from the nerves he had just woken up in her stomach for the first time in months, if Max was hiding something from you, it could be written in marker on your face and you wouldn't know it. David did his 'annoyed man-ape gone wrong' thing and then decided to jack the accusatory properties of his questions up a notch.

“And did she have any kind of boyfriend or anything of the sort?”

“No,” Rachel replied, shortly. Max's eyes had strayed from David's face. Chloe was no longer convinced she had imagined the temperature rising in the hallway. She was also unsure exactly what was going through Max's head. I hope she doesn't do something stupid like try to hit him and get herself expelled. “She was too shy for that kind of thing. She was just starting to make friends for the first time thanks to Max and the Vortex Club. There was no one close.” Apparently deciding Rachel was talkative enough, David focused his attention on her instead, turning to almost present his side to Chloe and Max.

“Are you certain?” David asked her. “There's no one that she- I don't know, might have been 'involved with' one night who might have thought there was something more going on?” Chloe did not look at Max or at Rachel. At the same point the switch flipped in her own head, that David was trying to paint Stella as drug addicted and promiscuous, Max snarled, audibly. She heard the photographer's sneakers on the floor of the hall as Max turned away from them and began to walk toward Kate. “Max?”

“I'm done answering your questions for the day, Spycam,” Chloe could not recall when any of
them had made a threat involving the knowledge of David's crime in front of anyone else. Max's words were not lost on Kate who barely reacted to Max's hand grasping her own as she was busy looking in confusion and concern between Chloe and David. Daughter of a bastard. David did not say anything. The color had drained from his face long before Max and a quietly protesting Kate reached the front doors of the school and pushed out into the chilly March air.

“Well, I'm sure,” Rachel said as soon as they were gone. The girl shifted beneath her jacket and seemed to try to keep her voice calm, but failed at the last. Chloe no longer felt so calm herself. When she looked down, her hands shook in time with the feeling pulsing in her stomach, the one telling her that maybe finding a toilet before she threw up on the floor could be a good idea.

“Listen, David. I'm not going to lie to you. There are any number of things that could've happened. She said that some guy hurt her. I could list the top five creeps at this school, you'd write off three of them because, frankly, I think you'd find you had more in common with them than you care to admit, and you'd ignore the other two just because they came from me and we both know that what you're really here for is to prove that somehow the three of us had something to do with her leaving.”

“And did you?” the man questioned bluntly, clearly reaching the end of his patience. He was not the only one, though. At the question, Rachel's hands came together in one loud clap, pressing against one another as if in prayer and then rose, the tips of her fingers pressing against her lips as she took one loud, slow inhale as if to resist shouting something at the man. When Rachel exhaled just as slowly, Chloe realized that she wanted more than anything to leave that hallway, then and there, with Rachel or without.

“Boy,” Rachel told him, “you just don't fucking learn. No. No we didn't have anything to do with it. Why the fuck wouldn't we tell you? Kate and I spent three hours looking for her. Max and Chloe spent six.” At this point, any semblance of control in Rachel's shaking voice flew out of the window. When Chloe reached out for Rachel, her forehead was covered in a thin layer of sweat, as were her hands. Chloe wasn't so sure she wanted to touch the girl if she was going to go nuclear.

“Our friend's missing and your idea of an investigation is to harass Kate, probably her best friend and then come around to your favorite targets. You never change. You couldn't just do your job, and now people are getting burnt again.” The effect of this statement, even though Chloe momentarily did not catch the meaning, was immediate. The last of the rage in David's eyes gave way to widening pupils and suspicion and then he closed his notebook with a loud thump and turned away from them.

“Isn't it weird how whenever the great, moral crusader David Madsen launches an investigation everyone around him gets hurt. If Kate or Alyssa get hurt, if Max gets hurt, if Chloe gets hurt or, god forbid, Stella gets hurt because of something you did, it will be on you Inspector Clouseau. I'll make sure the entire school knows how you handled this investigation. That'll be you out of the frying pan and into the fire.” Oh god, she's all but screaming at him that she was the one threatening him with fire. While Chloe was curious as to who Inspector Clouseau was, she thought it better to ask when neither of them felt like pissing in David's shoes. Actually, right about that moment, Chloe felt like doing far worse than that.
When Rachel turned away to walk toward the front doors, herself and David continued down the hall away from them in the opposite direction, Chloe did not follow. Fuming and uneasy, she realized that the best thing she could do was walk away and give them all time to calm down. David flips all my switches and presses all my buttons. I'm not gonna calm down so easy. Still, the blonde paused and looked back at her when she reached the door. Rachel's face was still contorted in anger and though Chloe knew it was not directed at her, she still didn't want to be on the receiving end of that look in Rachel's eyes that spoke of the kind of fire one might find in a furnace, one which would consume all fuel fed to it until nothing was left.

“I'm gonna um, I'm gonna get a drink and I'll meet up with you in a couple of minutes. I don't feel so good.” Rachel's face softened at this and though she momentarily looked past Chloe at David's retreating form, the girl promised to text her when she found Max and Kate. As the door shut behind Rachel, Chloe spun in place to make sure that David turned down one of the other hallways and left her alone. As she saw him do just that, her eyes wandered to the vending machines and she tried not to grimace as she set off toward them. Gathered around the pop machine while they talked were Victoria and Taylor, looking as if they were a little harried by their own days. Not that Princess Victoria would admit anyone ever saw her with a hair out of place, Chloe thought. She had just wanted a damned soda, not to have to deal with the mystery of the great 'turnaround of Victoria Chase.' After grumbling to herself for a moment, Chloe exhaled and approached. Instantly, Taylor looked up at her from Victoria who was leaning forward to free a can of coke from the machine. Chloe noticed Courtney's absence immediately.

“Hey, Chloe,” Victoria greeted when Taylor tapped her on the shoulder and gestured. Okay, that's downright friendly. It wasn't exactly an excited greeting, but it was surprisingly calm and cool. Taylor, on the other hand, waved rather genuinely. Chloe tried not to shift her shitty mood to the two of them, but even though Taylor had become more open toward her, even more than Victoria, Chloe was getting tired of wondering when the next snide remark was going to be coming. Victoria had changed her mind about them once and she could change it again. Chloe, at least, had not forgotten the past two and a half years of Victoria's snooty, stuck up, superior attitude. She had not forgotten being brought to tears in front of a classroom full of people as Victoria mocked her for something as simple for a ratty red sweatshirt. One which Max wears whenever she wants and gets nothing for.

Chloe knew she had failed at keeping her last conversation from affecting this one before it even began, because the closest thing she could manage to a greeting was to wave one stiff hand in the air as she approached, eyes focused on the pop machine which Victoria was stepping clear of. I can't help it, alright. This isn't fucking Brooke or something this isn't even Taylor or Courtney. This is Victoria. The shit she used to give me, the shit she'd give me and Max about this 'Rachel's Harem' bullshit. I don't care why, it pisses me off.

“Are-um, are Max and Rachel nearby?” When Chloe's eyes slid to Victoria's face the girl did not immediately match them. In fact, she did not quite look directly at Chloe. Chloe took this as a sign that maybe the conversation would end quickly if she just answered and began to dig a few quarters from her pocket. The bag over her shoulder did not cause her any problems as she had left her skateboard behind that morning. The first of the quarters rolled down the slot and into the machine
as Chloe found the words to respond.

“No, they're-” she cleared her throat, well aware of the hard tone in her voice. Chloe tried to calm that down. “They're with Kate. I'm not sure where, yet.”

“Oh,” Victoria responded. Hoping that that was all there was to the conversation, Chloe fed the machine a couple more quarters. “Hey, Taylor? Could I talk to Chloe alone for a second?” Chloe's hand froze over the button for a cherry coke and she turned to look back at them. Taylor glanced at Victoria from beneath blonde bangs and then, after shooting a confused look at the both of them, nodded very slowly, as if an old machine processing a complicated command.

“Yeah, um, I'll be in the cafeteria with Juliet and Courtney.” Something resembling hurt sounded in Taylor's voice and it was almost enough to pull Chloe's heartstring. Then again, Taylor was no fucking angel, either. She watched Victoria promise to catch up with the girl and then paid attention as Taylor retreated from the situation toward the cafeteria, looking almost a little dazed each time she glanced over her shoulder at Victoria. Chloe pressed the button and returned to her quest for a coke. What the fuck does Victoria want to talk to me alone about? She was just working ideas over in her mind as to how she could extricate from herself from the situation when Victoria glanced around the school as if to make sure no one was near enough to hear them and then decided it was time to speak.

“Okay,” Victoria started, turning back to Chloe, voice all fire and indignance. Now that is Victoria Chase. “What the hell is your problem?” Her hands still shaking slightly from her earlier encounter, Chloe decided that if Victoria wanted to get into this now, she was more than happy to oblige the girl.

“Don't you mean 'What the hell is your problem, Kari?' Don't you mean 'What the hell is your problem, urchin girl?' Don't you mean 'what the hell is your problem, Kevin?'” She spat each of these in fairly rapid succession and revelled in the vitriol in her own voice. Surprisingly, Victoria did not glare at her, but instead immediately looked at the wall beside the machine as if examining something on it. Chloe did not miss the slight sigh, the reddening of Victoria's cheeks. “That's what I thought,” Chloe told her. “Look, Max is willing to forgive and forget and you've barely ever been a dick to Rachel, but I remember everything you've ever said to me and the shit you said about Max and I being with Rachel. If you're gonna change back and start treating us like shit again, it's better to get on with it. We've got enough bullshit to deal with without Victoria Chase's insecurity ticking like a timebomb in our ears.”

“Look, Chloe,” Victoria shot back as soon as Chloe said this last. Okay, too far. She had wanted to apologize as soon as the words came out of her mouth, but Victoria did not look like she was going to let her get another word in until she'd had her say. “You don't have to like me if you don't want to, but people can realize they were being dicks and change.” ’ Poor me, I'm reformed and you're being hateful.'
“The worst thing is,” Chloe responded, immediately forgetting her desire to apologize. “I want to like you. Totally. Both because I know Max likes you and because you’re good at what you do, you’re smart and generally cool to most people. Why do you have to be such a dick to others?” For a moment Victoria's cheeks continued to flare and she looked as if she was going to stare past Chloe again, at the wall but at the last Victoria's forest green eyes returned to Chloe's. “It's not just to Max and I, it was to Kate too. Why would you want to be a dick to Kate? She's a fucking saint, and you know it.” Again, her last sentence was apparently too much for Victoria. The blonde did look shaken up and Chloe felt a little bad about pushing. Victoria's been through way too much shit lately. That didn't mean Chloe felt like leaving Max open to whatever bullshit Victoria might have planned.

“First off, Kate's no fucking saint,” Victoria told her, her voice not faltering whatever the look on her face said. “She can be a judgmental bitch.”

“My girlfriends and I hang out with her all the fucking time. If she was the judgmental type, shouldn't that get in the way?” Chloe laughed at the assertion. The laugh had been intended to lighten things up as much as anything else, but Victoria looked as if she thought she was being mocked. Those green eyes narrowed and her nostrils flared, almost dangerously.

“Maybe not about that, but about other things. I bet you've never tried to smoke so much as a cigarette in front of her. Oh and don't let her hear about you touching a drop of alcohol, or she'll turn her nose up at you like you're some kind of brown stain.” Victoria's voice was slowly ticking up a notch or two in volume. “That's not even the worst of it. She's not perfect.” Chloe raised her hands. The truth was that there was some potential honesty in that statement. The girl occasionally get passive aggressive about drug use. Was it so unlikely that she might have said something to upset Victoria at some point? Even if it was an offhand comment, it might have upset Victoria's, frankly, delicate ego. It didn't excuse her behavior, but Chloe took the girl's point.

“That's fair. It's possible. Everyone has problems. But why me? Why Max?” There was a debate on Victoria's face. Chloe watched it rather intently. With the wind out of both of their sails, it felt like a conversation was actually happening which held some value, some purpose. Chloe had a feeling she was about to learn a thing or two about Victoria Chase and probably teach her a thing or two about herself, as well.

“Look, about you... about the clothes... it's like I said. I was a stupid, shitty kid. I get that. I'm sorry.” If last part of the conversation had taken the wind out of her sails, this one felt like it had knocked the air from her lungs. Chloe tightened her grip on her drink slightly so that it did not fall from her hand at her surprise. Had she ever actually witnessed Victoria apologize to anyone about anything before? This was a girl who had once kicked someone by accident after that person was tripped and complained at the person who tripped him for slowing her down. Chloe would have told you even five minutes ago that the Queen Bee didn't know the word sorry. “About the rest, and the things I said to you and Max about Rachel, look. I'm just-” the battle playing out across
Victoria’s face faded into the background, but not before Chloe saw the victor. *Truth.* “I’m just jealous, alright. I didn’t wanna say it.”

Immediately, Chloe held up a hand and considered the number of ways that she was going to gloat to Rachel and Steph both about being right. *How about a big blue banner declaring my room the headquarters of the Chloe is Always Right Foundation?* Victoria’s stare only turned from unease to frustration as a smile bloomed across Chloe’s face. Of course Victoria was jealous. She wanted the impressive, popular Rachel Amber all to herself and she had been too busy hiding in the closet to make a move. Now there were two girls with Rachel, one she had never been friendly with and a second who had come out of nowhere. It didn't excuse her behavior by any means, but holy *shit* did it feel good to be right. Victoria was red and upset, offended even when Chloe finally looked back up at her.

“Ha,” Chloe declared. “I knew you were into Rachel. No fucking *wonder* you let them into the Vortex Club.” Far from telling her to quiet down, scoff at her or otherwise attempt to convey exasperation, frustration or even offense, Victoria looked the picture of surprised and confused. For the second time that day she did something Chloe had never seen her do before: Victoria’s mouth dropped open. *Is she surprised she's so transparent that her tongue is about to actually hang out like Pompidou's?* After a moment or two of Chloe gloating silently at Victoria, the blonde shook her head and pulled herself together.

“If I’ve ever been jealous of *anything* when it comes to Rachel, it’s how she doesn’t care what people think of her so well. I’m not into Rachel. I didn't let them into the club for *her*. ” Then, came the exasperation. *The Chloe is Always Right Foundation? We might be going through a bit of a rough patch.* As Chloe tried to process this response and wondered exactly why she believed it so completely, Victoria drained the last of her pop can all at once. “Look, I'll just, I dunno, text Max later to ask what I was going to ask.” Chloe did not respond, instead she furrowed her brow and ran the math on what this was all likely to mean. If *she's not into Rachel then what in the hell could she be jealous of me about?* Then Victoria's statement caught up to Chloe and the can in her hand clattered to the floor, spilling its contents. *'I didn't let them into the club for ' her.'*

“You're into *Max?* ” Chloe hissed. This time, when Victoria's cheeks flared one last time, it was dark. Chloe reached across herself and pinched herself hard on her left arm. *No, no not dreaming.* The blonde crossed her arms over her chest, huffing as if it was no big deal and stared, head cocked at Chloe until Chloe remembered what was going on and shut her gaping mouth. “Why in the hell would you admit that to *me?* ”

“It’s not, like, a big deal to me anymore. I don't want to be a dick to anyone and besides, I don't think I can get anymore embarrassed right now than I am. You and like five or six other people know the most embarrassing thing there is to know about me: my best friend tried to- yeah, no, never mind. ” The sudden twist the conversation had taken had clearly made Victoria immediately uncomfortable. Chloe quieted as she watched the slightly shorter girl piecing words together. “My parents somehow heard a rumor about it that I think is down to Courtney and are trying to convince me to let them pull me out of blackwell and take me back to Seattle, so everything’s kind
of shit and if you go and tell everyone what I told you and I get mocked or something, I don’t really care.” They're trying to pull Victoria out of Blackwell? Victoria, and not Nathan?

“First off, there's nothing for you to be embarrassed about,” Chloe told her, voice as firm as she could make it. A year and a half ago she had been forced to have this same conversation with a disoriented Max. “That was his fault. He's the one with the problem. He's the one who hurt you.” Though, she did keep her voice down. "Besides, as for the other thing, Max is fucking gorgeous, she's smart enough to make me feel like a total ditz and not mind it and you both like photography and shit. I'm not gonna tell anyone but you should tell Max, A-S-A-P.” This seemed to take Victoria enough by surprise that the girl let down her defensive barrier and uncrossed her arms watching Chloe with surprise on her face. “Like, ASAP.”

“Would you- you know, actually be okay with that?” Victoria asked her, sounding both unsure and confused. The truth was, Chloe thought as she scratched her chin, she had never thought about it before. Chloe sidestepped the puddle she had just made and retrieved her can. Without a second thought she downed what was left in the vessel and hurled it at the nearest trash bin. How do I word this?

“What Rachel, Max and I have is different.” That much was unquestionable. “I don’t know if ‘okay’ is the right word, especially when all I can think about is being called ‘Kari Price’ but if you’re asking if I’m gonna get jealous? I know Max. I know where we stand. That’s all I need. And Max has been trying to be your friend since she moved here. If you’re actually willing to treat her like a person, now, don’t let this shit get in the way.” Genuine guilt snuck its way onto Victoria’s face. You know what, it fits. She should look guilty, Chloe thought. And when she gets over that guilt maybe she'll be a better person for it.

“Look, I know I was a dick alright? She just, makes me feel like I have to be something I’m not, alright. Like I have to push harder.” This seemed to be a confession Victoria had some difficulty with, so Chloe gave her the respect of not interrupting. Besides, I've seen it before. It's even happened once or twice with me and Rachel. Max could be intense, on another level one moment or the next just this goofy, short brunette who wants to take pictures, cuddle, eat chinese and watch shitty B movies on Netflix.

“You know what?” Chloe told her, “I get that. She can do that to people. But how you handle it is on you. My advice is, ‘get over it.’ I'm going to go find her and Rachel and Kate now. You can come with me or don't.” At this, Chloe gestured over her shoulder to the doors that came out closest to the dormitories. Victoria glanced at them and then back toward the cafeteria. Oh right, she was busy.

“I-I had better go find Taylor,” Victoria said, audibly trying to keep her usual confidence in place and failing as she hurried to add, “but don't tell Max, alright?” Chloe shook her head, laughing.
“You’d tell me, with me probably being the least friendliest with you of the three of us but you don’t want Max to know?”

“Yeah well,” Victoria responded, adjusting the pale purse strap on her shoulder. “This shit is weird.”

“On this one you and I agree,” Chloe replied, nodding. She was trying to sound laid back, playful. For a moment she turned, intent on taking off and then, wincing at a thought, called out to Victoria.

“Yeah, Price?” Victoria asked.

“If the other thing that you're worried about gets bad you need to talk to Max about it. Max has been dealing with it for a while and it's not always good, sometimes just seeing him fucks with her, but she wouldn't have said the stuff she did about being there for you if she didn't mean it. Max can be horrible about her own issues, but she's pretty good to have around for others' shit.”

“I'll think about it.”

“One more thing,” Chloe told the girl and this time she took her backpack off and shifted it to the other shoulder entirely, her right now sore. “Don't call me Price anymore.”

“Why do you care?”

“Because I think you're going to be sticking around.” This was the best olive branch she could offer to Victoria. Things were still shaky, she still didn't trust the girl with her life but this was Chloe's attempt to tell Victoria that she was trusting that her heart was in the right place.

Me

Hey you. Where are you guys?

Max
If Max found out and agreed to give Victoria a chance, how would Rachel react? How would I feel? One thing she knew for damn sure was that it was going to take time for her to reach any kind of serious friendship with Victoria. In response to Chloe stopping and falling into thought for the moment, Rachel prodded lightly at Chloe's side, causing her to yelp a little. Kate and Max looked up from the screen at this, Kate with a confused smile and Max patting the seat beside her. The message was clear. Either she sat down with Max or she was going to be prodded and tickled into submission. She was, nonetheless, a little caught off guard when the moment she sat down and Rachel sat on her other side, either girl pressed tight against her side and rested their heads on her shoulders. Chloe laughed and lifted her arms to make them all a little more comfortable. Kate seemed to be in a better mood than in the hallway. The girls' antics won a small grin from their devout friend and then Kate returned her attention to some show on television, some show Chloe had never paid attention to.

Rachel and Max fussed over her for the next few minutes and, quietly, Chloe allowed it. She didn't mind. She kept her promise of silence to Victoria, but when eventually asked why she took so long she just informed the three of them that she had been talking to a potential new friend and refused to say anything else. This was about the time that Rachel again began to lightly prod her as if to threaten to annoy her into talking.
“have they been this way the whole time I was gone?” Chloe asked Kate, looking past Max. The blonde looked at Chloe and shrugged one shoulder.

“They usually are like this when you're not around,” Kate told her, playing along. This seemed to be perfectly acceptable to Rachel who seized on the comment.

“Exactly, so you'll have to make the most of our time together so we don't get to feeling neglected.” Chloe had a few ideas of precisely how they might do that, but settled instead for leaning in as the thespian's hazel eyes danced with the urge to tease Chloe. Who, Chloe thought as she pressed her lips to Rachel's and felt the reaction, the slight parting of the girl's lips, the eager return of the kiss, *am I to turn down a request like that?*
Chapter Fifty-Seven: Mentor

March 16th, 2012 2:42 PM

The sight of her notebook was no longer enough for Max. Around her was a whole list of things that she wanted to know, to understand, to analyze until they stopped scaring her. Quite suddenly, almost overnight, everything had changed. That was terrifying. Slowly, Max lifted her eyes from her notebook and brought her ears back into focus, too. On the other side of the room, Nathan Prescott was speaking. His hands were folded in front of him and his eye was focused intently on Mark Jefferson as he delivered some fairly well put together and eloquent response to a question that Max had not heard. This, here, was an example of problem number one.

All of the sudden, Nathan was not only well behaved in class, but actively participating, polite and attentive. It set off every alarm bell in her head which she had tied to the idea of Nathan Prescott and Mark Jefferson becoming partners. Nathan had even taken to dressing nicer: a dark jacket, his thick hair held back by some kind of gel and, perhaps in part to protect what remained of his vision, he had begun to wear a set of glasses which he seemed to think gave him the air of someone somewhat more mature than he was. They did not, in Max's opinion, but that didn't stop her from being unnerved by the behavioral shifts, especially when it came to Nathan being friendly with Jefferson. Then there was the matter of Jefferson becoming more distant with her. That would normally be a relief, but it was only a slight change, barely noticeable to anyone who was not hyperaware of his every move, word, breath. This all might look like nothing to most people. It was not nothing.

Then there was Victoria, Max thought, shooting the girl a look across the room. Even despite her attempts to actually hang out with Victoria and Taylor, both separately and together, Max felt as if their progress toward at least understanding each other better had suddenly stalled. The girl was constantly tense. Max had gathered enough by wheedling both her and Chloe to figure out that the two had talked the other day, but she did not know what about and it did not seem to be connected to Victoria's mood shift. What she suspected was connected was the fact that Courtney seemed to be on the outside of Victoria and Taylor's friendship all of the sudden. Looking the girl in question over, the thin brunette responded to meeting Max's eyes by immediately looking away, frustration obvious in the angles of her face. Okay, so I'm getting the blame for that one, apparently.

The photography class continued, going far too idyllically. Whenever Jefferson spoke, two or three
hands usually raised to answer his questions. Nathan's was almost always among them, when for the majority of the last couple of months he had made a big show about being barely responsive to the man's attempts to engage him on anything. Max couldn't prove anything, at least not yet but she had a plan. Something's changed, Max told herself for the sixth time that day. Maybe Jefferson and Nathan connected over photography. Maybe Jefferson caught onto the rumors about Nathan trying to hurt Victoria. They've started to get around. With Stella still missing, it was possible that Jefferson had put two and two together about her, too, and spotted a kindred spirit. Look, Max told herself as she accidentally met Jefferson's dark eyes and looked down at her notebook. This early on, Jefferson's probably not super involved with the Prescotts. There's no reason to assume they're up to their shit in the Dark Room. Still, if the possibility existed that the two were connected, finally and Nathan was growing otherwise more unstable, Max couldn't allow things to go on much longer. His death glares and hateful reproaches were no longer reserved for Max or Rachel. They had come to stretch to Chloe, Victoria and even Taylor and Courtney. Taylor practically wilts when he does it and Victoria tries not to look, but I can see how scared she gets.

All in all, Max thought as the bell rang, cutting a distracted Jefferson off mid sentence, this was not fucking good. It was a surprisingly easy thing to collect your gear and be the first out of the door when one did not make themselves comfortable in a classroom. Max was, frankly, impressed when she looked back and caught sight of Kate following her out of the room. I'm gonna have to shake her, Max thought, feeling guilty. Kate was lovely and all, but she didn't really know much about what Max had experienced in relation to Nathan, nor about the fact that Max was keeping an eye on him. Even with her powers, her next exercise was going to be made more difficult with Kate around.

“Hey,” Max greeted the girl the moment they got out of there. “Are you alright?” Kate nodded, though she glanced back to the room.

“That's like, the only class where Nathan's acted... normal in a couple of weeks,” Kate observed, in a low voice as Max crossed to the wall opposite of Jefferson's classroom door. She did not want to stay close enough to be overheard.

“Yeah,” Max agreed as she unceremoniously shoved her pencil and notebook into her messenger bag. “Look, I'm gonna have to catch up with you later, Kate. I need to talk to someone really quickly.” There was a moment where Kate paused, as if trying to read signs of any kind of problem between them and then, reluctantly, nodded. Kate was particularly sensitive to the signs of any fluctuation in relationships ever since Stella's disappearance. It was as if she had some fear of being abandoned. Max wasn't sure what to do for her, but she tried to smile apologetically as the girl gave a wave and slipped away announcing that she was going to be in her room, reading. I'll figure out what to do to cheer her up later.

From over Victoria's shoulder as the girl paused in the doorway, Max saw Nathan watching her. All she could think to do in that moment was wave Victoria over to her. Maybe it's best I don't tell her Nathan's staring at us? Max watched several emotions which were hard to catch one at a time and identify play across Victoria's face. Whatever had changed over the last couple of days, Max badly
needed it not to stand between the two of them. After a second more and with no sign of any snide
remarks or other protests Victoria approached her and, when she finally reached Max with Taylor
in tow, Nathan looked away from them. As for Victoria and Taylor, they turned in time to catch
him as he passed the open doorway and moved toward the front of the classroom. *We're so* fucked.

“Victoria, have you ever seen Nathan get *this* scary and then *this* calm?” In all of his other classes,
Nathan had the potential to be silent and inattentive but he also had the potential (and, nowadays,
the tendency) to be an utter terror, loud and violent. No matter what he did he never seemed to miss
much more time than it took for the trip down to the Principal's Office or the Nurse when a teacher
declared that he was 'obviously distressed.' So far the history teacher was the biggest offender on
this front.

“No,” Victoria all but whispered, and this time Taylor and Max drew closer to her to hear her. Max
had to tilt her head a bit and look up into the blonde's face. She was uncomfortable but if she had
any true inkling as to the danger they were all actually in, she did not show it. “He's getting worse
and it's really kind of scary.”

“Victoria, I think it's scarier than even you've realized yet.” This was all the warning that Max
thought she could safely give but no matter how much either blonde in front of her stared, Max did
not tell them precisely what she meant. She only steadily met their gazes in turn and hoped like hell
they could absorb a bit of the truth of her warning through that connection.

“I'd- I'd be better if Stella Hill just turned up okay or something. I'm scared something's going to
happen any second now.” *Oh it is. It absolutely is. You just won't know a* fucking *thing.* Max kept
her eye on the classroom as the familiar faces began to empty from it: Dana, Juliet, Hayden,
Daniel, Courtney, one after another the room emptied until there could only be two left in the

“Victoria, welcome to my world,” Max told her. When she reached out to pat the girl on the
shoulder, Victoria went rigid and stood a little straighter. Did she have difficulty with being
touched? Max had been there a time or two in her life. She removed her hand quickly. “Scared is
like, my default emotion.”

“Why don't I believe that?” Taylor asked her, drawing Max's eyes away from the classroom door.

“No more being alone with Nathan,” Max told the both of them.

“Okay,” Victoria's response was immediate and carried with it the 'well, duh' tone. “I don't have a
death wish. I just wish I didn't sleep in the same building as him.”
“You and me both. You and me both. This is my home, though. I'm not going anywhere. Not for that spoiled prick.” For a moment that seemed to be all there was to the conversation. Max gave Courtney the side-eye. The girl had stopped a bit down the hall and was pretending to check her phone but Max knew that she was watching Victoria and Taylor. Maybe she wanted a word with them or maybe she was just spying, but whatever the cause was, it was something that needed taken care of soon. She was going to ask Victoria about it when the girl spoke.

“I told someone what happened.”

“Who?” Max asked, a little curious.

“Mark Jefferson.”

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck! Like that, the puzzle fell into place. The alarm in the back of her mind swelled to a crescendo and then died: there was no warning left to give. The danger was clear and present. Jefferson had always had an interest in Nathan that Max assumed was down to his unique style of photography and the similarities it shared with the darkest depths of Jefferson's philosophies. I bet the moment Victoria told him, he reached out to Nathan. This time, unsure if she cared how uncomfortable it made Victoria if it got her attention, Max pushed between her and Taylor and reached up, placing a hand on either of Victoria's shoulders.

“Listen to me. Jefferson is shady as shit and that's why I've stopped paying attention or talking in class.” Dubious, dark green eyes bored into her skull as if trying to read the contents of her mind. Fuck, if only you could. Max told herself to stay calm but she also knew she was holding very tightly to the taller blonde's shoulders, tight enough to possibly even leave marks. “Victoria. Do not trust him. I'll send you all of the evidence I have tonight.” Though she was attempting to stay calm, the plan she had begun to hatch during class resurfaced in her mind and it now felt more important than ever. To her immense relief, Victoria nodded very slowly and Max released her.

“Hey, you all okay?” Max's head spun toward the sound. Rachel and Chloe approached, devoid of Brooke or Steph. Maybe they're at their lockers, Max told herself. Chloe carried her board beneath her left arm even as she tried to balance a fatter schoolbag than usual over her right shoulder. As for Rachel, she looked rather like someone angling for a nap even from a distance. She walked practically hunched over. Okay, one problem at a time, Max, she coached herself as she turned away from them all to watch Nathan emerge from the classroom, his face tilted down and focused on his phone. The boy took one or two steps to clear the door and froze.

“Yes. Just like that, Prescott.”

“You need to talk to her.” Max glanced back toward the group to find that while she had been focused on Nathan, Chloe and Rachel had joined them, forming something close to a circle. Unabashedly, Chloe's right thumb was pointed over her shoulder at Courtney. Chloe was not looking at Max, however, but instead doggedly at Victoria. Max had never seen the two of them
interact so directly, so she tried to split her focus between Nathan and Victoria and Chloe. He
seemed to be pretending to be unaware of the group of them only a few steps away. “I mean it,”
Chloe said insistently after Victoria shrugged her shoulders and pretended to play with the strap of
her purse. “Maybe she did you wrong but I’d guess she only wanted to help.”

“Maybe,” Victoria responded, sounding dismissive.

“Look,” Max said as Nathan began to move. “Chloe, Rachel and I had plans today but if you two
want to hang out tomorrow-”

“Sure,” While far from an enthusiastic exclamation, this was a quicker and more positive response
than Max had expected to get from Victoria. Usually if they 'hung out' it was during a Vortex Club
meeting or a chance encounter turned into a conversation. They had never particularly made plans
before. Max tried not to stare or blink at the friendliness, eventually turning to look at Taylor who
agreed, though she looked just as unnerved by Victoria's attitude as Max. Unceremoniously, Max
gestured for her girls to follow her. Instead of making for the front door, though, she waved a quick
goodbye to Taylor and Victoria and made for the center of the school.

“What's going on?” Rachel asked Max almost as soon as they were far enough down the hall that
Victoria and Taylor wouldn't hear them. Max turned to look either girl in the face. It was then that
Nathan began to walk, slowly down the hall in the same direction, texting. “Max, what's
happening?”

“She's planning something,” Chloe answered when Max did not. Maybe they turned to see what she
was focused on or maybe they did not. Max wasn't about to avert her eyes from Nathan for
anything.

“Don't worry,” Max finally whispered, reaching out and finding either one's arm with one of her
hands. That's not quite right. “Or I guess, worry a lot.” With that, Max pushed between the two of
them and as soon as she was clear she started to run, not away from Nathan but directly at him, at a
sprint. The boy must have heard her rapid footfalls approaching because he looked up. Surprised,
nathan gaped at her, staring with one false eye and one real eye through a slightly scarred face.
Poor Nathan, Max thought, genuinely,
but poor Victoria too. Poor Stella. Poor everyone he's gone
after. Nathan didn't have time to get out of the way. Max was smaller than him but that did little to
mitigate the effects when she turned her left shoulder in and threw it and herself right into his chest.
Almost as soon as she felt the impact she also felt pain shoot down her shoulder into her arm,
which was why she had chosen to strike with her left shoulder.

Nathan bounced back and began to fall. As she had hoped, his phone slipped from his hand and
through the air. She was relieved when she grabbed at it with both the hand whose arm felt like
shattered lead and her right one and found purchase after juggling it for a second. Enraged, Nathan
stared up at her for a second as the hallway grew quiet. Max leaned forward, smiled at him and then bolted again. Pain radiated from her arm, throbbing, demanding to be recognized, demanding she stop and show her body the care it deserved. Beneath the arm of her new sweatshirt she would not have been surprised if her flesh was, at least, bruised. That didn't matter. She had what she wanted. Max looked down as Nathan cried out for her to stop. A scuffle sounded in her ears and she heard Rachel shouting for Chloe to 'move out of the way.' Max had to assume Rachel wanted a crack at Nathan, but whatever the case it sounded like she was home free.

She eagerly shifted from screen to screen on the phone, but not to see anything in particular. It would have been nigh on impossible to focus on the screen at that point. She simply knew most screens shut off after not being used for a few seconds and if the phone was password protected this would all be for naught. When Max reached not the doors closest to the classroom she had just escaped but the front doors instead, she turned her good arm into the handle and pushed the door open. The sunlight flooded over her body, but it did little to warm her or to calm the jitters the adrenaline was giving her. Faces turned as the door slammed hard at the edge of its frame. Max ignored most of them but as she descended the stairs she caught sight of Steph and Brooke posted up not far from the front of the school, ostensibly waiting on her, Rachel and Chloe.

“Knock his ass down,” Max called desperately back at them as she bolted for the parking lot. Sure that would probably make very little sense to the two girls, at least until Nathan came out of those doors. *I mean, if he even fucking got away from Chloe and Rachel.* The two were not a force to be taken lightly. It was when Max hit the steps of the lot that she realized she had been taking gulping breaths through her mouth and that the adrenaline was making her head swim and her heart pound. Eager to keep the phone from going to a locked screen, she pressed any icon she could.

She scanned the lot and found the Frankentruck surprisingly close to the steps. With one great heave Max leaped from the ground to grab hold of the edge of the pickup truck and heaved herself in. The pain in her arm peaked from the exertion alone but was none-too-kind on her when she slammed into the rusty bed of the truck and grew still. Dazed, Max lifted the phone up to her eyes. The light of the screen took a moment to focus on, but when she could she realized it was displaying some sort of stupid phone game in which Hawt Dawg Man had to collect mustard packets and avoid grills and what looked to be little jets. She found the home button and double clicked it, recognizing the model of the phone as being similar to Rachel’s. With *that* knowledge in mind it was almost too easy to open his text messages. Listening, she heard a fresh round of yelling from somewhere on campus. Nathan had made it out of the building.

The boy had three conversations that had seen any activity in the last twenty-four hours. She opened the first.

*Me*

*Yo, I'm looking for the hookup. Same as last month. You got the gear?*
You got my money? You still owe me fifty from last month.

Me

I've got your money. Let's meet.

Nathan's got a new dealer. Her contact's name in Edgeton was Luke, so apparently Nathan was dealing with someone else. That was an unfortunate development, but this conversation proved nothing about what she wanted.

Fucking Loser

Hey Dude, got the ludes?

Me

Yeah. Tonight at the usual.

Fucking Loser

Sick. I need to bail out tonight, big time.

Justin looking for his hookup, Max thought as she moved her injured left arm. That did not hurt as badly as she expected it to, however placing her left hand over her chest did nothing to calm the absolute pounding bassdrop that was her heart. Let the beat drop, she thought, half delirious as she pulled up the third and final conversation and upon reading the last line, scrolled up a few.

Nathan

I enjoyed our conversation the other night and I've thought about your offer. I accept it. I want to learn from the best. I am a Prescott, after all. I deserve the best.

???

I'm relieved to hear you say that. I have always thought you had an excellent eye for subjects. I must warn you, though, if you agree on this apprenticeship, there must be more caution and care given to your craft from now on.
Nathan

Of course, sir. I would have to be stupid to waste such an opportunity.

???

The one thing I know you are not, my dear boy, is stupid. Misunderstood, underestimated, taken advantage of, maybe, but never stupid.

Nathan

No, sir.

???

I will expect you to bring all of your work to me for evaluation. This will be an apprenticeship but I foresee great things in your future. I foresee collaboration. I foresee both of us receiving what we deserve. Me, worthy subjects and you the respect you've been denied, as long as you are smart about what you do.

Surprisingly not close to vomiting, Max reached up with her right hand, tilted it to the left and hurled the phone out of the back of the truck. Eyes shutting, she did her best to tune out the yelling from campus or the sound of Steph calling out her name. She did her best, even, to tune out the sound of Nathan's phone hitting the side of someone else's car and shattering. What Max had difficulty with was shutting out the mix of panic and vindication. Some small voice in the back of Max's head had always whispered, wondering if Nathan was really going to come out to be all that he was in the other timeline, if she wasn't simply acting prejudiced toward him because of what he did to her. That voice had fallen silent. It was a gratifying, almost sensual silence and the idea of revelling in it was not unappealing. Hell, the idea of crying in a strange, almost contradictory relief didn't sound bad, either. *How fucked am I to be relieved Nathan is going to be manipulated by Jefferson again?* Maybe it was fucked, but there was one thing that her interference might do. In the other timeline Jefferson had eventually killed Nathan, but that was some time into their partnership on the eve of the storm. Now and here, she still had the potential to stop Nathan and stop Jefferson before anyone died. *That's right,* Max told herself as she lay still on the floor of the truck bed and tried, desperately to quiet her thoughts.

Her right hand grasped at thin air above her. She was trying to grasp at something else, something closer to the theoretical 'fabric of spacetime.' *That's right. No one's died. Rachel's alive. Chloe's alive. Even Nathan's alive.* The biggest question mark was Stella, but if Rachel and Kate truly had talked to someone who had seen Stella, she was still out there somewhere, maybe not even far from Arcadia Bay. *And you know what you have to do, Max. You have to make sure it's safe for you all, including her.* The cold, hard metal of the truck bed fell away beneath her. It took with it the pain in her arm (lessened as it was) and the rapid heartbeat, the sweating and the other symptoms of too much adrenaline. When she again opened her eyes she was not in Blackwell's parking lot.
It was hard to follow the path of adrenaline, panic, guilt and eagerness. The emotions tasted of so much, some of it good, some of it bad, but it all pulled at her. She wanted to return to those thoughts, those moments to examine them anew. They all stood out bright and clear against the backdrop of the grey-fog world that Max had come to think of as the timescape. Even still, she was determined to get past those glowing bright gashes of emotion in time and find the ones that she wanted, the ones that were safe, not enriched by the kind of adrenaline that threatened hearts. Eventually, she came upon a neat, thin tear in the timescape.

Through the opening, she observed her own face, heard her own voice asking Victoria and Taylor to hang out with them the next day. The plan had not yet been put into action. That was when and where she wanted to be. Max pushed herself, her Self through that cut, being birthed from this void into the world at a more peaceful moment. Light and sensation came first: breath in her lungs, warm air on her skin from the school's heating system, Chloe and Rachel standing close enough to her that Rachel's body was giving off a bit of heat of its own. Then the moment solidified and the pain in her left arm returned, no longer as severe as she thought it had been but still unpleasant.

“Sure,” Victoria declared in response to her invitation. Then the blonde started slightly as Max leaned into Rachel and reached across her own body to press her left arm against her, and try ot keep it still. For a second, Victoria actually looked as if she had read the pain on Max's face and was going to ask what was wrong, but then, reluctantly, she looked past Max and at Courtney as Taylor, too, agreed to meet up with them.

“You okay?” Rachel whispered.

“I'll talk to you soon,” Victoria said as a sort of goodbye. Nathan had already emerged from the classroom as before. Now he walked away, seemingly unaware of them. Max turned and walked away without answering Rachel or Victoria even though all she wanted was to have Rachel and Chloe's arms around her in that moment. When she glanced back, Rachel and Chloe were following but looking expectantly at her. She waited once more for Nathan to be far out of earshot before she sagged against a wall.

“It's either all over or it's all finally starting,” Max told them as she carefully removed her left arm from the inside of her sweatshirt and revealed it to Rachel and Chloe in the light. She caught sight of the skin as at least dark red but her shoulder and neck hurt when she turned her neck hard and far enough to get a good look at her own shoulder and arm. Judging by the sound of Chloe sucking breath in through her gritted teeth, it was probably bruising as she had suspected. Max, keeping an eye out for anyone who might come close enough to listen in, hid her arm and filled the girls in as well as she was capable. “I'm telling you, it read like he made a deal with the devil and I guess he sort of did.” By this point, as uneasy as Chloe looked, Rachel's face was contorted as if she was holding something very bitter on her tongue.
“Do you at least feel better knowing?” Chloe asked her.

“I thought it would be a weight off my chest but instead I’m just kind of freaking out a bit. I’m giving myself the session tonight but after that it’s game on,” Max said. “I don’t care what happens. Miss the Vortex Club, miss game sessions, flunk out of school, the only thing that matters is putting Nathan and Jefferson in their places.” The disgusted look on Rachel’s face did not disappear but Max still almost melted despite the pain when the blonde stepped forward and wrapped her arms around her. Whatever else was going on, there was comfort to be found in the people she loved. At some point, Chloe and Rachel had gone from people she could always trust to people she couldn’t live without, to people on the front lines with her, from those who always had her back to those standing by her side and it was this last realization that made Max grab back at Rachel as tightly as she could, that made her welcome the feeling of Chloe’s hand rustling her hair in the way that usually pissed her off.

Unfortunately, she realized, putting all of her cards on the table in an effort to shut down Nathan Prescott and Mark Jefferson meant being willing to put all of her cards on the table.

“How long was I out of it? What was I even thinking about? There was so much happening up there in her mind that she thought she should have been able to pick out exactly what she was just thinking about but there was nothing.

Briefly, Max wondered if there was a chance that someone else had been in control of her, another Max. Maybe the one she had spoken to in Los Angeles. Almost as soon as she had the thought, she realized that that was wishful thinking. She wanted that Max to resurface, to come walking through Steph and Chloe's kitchen table was that she got the feeling that some time had passed since she was last tuned into her surroundings. The light coming in through the glass sliding doors seemed too low and the faces of those around her looked too concerned for a simple lapse in concentration. How long was I out of it? What was I even thinking about? There was so much happening up there in her mind that she thought she should have been able to pick out exactly what she was just thinking about but there was nothing.

“Are we ready to start?” she asked them all at large, putting on a show of rubbing her hands together as if she was eager to begin. It did not work. At least two sets of narrowed eyes were watching her and even Brooke looked as if she thought Max was having some kind of breakdown. Maybe she’s a little bit right, Max admitted as she reached for the dark brown bottle in front of her.
The moment her right hand closed around it her earlier concerns about how long she might have been spacing out seemed confirmed. The beer was too warm by far. It was also her first of the night and she had not even finished it. *That's fine, I guess, but it's a shame.*

“Yeah,” Chloe said, “we are, but if you're not up to it, we could wait for a bit and see if you feel like it in a few.” Max didn't answer her. As soon as Max realized where Chloe was going with her response, she lifted the bottle to her mouth and drained it. That, however, seemed to be answer enough for Rachel who got to her feet. Very lightly pressing a hand under Max's arm, her *sore* one, Rachel motioned for Max to join her and for what it was worth, she did, leaving the empty bottle behind in front of her. “Yeah, I think that's a good idea. Maybe some fresh air,” Chloe suggested.

“Totally,” Rachel agreed. Max allowed herself to be led from the table toward the back door but she did spot, just briefly, a look of disappointment in Brooke's eyes. She wasn't sure entirely what it meant, but suspected it related to the eagerness she had been displaying all week for this week's session. Pompidou, apparently sensing that Rachel and Max were walking arm and arm for the back door, shot out from beneath the kitchen table through the gap left behind by Max and Rachel abandoning their chairs. Steph began to speak but it was not directed at either of them so Max focused more on letting Pompidou shoot past them out into the backyard before either of them followed.

Once the door was shut behind them, Max braced herself. She *hoped* she was bracing herself for a bit of excessive (*or was it?*) concern and not any frustration. Instead, Rachel looked sideways at her, then back to the shepherd-pit mix who had already hurled himself down into the grass and begun to roll about as if he had not been outside in years, and laughed. She wasn't sure when she joined in, but by the time Max had lowered herself to the step between the house and the backyard, she was laughing too. Maybe it was just stress messing with her head, but she embraced it. Had it been any other moment, with any other mood, she would have already been laughing at the look of poorly disguised disappointment on Brooke's face as she had realized that the game was not starting yet, anyway.

Max knew why the girl with the red-streaked black hair was so eager. Brooke's character, the party's bard, was also the party's only real source of Charisma and they were going, in character, into a situation where high Charisma rolls were likely to be helpful if not downright required. If their characters wanted to avoid upsetting the guard of the isolationist city-state they were going to meet, Brooke's bard was their best chance. *I don't particularly fancy spending a session fighting my way back out of their land.* Quickly as she sat and stared at the grass in front of her, Max's attention strayed from the game back to other things. With an apparent confirmation that Jefferson had taken notice of Nathan, she thought they had to decide very soon what exactly to do. *Stella's still missing,* she reminded herself. Every second Stella was gone the situation felt a little bit more desperate.

Perhaps seeing that fresh air and quiet were not working, Rachel quietly prompted her several minutes later to come back inside as it was ‘getting a little cool out’. Max jumped at this, feeling guilty at the path of her thoughts. Given that there had never been any confirmation of Stella's presence in Bruss, a part of her was concerned as to whether Stella was actually alive or not. If
Stella was gone and there was a chance Nathan was behind it, it wasn't impossible he had fucked up the dosage of whatever he gave her and killed her. Wasn't that what happened to Rachel in the other timeline? Nathan was clearly unstable and definitely no good at chemistry.

“Okay,” Max told her Rachel, looking up into the girl's eyes. She felt a certain sense of desperation whose source she couldn't really place her finger on as the blonde reached down to help her up. She's taking care of me. They're taking care of me. I hate being useless. As soon as the back door shut behind her, Max rubbed her hands together. “Alright,” she declared, trying to put more life into her voice than even she found realistic. “Let's do this.”

When Max joined the table, Brooke was already rolling her D20 between her palms, absentmindedly, but she waved off Max's apology for spacing out. The rest of the table knew exactly what was on her mind and she could see the concern and confliction in each of their eyes. Max wasn't intent on being the reason they canceled the game, even if she was sure they would understand. From the pile of dice in front of her, she herself pulled out the bright blue D20 and set it aside. For some reason, as soon as her eyes had landed on it spilling from her dice bag, she had decided that she trusted it more than the other 20-sided-die she had.

She did not match eyes with most of the table but eventually Chloe begrudgingly began recounting the events of the last session. While she did so, Max lifted her head occasionally to indicate that she was listening, but had also taken to making notes on things she had forgotten on an old piece of scrap paper. Unfortunately, somewhere not long after Chloe started talking those notes changed from pieces of the last session she had forgotten to what they could do about Jefferson. One option that weighed on her mind was simply doing what Chloe suggested and doing whatever it took to get him fired. Victoria was really upset when I showed her that email with Jefferson's bullshit in it. Either way, Max felt lucky that she caught when Chloe's recap came to an end instead of simply sitting there lost in her thoughts, obviously not listening.

“When we left off you were about two hours’ through the cavern from the Stygian border and about four hours from the mushroom farm you were supposed to meet at. All you really know is that the Kobolds' captain of the guard will be waiting for you.”

“Yeah,” Rachel muttered, “along with how many others though.”

“Enough, probably,” Steph replied as Max took the table in properly for the first time in a while. Brooke's eager smile had returned to her face.

To Max's credit, she thought, she managed to stay fairly focused from that point onward. As the session opened, her character and Rachel's both managed to pass a couple of perception checks and catch on that they were being pursued through the tunnels. While the characters discussed what to do and ate their rations, Max subsisted off of her second beer and the occasional pretzel. It looked
like the majority of the night might be taken up by the trip and that idea became even more severe when Isp, Rachel's Fire Genasi, stumbled across a pair of young gnomic children while scouting a side tunnel. The NPCs seemed deliberately put there to slow the party down, Max thought, but did not reckon that her character would share that belief, ultimately. One of Andil's major personality aspects was his lack of belief in fate. Eventually, though, the night wore on long enough that Max's third beer demanded a bathroom break of her and it was during this bathroom break that Max landed on a potential cure for her issues focusing.

By that point, Max had returned to the kitchen and even let Pompidou back inside. The mutt couldn't quite decide who to go to for attention and more or less had his pick, so Max was not too disappointed when he ignored her in favor of Brooke. It made it easier for Max to sip at her fourth beer of the night and listen to the black haired girl as she went over her week at school. While Rachel and Chloe shared a smoke, Max and Steph listened and this was what brought Max to her decision. The overall theme of Brooke's week had been stress and worry and discomfort, ultimately culminating in having been eager for their weekly game.

“You know, I'm really sorry I slowed us down earlier,” Max told her. “Out of character, I mean. I've been pretty bad about not being able to concentrate tonight.”

“Don't worry about it. We're all worried about her,” Brooke promised Max. That's true. Stella's absence was affecting just about anyone who counted her as a friend and even a few people who were not. Brooke had especially taken an interest in Stella this school year. “I wish I understood what happened.” I could tell her what happened to me. I could make her understand that. Then I can tell her why I think it happened to Stella, too. Perhaps Steph saw the decision in Max's eyes as soon as Brooke voiced this desire and that was what caused the auburn haired artist's eyes to widen. Brooke, for her part, noticed the change in the air and looked between the two of them, her head turning from side to side rapidly. “Okay, what?”

“Um, one second,” Max promised her. With that, she rose back to her feet, leaving the beer behind. She measured herself for any sign of being lightheaded and thought, as she crossed the kitchen and reached the back door, that there might be some. Max didn't bother to step out into the cool March afternoon. Once the door was open, she simply leaned out to look first to her left and then to her right, where she spotted Rachel and Chloe, arms around each other. “Hey, guys, are you okay to come in and uh, extend break a few minutes?” Please say yes.

“What's going on?” Chloe queried as she slowly unwrapped herself from Rachel. The act and the way Rachel clung to her anyway being as difficult as possible about the two of them splitting apart almost made Max grin.

“I think I'm gonna let Brooke in on some things.” That was vague enough, but Max knew that she was very audible from the table. “Some things about me and Nathan.” At this, Rachel, who had had her back to Max this whole time, released Chloe, who pulled an exasperated face and lowered
her arms to her side. Rachel turned around pretty quickly once she was not holding onto Chloe, though. The thespian, grimacing, seemed to be looking her over for signs of distress. Either way, neither one argued and after a second of silence, there seemed to be understanding enough for Chloe to stomp her mostly finished cigarette into the mud.

As Max had expected, her every word rang out loud and clear for those at the table. Steph was a reminder that many people already knew about what she was about to tell Brooke. At least, part of it. That was why Max focused on the normally jovial artist giving her an encouraging smile as she sat down. *It's been a good night for Steph,* Max thought a bit inappropriately. *RNGesus has been kind to her.* Brooke on the other hand was now watching Max with her hands folded properly, almost primly in front of her and a no-nonsense, serious look on her face. Despite the fact that she knew Brooke, she couldn't help but develop a sudden concern about the girl's reaction. Something about Brooke's serious face made her think of another Max and another Brooke and the almost antagonistic relationship they had shared. *Different people, different lives.* Then, anew, came the concern of what would happen if what she was about to say got around to her parents.

Chloe and Rachel settled into their spots, though Rachel had to nudge her way in when Pompidou did not want to move from Steph's side. Max didn't fear what her parents might think of her if they found out what happened. What she was afraid of was that they wouldn't hold back if she begged them to. A few seconds ago she had been sure that explaining to Brooke a bit of what was actually happening at Blackwell was not only for the best but might actually help her think, help her mood improve. Now, with the idea of her mother and father finding out about one of the secrets she had been carrying for so long fresh in her head, she wasn't so sure. *I'm not about to lose Blackwell just because of Nathan fucking Prescott.*

The table was, rightfully, looking expectantly at her. When she opened her mouth to finally do as planned, though, nothing came out. In that moment she could not even fathom talking to say that she had changed her mind. Instinctively she decided to stall for time, reaching for the bottle nearest her with her left hand only to have the bottle immediately moved away from her by Rachel. Max looked askance at the blonde but was answered only by Rachel leaning forward to wrap one arm carefully around Max's right shoulder, not trying to hurt her left. This was both comfort and encouragement. It took several seconds of that hug for Max to realize that while she was having difficulty talking, she wasn't on the verge of any kind of breakdown. Still, there was a *reason* she had decided to talk to Brooke, one beyond just the fact that Brooke was concerned for Stella and might have an excuse to be even more concerned.

“Okay, this sounds shitty, but I thought I could and now I can't,” Max finally said. Rachel released her, but did not look disappointed in her. On the contrary, the girl simply gripped Max's left knee with her right hand and squeezed softly, a reassuring gesture. Chloe's response was simply to nod in acknowledgment. Max knew Steph would understand, too, but it was Brooke's reaction which she kept an eye on.

“Is it about Stella at all?” Brooke asked. *Sharp and to the point.*
“Me, Stella, others,” Max admitted. “I think I know what happened but I don't have any proof. I have no way to prove any of it, I don't even have a way to find out if I'm right and prove it to me. But there's more, stuff that I thought I'd gotten over but I guess I thought of it from a new angle and I can't really lose Blackwell right now.” The words came out quickly, but there was something about the girl on Steph's other side that made Max spill more than she intended to. Probably has to do with her eyes. Brooke did sometimes look at people as if she thought she could see right through them to some version of them inside.

“What do you mean lose Blackwell?”

“I don't think I could stay at the school if this got around.”

“And does it have anything to do with the rumors going around about Victoria and Nathan?” Max wasn't sure if it was her place to answer that. Instead she matched eyes with Brooke and indulged in that sense of being read. Max did not speak, did not nod or shake her head. *I didn't know the rumors were so widespread already.* Max also didn't know exactly what rumors they were, but there had been witnesses to her confronting Nathan as he tried to half-carry Victoria away from the school. With Blackwell being so small, there was a good chance Brooke had the measure of things. “You don't actually have to tell me anymore. I understand. It freaks me out about Stella a little more but I get it and I get why you wanted to tell me. Thank you.”

Within a few minutes, the session was set to continue. Max did her best to focus but she just did not really feel like speaking so she allowed the other three players to dominate the situation and mostly just acknowledged her own character's cooperation until such time as they made contact with the Stygian guards. Even then, she did her best to let Brooke handle negotiations. She also, surprisingly, did not feel guilty either that she had wanted to tell Brooke the truth or that she had failed to do so. Instead, Brooke's gratefulness at the revelation simply reinforced the idea in Max's head that telling Brooke was the right idea. She deserved to know what might have happened to her friend.
Chapter Fifty-Eight: Desmios

March 17th, 2012 9:30 AM

When Rachel's arms interlocked tightly across her chest, it was not in a display of petulance or even aggression. It was an attempt, however small, at self-comfort. Since she and her mom were making this trip alone, there was no Max, no Chloe holding her. They had left Arcadia Bay and the parking lot of Blackwell Academy behind several minutes ago and were taking the straightest path through Bruss to the interstate. Rachel did her best not to think of Stella as they passed through the town or the idea that the brunette might have been hiding out a block or two away from her and Rachel would have never known. She also did her best not to acknowledge the fact that she was sitting in the passenger seat of the car that used to belong to James for the first time in a surprisingly long time. Finally, she was trying to resist the urge to look at her phone and text Chloe, who she knew would not be able to answer while at work or Max, who was probably, if all went according to the photographer's plan, spending the day with Victoria Chase.

It was a bit laughable to consider the two of them hanging out together, not because they were wildly different people but because Victoria had been so standoffish toward Max and Chloe only a few months ago. I just hope she doesn't follow up on Chloe and Steph's idea that Victoria's got some sort of secret crush on me. Rachel was not a big fan of that theory. In some ways, though, considering what was going on in Arcadia Bay at that exact moment was of more comfort than simply crossing her arms. Even so, eventually even indulging in that comfort had to end. Slowly she turned her gaze from the window, the streets and buildings of Bruss passing by at thirty miles per hour and to her mom in the driver's seat. There was a lot of difficulty ahead of them that day, and Rachel understood that. She also knew that she had barely spoken since she got into the car and she would have to fix that posthaste if she did not want things to get awkward. Well, actually they're already awkward. Her mom did not immediately notice her looking, so Rachel turned her eyes to the road and tried to figure out how to start a conversation. How annoyed would mom get if I bring up talking with Sera today of all days?

For all of the respect her mom seemed to be giving Rachel's relationship with her mother, perhaps bringing her up that day of all days was a bad idea. Briefly she wished that maybe Sera could have been along for the ride, or maybe Max. Chloe had to work, but Rachel was kicking herself for not asking Max to come with her. I just don't think mom would've been alright with that. Fuck, this is crazy. I don't want to see this guy. If I could get lucky and never see him again, I'd throw a fucking party.
“So,” Rachel finally said as they passed through the center of Bruss and approached the edge of town. “Did you have breakfast?”

“Oh, yes,” her mom answered in that forced lilt that was supposed to mean that everything was fine. “I did build in a little time so that we could stop somewhere for lunch before we go in to see your father.” James, Rachel wanted to correct her. Before we go see James. Instead, Rachel bit the inside of her cheek with just enough pressure that she did not need to bite her tongue and did not stress what was already a tense situation out by speaking her mind. “Have you had breakfast, dear?” Rose turned eyes on her that Rachel wanted to find deep care in. She wanted desperately to read real, true love in. When Rachel looked, though, she could not find anything behind the mask of the prim concerned parent. Nothing.

“Oh, um, yeah. Most of the usual weekend breakfast table was there. Not everyone,” she glanced down at her hands in her lap. Actually, other than Stella being absent from the table, it was a fairly decent breakfast. The food had tasted better than usual, Jefferson had not been the teacher to draw the short straw and come in to help security watch the cafeteria and, to top it all off, Max had eaten breakfast for the first time in about four days. The girl's difficulty eating tended to fluctuate, worsening when she was feeling her lowest. Rachel tried to take it as a sign that Max was not feeling too bad that day.

“Yes.” Rose frowned as she spoke and turned her attention back to the road. Rachel watched the lines in her face as she frowned. It was like the motion did not reach past her mouth at all. “That terrible business about your friend, Stella. I'm very sorry you've had to deal with that.” The conversation was starting to stray into dangerous territory. She knew she had to get out of it fast, but not so fast that she aroused and suspicion. Fuck.

“I'm fine,” Rachel lied, “It's Stella that I'm worried about.” For not the first time, she wondered at exactly how her mom processed emotions. Once, near the end of her father's trial, Rachel thought she might have gotten a look beneath her mom's mask. Now she wasn't so sure. There was a part of her, especially on tough days like this one was sure to be, that wondered if her mom actually experienced emotions or if she simply mimicked them. There were people like that, she knew. Chloe had spoken in length about it, in that 'beat around the bush' way that people might when they didn't want to say anything. Rachel wasn't stupid, though: she knew Chloe had been floating the idea that her mom was one of those people past Rachel. Right now Rose was fairly stoic, her face had already returned to that 'stiff upper lip' pose. Rachel wasn't sure when she had uncrossed her arms but suddenly the urge to return them to their position struck her.

“The news report I saw suggested that the girl told her friend someone hurt her at a party,” her mom continued. In that moment the one thing that was clear to Rachel was that this discussion had always been slated to happen. She had just moved things along a little faster. It was obvious when Rose was prepared for a conversation: she spoke more formally, more forcefully. “There's no one dangerous at Blackwell, is there, dear?” Despite the fact that Rachel had entered into the
conversation in good faith and her mom apparently had not, she was immediately struck by guilt at
the idea of lying to the woman. It was with a completely serious mindset that Rachel settled on just
*half* lying to the woman.

“If there is, I certainly don't know anyone with enough proof to do anything about it.” Rachel
turned her attention to the floorboard, where her sneaker clad feet shifted uncouthly about. When
she glanced back, her mom was turning away from her and nodding.

“I must admit that there are some characters there I don't much care for.” A slight bit of excitement
came to life in Rachel. Was it possible that maybe, just maybe her mom had seen something
concerning in, say, a recent hire? Rachel could not entirely stop her hope from reaching her face.
She did, however, have it together enough to notice the strange sensation of numbness easing into
her fingers. Rachel tried to ignore it. “Honestly, I’ve always suspected that groundskeeper of some
unsavory practices.” Rachel sighed and rolled her eyes. *What an asshole.*

“Mom, Samuel is a harmless guy whose biggest secret is that sometimes he takes an early break in
the mornings to feed the squirrels on campus, and trust me, I’ve heard Wells chew him out for it.”
While that *was* mostly true, Samuel was more than that. He *knew things.* Most of the time, as
Chloe said, it tended to be the kind of thing that someone who was so bored by his work that he
observed everyone around them might see. Other times, not so much. Max, in fact, insisted that he
likely knew the full extent of her powers or, at least, as much as she did. *It's actually kind of
fucking weird we haven't followed up on that,* Rachel told herself, making a note of it.

“Still,” her mom insisted, waving a hand and then immediately putting it right back down on the
steering wheel. “He has always felt a little off to me.”

“You're off base on this one,” Rachel insisted. Her mom had a bad habit of judging people for
surface level things. In the same way that Rose used to (and Rachel privately suspected continued
to) judge Chloe's appearance and social status, she likely based her judgments on Samuel on his
gender, his appearance and his unusual speech patterns, none of which determined a damned thing
about a person's character, as far as Rachel was concerned. As of yet, she had not heard her mom
make any kind of offhand negative comment about Max but then, they did not talk too much about
her partners.

“Still, if there was something going on at Blackwell Academy, you would tell me. You would,
right?” Again, Rachel knew she was going to be forced to make trouble or lie to her mom and again
she chose not to do so blatantly.

“If I had any kind of proof of anything going on, I'd *have* to tell someone.”
“It's not about proof with these kinds of places.” Rachel wasn't sure she understood exactly what her mom meant by that but she did not know how to respond. “Things have a way of getting swept under the rug in institutions like this one.” Okay, stop sounding like Max and Chloe, please. There was plenty of truth to the statement but Rachel still didn't want to meet her mom's eyes when the woman turned back to her. Outside, the town had given way to a highway. They weren't far away from the interstate.

“Yeah, well, without proof, nothing can be done.” This had been the unfortunate refrain she and her girlfriends had sung time and time again since October. Without proof, there was nothing to be done but wait for proof.

“Maybe,” Rose muttered, though she sounded disgusted by the admission, “but, if something happens I still want to know.”

“Alright,” Rachel lied. “Right now, I just want my friend back.” With that, Rachel decided that if she wanted to keep it together for the rest of what was sure to be a very long day, she had better shift the subject away. Her mom would not understand the truth of things and wouldn't have been able to do anything about it even if Rachel told her, that much Rachel was sure of. Instead, Rachel talked about the kind of things that day-to-day life at Blackwell brought her. In the process, she spoke pretty openly about her relationships with Max and Chloe. Her mom had not really commented on all of that, though she had tried to go out of her way to get to know Max once or twice since Rachel let on. As they hit the interstate that afternoon, Rachel watched for a reaction to any talk about the relationship. For the most part, things were mostly peaceful, though she did notice a frown once or twice that she thought was intentional.

“I'm glad you get to spend your time with such close friends, Rachel.”

“They're my girlfriends, actually,” she corrected her mom. “You know, you don't really have to understand it, just accept it and that's enough for me.” This was not hostile, it was just her first chance in a long time to bluntly push the issue. “But yes, they are good to me. Very good. Every day. We take care of each other and even on the shittiest days, things are a little bit better.”

“You know,” Rose started, and then, with her voice low and almost mournful, she tried to explain herself. “I always hoped for a big wedding for you, one day.”

“Who knows?” Rachel told her, turning out to watch the thick traffic engulf them as they merged into the right lane of the interstate. “I'm still in school. I'm not thinking about weddings and stuff like that. The farthest ahead I'm thinking is college, and even that's rare.” Rachel had learned well from her mom. She knew exactly how to steer conversations, at least when it came to people who operated first and foremost based off of their own interests and desires. Rose seized the bait that Rachel had just cast out like a fish on a hook.
“I’m really glad to hear you're thinking about that,” her mom exclaimed in that overly enthusiastic lilt of hers. Rachel again considered mentioning her conversation about the topic with Sera. Instead, she sat quietly and listened to her mom talk about the benefits of agreeing to go to UCLA, something which she had privately done but never expressed to her mom before. She wasn’t entirely sure that she was going to do so, yet, with the presumptuous way that the woman was acting.

The prison before them looked imposing to her. Rachel stared out of the windshield, over a couple of stacked, styrofoam carryout containers and tried to take in the sight of various buildings on the grounds of the Oregon State Penitentiary. She knew from her mom's gesture as they pulled up what little glass door they were supposed to walk into. Still, she could not help but freeze in the seat, looking up at the building nearest them which had either been painted yellow or yellowed by the elements. Now that they were there, even the three or four bites of the burger she had managed to get down at the restaurant were threatening an unwelcome reappearance. In fact, she suspected that if she did not get herself under control she was not only going to be ill but possibly also cause some sort of unpleasant reaction with whatever one wanted to call these abilities she had.

“Rachel,” her mom prompted her as the woman unbuckled her seatbelt. Rachel slowly did the same. “I wanted to thank you for coming to see him this once.”

“This once,” Rachel emphasized as quickly and aggressively as she could. “If I decide this is the last time, then this is the last time.” It was important that they get this discussion out of the way, especially given that Rachel thought that they already had. She paused with her right hand on the handle of the door. There was no way in hell she was getting out of that car without her mom agreeing. The idea of seeing James again made her ill. The thought that her mom believed this might be the start of a series of visits was upsetting.

“I’m just glad you're giving your father another chance.” At this, Rachel let go of the handle and turned toward Rose who was already halfway out of the driver's seat of the car when she saw this. It was important that her mom understand what was actually going on there. This was no golden hallmark moment. There would not be a heartwarming family comedy written about this in a few years and they would not be sitting around a Christmas tree one day laughing about the visit after James got out of prison, assuming he did get out before his time came up.

“I'm not giving him another chance, mom.” Rose frowned and then pursed her lips as if to say that this conversation was not welcome. “I'm here to make you happy, this once. I am here to see if he has any genuine regret for what he did so that I know whether or not there is part of a monster in me.” The pursed lips smoothed out, the frown did not return. In fact, Rose watched her from behind a blank face. “I'll be on my best behavior, but there is no scenario where the guy who tried to kill my mother gets back what he had.” After a moment or two more, Rachel turned away from the woman and opened the door to the car. Her mom looked upset when she finally stepped out after Rachel. It was too late to prevent that.
“I see,” Rose finally said and then turned to lead them toward the entrance she had pointed out a moment before with its tinted glass door. She doesn’t get it, Rachel told herself. Is she delusional? The two of them joined a small line of other people, smaller than Rachel had expected at least. One after another a group of about ten people, one of them a child no older than ten or eleven, were lined up near a door and eventually processed by being asked to sign in and walk through a metal detector. When they got to the turning out of pockets, Rachel quietly thanked her stars she had predicted that and had not only left her phone in the car but also not brought anything that might get her into shit with her mom along on the trip. She wanted a smoke, though. I should have just toked up before mom even showed up this morning. The ride might have gone different if she had been coming down from a high.

Eventually, Rose, Rachel and the other people, many of whom Rachel had not gotten a good look at, were led through a long hallway and into a room deeper inside the building with several old tables laid out across the floor. The chairs at each of these looked to be fairly old and worn so Rachel eased herself into hers when the guard gestured for them to take an empty table and await their inmate. It was during this time, as the first prisoners first started to file into the room that Rachel, in lieu of looking at her mom, began to examine those around her. Many of the older men wore cheap looking tattoos that looked like they might have been done in prison, themselves. Rachel was not the most connected to things of the sort but even she was educated enough to recognize a couple of the tattoos, like the number 1488 inked into one pale, bald man's exposed arm or the teardrop beneath an eye on smaller, more stone faced man. It wasn't the ink that made her look away from them toward the door. Tattoos were fine with her, after all she had her dragon which she often enjoyed feeling Chloe trace with her finger when they sat comfortably together. It was the meaning of the tattoos around her, signifying alignments with less than savory forces or long prison sentences or even, in one case, attempted murder.

Eventually, the calm before the storm passed and Rachel watched as one jumpsuited man stepped aside to reveal James Amber behind him. At this, Rachel looked at her mom for the first time since they were led from the processing area. The woman only sighed and fixed onto her face a look of a devoted and dutiful wife. It took the man who had fathered her several seconds to spot the two of them, during which Rachel had plenty of time to observe the hunch in how he stood, the slow weariness in how he walked. It did not make her feel any pity for him, but it did make her immediately more uncomfortable than she had been in a way she could not really name. The guards, who were allowing handshakes, hugs and even kisses before the inmates sat down, barely even reacted as her mom rose to her feet. Rachel simply paid close attention.

When James saw them finally, his dark eyes lit up slightly, he looked relieved, excited. Proceeding perhaps a bit more quickly than the uniformed lady behind him looked comfortable with, James crossed the room and embraced her mom. The hug lasted long enough for the nearest guard to grunt as if to warn him to move on and certainly long enough that Rachel looked away from them and only looked again when James released Rose. It was when he made as if to reach down and hug her that Rachel scooted from her seat to the one her mom had just vacated farther away from him. The hurt on his face was palpable but his reaction was simply to greet her by name and slowly lower himself into a chair on the opposite side of the table, as if sitting down too quickly was dangerous. Not sleeping too well in The Can, there, old man?
For the next several minutes, she watched in silence as James spoke to her mom, asking her about how things were going with work. Rose, in turn, told him about how things had calmed down and she had been accepted as a higher up in the accounting department, how all was well and she was looking at a potential raise in a few months. Rachel wondered at this, not for the first time, how well finances were really going for the family, especially given the plan which had begun to develop in her mind for a way she might manage to treat herself, Max and Chloe. Generally, Rachel tried not to spend much money, anymore. Once in a while she might buy the cheapest things on a fast food menu, but otherwise she didn't touch the card her mom had given her for 'expenses.' Rose had commented on that a couple of times during their drive down. Rachel didn't know how to express that she was concerned about spending anything, usually. She also hadn't had a clue how to bring up her request about Spring Break. Maybe if things did not go disastrously, she would on the way home. As the conversation continued, Rachel found herself wondering what she was doing there, precisely. She did not care much for family conversations, not ones that included James. As such, she did not know what to do when he finally turned his eyes on her and spoke to her again.

“How are you, Rachel?” the man asked her, his voice low, caring, soothing. She did not know how to respond. What would manners dictate and how many fucks did she have to give about manners? It took Rachel longer than she expected to come up with a number for those fucks, but it was a nice round number, rather like a circle.

“I'm doing fine, my girlfriends and I got to spend a couple of hours with Sera last weekend.” The energy at the table immediately shifted and this fact was marked by her mom clicking her tongue scornfully. “I can't imagine life not being able to talk to Sera, you know?” she continued, trying to keep her voice level and conversational even though she was already starting to regret how warm she felt beneath the leather jacket over her shoulders. “It'd be horrible if something were to happen to her.” Instead of responding or exposing the full brunt of his reaction to Rachel, the man lowered his head and frowned at the table. Not fair, she wanted to tell him. That's not fair at all.

“What do you want from me?”

“I want my daughter back,” James told her. He lifted his head and stared at her from earnest, expressive eyes. For a moment, looking into James' face, she saw something she had condemned Joyce for some time ago. It was the quiet hope that someone's emotions would move the person they were talking to. It was emotional manipulation and James Amber dared to try it on her. He wanted his daughter back? What a fucking joke.

“Then you probably shouldn't have tried to kill my mother and turn my mom against me.” That, then and there, was when Rachel first heard herself call Sera her mother. Her head whipped around as soon as the sentence left her mouth, looking for Rose Amber, looking for her mom. There was no keeping her eyes from widening, no keeping the surprise, the concern off of her own face. When Rose looked back at Rachel, it was as if the woman was evaluating how she was supposed to react to what Rachel had just said and then, surprisingly, nodded. Rachel did not think it was in approval of her attitude or even what she had just said, so much as acknowledging and accepting the fact that she had just called Rose her 'mom' and Sera her 'mother.' Technically speaking, it was true. Sera was her mother in the way James was her father: mechanics. More importantly, though,
Sera was a confidant. The pale man, looking as if he had been nearly strangled as he stared back down at the table, was nothing to her except a reminder of what might be wrong with her. She stared at a small spot on his head where his hair was thinning to a very notable degree. This, along with other changes in him disturbed her, but she remained otherwise unmoved.

“And what do you want from me, Rachel?” he asked her in return. The thing was that she had come prepared with what questions she wanted answered from him. They were half of the reason she had finally relented to her mom's pressure to visit him instead of digging a trench and preparing for good, old fashioned warfare. Frankly, asking her such a direct question had been something of a misstep on his part and Rachel was not above taking full advantage of that. Frankly, it had been a long time since she had been able to talk to the man. There was only one thing she wanted to ask that could give her any peace of mind.

“I want to know if you're sorry.” In response, James looked up and gestured around him, at his jumpsuit, at the room around them, at everything. “No,” Rachel said and then she laughed, once, loudly. “No, not that you're in prison but that you tried to have someone killed, that you tried to have the women who gave birth to me killed.” Again, James looked her in the eyes and again she saw the attempt to garner pity, but she saw something else forming behind that. Tired, not stony at all, his eyes betrayed him to Rachel, who had learned long ago that the best way to learn anything about her mom or James was to try to read their eyes. It was not the familiar gaze of the man who used to comfort her after nightmares that she saw, but the answer. Her father was a practiced liar, but she could see right through him. “Tell me the truth,” she counseled the man. “I've been able to read you since I was eight. It'll be less embarrassing this way.”

“That's alright,” she told him, softly. This tricked him into lifting his head enough that she could again stare into James' eyes as she finished her thought. “I don't regret gathering all of the evidence up and dropping it off for the police chief to find, either.” While this earned a grand total of no response, no reaction from her mom, James' face split into a perfect artistic depiction of betrayal and hurt. It was everything she could do not to smile. She did consider him a monster. Maybe not the same flavor as Jefferson or Nathan, but a monster nonetheless. His genetics were in her. She hated that. Her reaffirmed hatred for him, for his very DNA in her body robbed her of anything else to say.

_He can't recognize his mistake. He can't own up to what he did._ She thought that that might look bad at his first parole hearing, but who knew? _Maybe he'll just bribe someone._ Rachel had always suspected that he had money hidden away somewhere, at least since she realized he could move several thousand dollars without her mom noticing in order to pay a hitman. Rachel let her mom
talk to James for the rest of the trip and quietly wondered to herself if she would have felt better if she had had Max waiting for her outside, or Chloe, or both. Eventually her thoughts came around to Sera and how she might react to being called her 'mother'. *I'm going to go ask her her permission.* It was only respectful and it might help her understand her own thoughts, too.

When they parted, James said nothing to her and she said nothing to him. Scared as she was of how Rose was going to act toward her, she still kept her distance from him until he left and then turned out her pockets in silence when she came out of the room and passed through the metal detector. She left the building a step or two ahead of Rose as the woman retrieved and shouldered her purse. Once outside in the late March day, she breathed easier. Glancing back at Rose revealed frowning, but no anger. In silence they got into the car together and buckled up. Though she felt gross, even still a little ill, the first thing she did when the silence did not break as the car started was to reach for her carryout container, pop it open and start on the burger inside.

“*That did not go as I had hoped,*” her mom started as the car cleared the parking lot a minute or so later. Even once her mouth was free of burger or fry, Rachel did not laugh even bitterly.

“I'm sorry to hear that,” she lied. “*It went like I expected, mostly.*”

“*Me as well.*” Rose told her, quietly, regretfully. “*I always knew you were behind your father's arrest.*” at this, Rachel put her burger down in the container and listened quietly. She did not know what might have tipped Rose off on that front, but her mom did not seem interested in sharing with the class.

“How do you feel about that?” If she told someone she was unafraid of the answer, it would be a lie. Mostly what she was afraid of was hearing a lie and yet at the same time she desperately wanted to be able to tell when her mom was lying.

“I feel sad. I feel sad that he put you in that position and that we'll never be the family we used to be.” She said the words, but Rachel heard grief that did not sound as if it had any more depth than someone who had lost a favored bauble.

“At least I still have one parent,” Rachel said.

“*Or is it two?*” Rose asked. “*Either will, you will always have me.*” Rachel wondered again if her mom would ever really come to understand her own emotions, because in this case she seemed fairly self aware, at least. “I don't mind it, in case you're worried, that you call her that.”
“This was the first time,” Rachel told her, feeling as if she needed to make some excuse for herself, for her ‘slip up.’ “I didn't realize-”

“It's not the first time,” the woman cut across her. “You've done it before, several times. You just haven't noticed.” There was no reason to lie, so Rachel took this as fact, internalized it and filed it away to be understood later, likely before she brought the concept up with Sera.

“I do love you, you know. I worry about you. I wish you would talk to a counselor- and don't ask why. You know why.” Rachel did not want to have to say it, did not want to give voice to her concerns that maybe her mom was a sociopath or perhaps she just could not process emotion well enough.

“I love you too, and I worry about you. It makes me say and do things that upset you, but I’m afraid that's just the way it's going to be, sometimes.” Rachel's response was to nod and then, with her left hand, reach for her cell phone.

Max

Stella's back. Wells and David basically interrogated her, Kate says. She doesn't want to see anyone but Kate right now. We're meeting up around six in Kate's room. Kate won't tell me anything. R u ok?

Me

I'm relieved it's over

Max

The visit or Stella?

Me

The visit. Glad Stella's home but do not think that's over.

Max

Maybe not. Call me when you get close, okay?
Me

Okay XOXO

Max

I'm giving you my bad habits.

“My friend showed up at Blackwell while we were inside,” Rachel told revealed, sighing. She hunched forward over the styrofoam container in her lap and closed her eyes. Her phone balanced on the seat beside her, forgotten for the moment.

“That's a relief,” Rose noted. “It has been a few days, hasn't it?”

“About a week,” Rachel answered. “And it's felt like three.” Rachel was going to talk to Stella later tonight one way or another, but first was a somewhat lengthy trip home. To make it all the worse or perhaps all the better, Rachel realized she still had to ask her mom for help to pull off the spring break she wanted. *Probably better do that after things calm down a bit.* Rachel returned to the remnants of her lunch and focused on that. She had a couple more hours for the rest.
Her arms ached a little more than she cared to admit when Chloe settled back into her truck. She reached sideways and shut the driver's side door, flipped the visor down so that the sun's rays were blocked from her eyes and then closed them for a second. It was a nice, comfortable feeling. Outside of her windshield, the squat, faded brown brick building that was brake shop was closed, the lights were dimming and the last of one or two other employees were beginning to make for their cars. Chloe did not open her eyes to look at any of it. She couldn't particularly allow herself to say, get too relaxed and sleep, but Chloe soaked up a good thirty seconds of sitting down and then started the truck. While it shuddered to life she fumbled in her pocket for her silenced phone and tried to calm her growling stomach. The phone showed her no messages from Rachel, but several from Max and Steph. Given that Rachel had gone on a trip to see James Amber for the first time since his trial, this struck Chloe as concerning enough that before she took off she had to read her messages.

*Steph*

*Chloe – we're gonna need to meet up with Max & Rachel*

*I think about six*

*Plz come pick me up on your way to school.*

*Me*

*Just got out of work, on my way to the house.*
With that, she opened her messages from Max, more than a little confused. It wasn't odd for them all to be hanging out on a Saturday night when there was no party. The issue was that as far as Chloe knew, Max and Rachel were supposed to come meet her and Steph at their house instead of the other way around. If plans had changed, she only hoped it was not a sign of some new kind of disaster. Honestly, they needed a break from disasters. At least, Chloe sure did. *I also need about a three hour bath, a twelve hour nap and to be shot in the face,* Chloe thought as she rolled her sore left shoulder.

**Max**

*Stella's back. No word on what happened yet. Doesn't want to see people until about six.*

*Rachel made it home okay. I hope work wasn't too bad. Let me know if everything's alright when you can.*

**Me**

*Love you. OMW home. Will meet you.*

Having figured that she had just enough time for a shower if she really stepped on it, Chloe had made it back to the house in the kind of record time that probably should have costed her in the form of a speeding ticket. Now, as she stumbled back downstairs still toweling her hair, Steph waited patiently at the kitchen table, shoes and beanie on as if ready to go. When Chloe had ducked back into her room after the shower, Pompidou was no longer asleep on a large pillow beside her bed, so she was unsurprised when she looked past Steph and saw the dog lounging in the backyard.

“You all ready?” Steph asked her, though the answer seemed pretty self-evident to Chloe. The eagerness in the girl's voice was understandable, as was the slight impatience on her face. Stella's return was a relief for the both of them. The growing concern that maybe she had not run away from school at all, but simply been killed by Nathan had started to affect them all. Chloe in particular had tried not to give the theory much credence or much time bouncing around her mind but these things had been harder to do the longer the girl's absence went on.

“Yeah, just let me throw on some shoes.” She was not about to wear her boots today. Her legs might not have hurt as her arms did (though the warmth of the shower had done them some good) but they still felt heavy and her feet ached from standing on cement all day. “So have you heard anything about Stella?” It was pretty clear from the shift in Steph's mood at the question that she had not.

“No, but there *is* something I need to talk to you about.” You know, *I hate it when people do that.* Instead of saying 'we need to talk' why don't people just say what they need to say? Chloe folded her towel over the back of the nearest kitchen chair and, running her hands through her hair,
gestured for Steph to go on. She hated the way her stomach twisted when she heard the phrase 'there is something I need to talk to you about'. Steph rose to her feet and Chloe followed her toward the front door, which allowed her to get her shoes on while Steph spoke. “So, it turns out dad wants to move me away from Arcadia Bay.” Oh, fuck.

“Oh, um, where to?”

“Out to LA with him. He does most of his work there, so he spends most of his time there.” Chloe tried desperately to keep her face calm and impassive. She did not want to let on that the second the idea of Steph moving away had come up, her raging appetite had vanished. Not only was she not a particularly large fan of losing friends in that way, there was an added aspect to this situation: she would find herself without a home when Steph left.

“How are you feeling about that?” At this point, shoes in place, Chloe led them from the house and up to the truck. She honestly found it a little hard to focus on anything more mechanically taxing than walking so she did not look back at Steph to try to read her face. It was enough work to simply open the truck door and slide into the driver's seat. Steph, for her part, chose not to match her blue eyes to Chloe's for whatever reasons of her own.

“It's a cool opportunity, considering I want to draw and animate for a living, plus maybe I could find a way to work for the same company while I'm in school, but- I'm not sure I'm ready to leave Arcadia Bay, yet.” Even put off by the idea of losing Steph, Chloe felt incredulous at this. When offered a choice between Arcadia Bay and Los Angeles, California, what could possibly be keeping Steph there? I don't know if I should look a gift horse in the mouth but I don't know if I should let my friend give up an opportunity like that? “I've made a deal with him. I'm going to stay here until graduation and then I'll move out with him. The thing is-” at this point, Steph's voice lowered and Chloe realized that she had not yet started the truck, despite the fact that they were both sitting there strapped in and time was winding down until they were supposed to meet Rachel and Max to go and talk to Stella. Actually, this is kind of a lot of people to go talk to her at once. “The thing is, when that happens the house is going up for sale.”

“I get it,” Chloe told her, trying to sound as reassuring as she could without letting onto her relief that Steph was not leaving her then and there, not during one of the shittiest times she could remember in recent history. The truck protested her interrupting its rest as the engine began its labor once more. “I'm really glad you told me, but I'm also happy you're going to stay and graduate with the rest of us.” At this, Steph seemed to preen slightly so Chloe figured that the serious portion of the discussion had come to an end. She put the truck into reverse.

“Face it, you'd all be lost without me. I am the guiding force of badass in your lives.” At that point, looking relieved herself, Steph turned on the radio and the two of them simply jammed out in relative silence the rest of the way to the school. Even when they spoke, they did not talk about any of the elephants in the room: Chloe finding a place to live after graduation, Stella, where Pompidou
would go when Steph moved or, of course, the fact that the campus they were on their way to was being haunted by a pair of sexual predators. Jesus, Stella. What does it mean if Nathan's involved? It's not like he's going to be gone just because she's back. Meanwhile, there was Rachel to consider and the day she must have had. Look, they're both back, so you can talk to them both. Just calm down and focus on the road. She did.

At no point during the ride did Chloe notice Steph particularly texting the girls ahead of time to warn them of their arrival, but the familiar forms of Rachel Amber and Max Caulfield were sitting on the bottom step down to the parking lot from campus when Chloe turned into the school. She was surprisingly relieved at the sight and, after pulling into a parking space and seeing Steph's cheeky grin, she was certain that she had simply not been paying close enough attention to her friend. On the plus side, Rachel looks fine, Chloe told herself as she stepped around the back of the truck and approached the girls, who rose to their feet.

“Steph,” Chloe said, drawing the girl's attention as she followed Chloe over to the steps.

“Yeah?”

“Sorry for getting sappy.”

“What?” It was alright that Steph was momentarily confused, because a couple of quiet seconds later, Chloe greeted first Rachel and then Max with very tight, very long hugs and very little else until she was absolutely satisfied. While it was getting close to six, Chloe did not care. There was a sigh of relief to be breathed now that Rachel and Stella were both back where they belonged. “God, you're such a softie, Chloe Price.”

“I warned you,” was Chloe's defense, before she released Max, who dodged her attempt to ruffle the girl's hair and turned back to Rachel. “Are you okay after today?” In answer, Rachel made a gesture with her hands so vague that the only words Chloe could find to describe it were 'flailing listlessly.'

“I'll fill you in later?” Rachel offered. Chloe searched her eyes for any sign of extreme emotional stress. Instead, the thespian simply looked determined. “Today was kind of a lot, but also at the same time kind of almost nothing.” Beside them, Max and Steph shared a loud high five.

“Alright, Stella wants to talk and I wanna know what's going on, here,” with this, Max turned back toward the stairs. Chloe understood, though she also could have done with a couple more minutes just with Rachel, Max and Steph. Still, it took very little time for them to reach the dormitories and by the time that Max was unlocking the front door to the building to let them all in, Chloe honestly
was as ready for answers as any of them, even if she did not think it would be as easy as all of that. Stella was shy enough under normal conditions and these were not normal conditions. *At least we didn't run into David skulking around like a big cat.* Every time she thought *that* guy was changing he just reverted back to the same old shit. The good news was that he could not touch her or the people she cared about ever again.

“Chloe, are *you* okay?” As they ascended the stairs, Rachel lightly bumped Chloe's shoulder, the affectionate gesture that the three of them seemed to find so universal. It was enough to pull Chloe from her reverie and draw her eyes to the blonde beside her.

“Tired, hungry, but I'll live.” She couldn't help it, despite the seriousness of the situation, Chloe smiled at Rachel and in return was rewarded with a smile of her own. A few steps ahead of them, Steph and Max did not see precisely what was happening and could not give them any shit about being 'nauseatingly cute,' so Chloe bumped the girl back. They did this back and forth until they reached the top of the stairs and Chloe felt significantly less tense by the time that the door to the girls' dormitory was unlocked and opened before them. That was probably for the best, too, because the moment that Kate opened the door and gave Max's joking query as to whether they would all fit into her room a sympathy chuckle, things changed.

Chloe couldn't recall ever having come into Kate's room before, at least not since it became Kate's room instead of Max's. She actually very much liked it. She was given to understand that the rooms were painted somewhat at random, but somehow the dark burgundy of the room which had been Max's last year fit her very well. There was something prim and proper about it which fit the girl and the way she had her room organized. Kate had put down a dark rug and there were a few posters along the walls that seemed to be for shows she enjoyed, as well as one that displayed the Lord's Prayer but beyond that the only thing about the room that stood out in that moment was the girl with the long, thin brown ponytail sitting on a chair in one corner of it. Chloe offered Stella a smile and took a moment to examine her. For Stella's part, she tried to return it, but could not quite manage it.

Her glasses had clearly been taped together and she was wearing clothing that was more suggestive of prepping to go to bed than anything else but all told, Stella looked very much herself, if tired. The whole dodging of eye contact and lack of verbal response was far from unusual for the girl, in fact if she had been super outgoing upon returning to the school Chloe would have been more worried for her. The most positive thing that Chloe saw about Stella as she and Steph settled down into a sitting position on the edge of Kate's bed beside her, was that when Max approached the girl and greeted her, Stella reached up and insistently grabbed Max in a hug that seemed tight, though not crushing. Without meaning to, Chloe cut through the silence and tension in the room by sighing as the weight shifted from her sore feet, and leaned back on the bed. It felt good.

For once, Chloe was not part of the tension, either. Though she was no less eager to learn what Stella had been through or, at least, where she had been than any of the others, she was not intent on pushing the girl. No one seemed to want to push the envelope, in fact, but Chloe saw the desire for answers in their eyes. Given that Stella had still not spoken by the time that she released Max
who joined Rachel on the floor near her, Chloe did not think answers would be immediately forthcoming. The truth was that her own worry was split between Stella and Rachel at the moment. Thankfully, Max was thinking tactfully. As the photographer reached around to rest her left hand on Rachel's opposite hip, Max spoke very softly, asking a question which either Kate or Stella could answer.

“Has Brooke been by yet?” Max queried. “I know she was eager to see you, Stella.” For a moment it looked as if Stella was going to speak and then, her mouth hanging half open, she simply nodded. “Brooke was here earlier but had to go into town before it got too late.” After that Max directed conversation away from Stella, which was probably for the best. No one liked to feel like a large group of people was sitting around expecting something from them. Chloe sure didn't. Instead they talked about classes, about things they had been doing for fun (this part of the conversation was quiet and short) and what they had in mind to do the next day. Generally, they tried to create a friendly environment and relax. As often Max's ideas did, eventually this plan worked.

“So, um,” Stella's interruption came in the middle of a discussion about whether Max should risk sneaking off for a midnight run to Up All Nite Donuts in town that night. The conversation fell silent in the room, which Stella openly acknowledged with a grimace on her face, but five sets of eyes turning on her at once did not quiet Stella down. Chloe wasn't entirely sure what she expected the girl to say, but it probably had not been what did come out of her mouth. “Are the rumors true about Nathan?” Stella asked, turning to look Max in the eyes. “That he tried to hurt Victoria, that he hurt you?” While Chloe felt cold the moment the girl asked, Max looked, if anything, more upset. The rumors include her now. Chloe had figured it was only a matter of time: there were plenty of people who heard about Victoria from Courtney and there had to be even more who witnessed the showdown or saw Max chase Nathan and Victoria from the gym.

“I can only say that he hurt me,” Max finally answered. She had not been able to admit that to Brooke in as many words less than a full day before. “The rest - it's um, not my place?” Chloe waited to see how Stella would react to this, if she would look frustrated or conflicted or even concerned. Instead the brunette folded one leg over another and her hands in her lap and, without looking away from Max who was still visibly perturbed, admitted much the same.

“I think he hurt me,” she confessed and slowly her hands shifted from a neat, folded position to twisting around one another. “At one point, he started talking to me... and I guess I kind of froze. I didn't know what to do so I just sat there with my drink and-”

“And then started to feel tired and confused,” Max predicted. Stella nodded. “I'm so sorry.” Instead of reacting to this, the girl with the broken glasses continued to wring her hands.

“I remember leaving the party. I remember a room, dark, big tall lamp in the corner and a big
padded chair. I remember a voice, and sometimes I don't think it was Nathan's, but the thing is, I think I remember Nathan touching me.” Chloe closed her eyes. Stella didn't have to tell the rest of the story, it made sense without that. After that she must have woke up in her room, struggled through a day and when she decided it wasn't safe at Blackwell because who would want to sleep in the same building as someone who did that to you, she left. God, Stella.

“I'm so sorry,” Max repeated, but this time she swallowed and continued speaking. “But I'm so glad you're home.”

“I don't have a home.” As devastated as she sounded, Stella kept it together even after Kate slid from her perch at the end of the bed beside Chloe and Steph and knelt down in front of her. The rest of the room remained silent while the two of them prayed, or maybe Kate prayed for the both of them. Stella often opened her eyes during the prayer, looking around the room as if she could not quite be sure she was really still there. It was, all told, devastating. While Kate spoke to her God about strength, hope, justice, Stella grasped the girl's folded hands in both of hers as if they were the divine lifeline. Maybe, considering how close the girls were, that was exactly what was happening. Either way, the others stayed respectfully quiet until such time as Kate rose back to her feet, grabbed either of Stella's hands in her own and then released the brunette all together.

“Stella, if you want to talk at any point, we can go somewhere and just sit down and talk,” Max promised after several seconds.

“I'm not sure I can right now, not more than I have.” At this, Stella, who had looked as tired as Chloe felt from the moment they had walked in, got up. It seemed she had gotten her answer and now her own energy reserve were running low. It's probably been a hell of a week for her, Chloe thought, before realizing that they had not learned a thing about Stella Hill's Week Off. The general understanding that their conversation was coming to an end passed around the room and Chloe prepared herself to stand up and leave, again, though her feet protested the idea.

“You can, though, come to me to talk any time. About any of it.” At this, Max released Rachel and rose to her feet. For her part, Max understood the concept of boundaries when upset, so she did not attempt to reach out for Stella, but she made sure that the taller brunette looked her in the eyes first.

“You understand?” At that, Stella nodded.

“I was just... scared and that's why I ran.”

“I'm scared, too,” Max promised her. It was probably the truest thing Max could've told her fellow photography student. No one rushed to evacuate the room. The rest of their visit was dictated by Stella and how she felt and that was alright. Still, Chloe would have been lying to say she was glad to be back on her feet already when they walked out of the room and found that less than an hour had passed. The confirmation that Nathan had hurt Stella that night, the night that he had tricked
them all into believing he had passed out in the gymnasium, had had the effect of lighting a new fire in the three of them as they descended the stairs to leave the dormitories. Steph did not look particularly comfortable as they paused at the bottom of the stairs and she looked toward the door to the boy’s dormitory. Chloe did not blame her.

“We have to watch him better,” Chloe said quietly as they stood there. Stella was, all told, her fault. She had been the one to believe that Nathan was unconscious. She had been the one to tell her girls that it was safe to go dance, to leave the room, to have fun while the bastard was on the hunt. Everything Stella went through fell partially on her shoulders. “We have to watch him closer. If he tries that shit again, I won’t fall for it this time.” You should have apologized to her, she told herself, swallowing at whatever was forming in her throat. Instead, when no one had spoken even several seconds after they emerged from the building, Chloe tried to distract them and herself. “So, how about that uh, D&D huh?” Someone behind her, and she was not sure who exactly, chuckled sympathetically. It was probably Max.

Some time later, Chloe came to on the familiar, soft pillows of the living room couch. She was aware immediately after opening her eyes to take in the room that something was off. The room was dark, the sky visibly through one the window above the television strangely wine-colored and there was no sign of Max, Rachel or Steph. The explanation took a little longer to come to her than it had been, but eventually as Chloe sat up and rubbed at her eyes she realized that she was not awake at all. Without having to test the world around her for the confining edges of a dream, Chloe was fairly certain.

Oh cool, is this one of those dreams where everyone leaves me and I end up whining like a bitch? Well, fuck that. With the knowledge that she was dreaming fresh in her mind, Chloe decided that she wasn’t going to be going through with any sort of unpleasant experience. Chances were that in the real world her girls and her best friend were sitting around, chuckling every time they looked at her slumped over. Hell, she was probably even drooling and doomed to hear all about it. The quiet of the house was punctured by a voice, which was just about all that stopped Chloe from ending the dream then and there, from sending her self out of the dream and into the fog-grey void or, better yet, consciousness. The voice belonged to Steph and it was not a happy one.

“Chloe?” The sky outside darkened and when Chloe turned to look out of the window, the window was gone, the television was gone and instead of sitting on the couch, she was standing beside the back door, staring out at the dark, wine-red day. The sky was reminiscent of the burgundy of Kate’s walls, and clouds of slightly paler red swirled dangerously in it. “Chloe?” At this, Chloe jumped because the voice sounded from mere inches away from her. Steph had her hair uncharacteristically pulled back, not restrained by a beanie or hanging loose around her head. It had been getting longer than usual as of late, but it was not quite as long as it seemed to be here in this dream. Judging by the way the girl looked clean through her, there was something else at work that was not as it seemed: this was not one of Chloe’s dreams at all. “Max? Rachel?” Steph stumbled away from her, blue eyes scanning every inch of the rapidly darkening house.

It wasn’t just light that was off within the building, either: the walls were changing color until they,
too, were almost the shade of the sky outside. *Oh shit, Steph.* As Chloe stood, conflicted, Steph crossed out of the room and the room fell away until Chloe was in the hall, watching Steph yell for Pompidou up the stairs, clearly hoping to hear him leap from Chloe's bed and come racing down to her. As disturbing as the dreams of being lost and alone could be when she did not catch them early on and put an end to them, this was more heartbreaking. The idea of leaving Arcadia Bay behind had apparently been far more upsetting to Steph than she had let on. By the time Steph had released one last, almost hopeless, monotonous call for Chloe, Max or Rachel, Chloe knew that she needed to put an end to the dream. Chloe stuck around long enough to make sure the pressure she exerted on the edges of the dream, this invisible, indefinable border which she could feel but not see, was enough to break the dream down. When signs of its instability (the walls shifting, moving, rooms starting to fade away into nothingness,) became impossible to ignore, Chloe pushed her way to the waking world.

“I'm going to try to do something special for the three of us during Spring Break, so you should probably call your folks and see if you can convince them to let you stay. I know we kept you to ourselves for Thanksgiving but—” Chloe woke to this and the sound of the immediate sigh from Max. It was not dismissive, it sounded like relief. “Oh,” Rachel murmured as Chloe opened her eyes. “Someone likes that idea.” When she shifted her head first to her right, Steph was still slumped sideways in her chair asleep. To her left, though, Rachel and Max had drawn close enough to one another that there was no question they were sharing a physical moment. Still a bit dazed, Chloe simply leaned back in her seat and shifted position as the girls shared first one kiss and then another.

“And is this 'something special' going to be embarrassingly excessive?” Chloe asked, earning a surprised hitch of breath from Max who pulled up, short of a third kiss and turned back to her. Chloe didn't comment on wide pupils, flushed faces or the fact that Max somehow looked like she'd gotten caught with her hand in a cookie jar. Rachel, however, had shifted her gaze from Chloe back to Max and was now grinning at the unaware girl as if she had done something cute. Max, in fact, didn't seem to realize that Rachel was paying her any attention until the blonde began to toy with Max's locks.

“I dunno,” Rachel said, batting Max's hand away when she tried to keep Rachel from her fun. “We've kind of just had a really shitty year, so I want us to have some kind of a good time. If we want to do something really ridiculous like take a holiday together and I can make it happen, I'm gonna.” It was hard to argue with Rachel under most circumstances, but somehow the thought of a vacation away from Arcadia Bay, one during which she, Max and Rachel could just be together without any pressures from Nathan Prescott or Mark Jefferson was way too much to raise even a single complaint against. She would do what Rachel said, because typically that was what one did if they were smart.

“Okay,” Max agreed, though she continued for a second or two more to try to stop Rachel from rearranging her hair until finally, bright red in the face, she admitted defeat and lowered her hands. Chloe did not say 'okay' but, then, she did not speak at all. Still processing Steph's dream, she watched Rachel play with Max's hair and fully welcomed the smile trying to push its way up her face. “The question is, what should I pack?”
“I dunno, a few outfits. Probably gonna have to find bathing suits or something. I don't know.” *Oh god, what does she have planned?* Chloe groaned at the thought of any kind of shopping whatsoever. It wasn't that she couldn't enjoy it, it was just that money was always kind of a frustrating concept for her. “Yep, and I'm thinking you should think about dressing warm.” *Dress warm it is.* Chloe shot Steph one last look as the girl moved slightly in her sleep, smiling slightly. *Her nightmare's over,* Chloe thought before turning back to her girls. She scooted forward, reached out with both arms and wrapped them around Max's midriff, though it was somewhat difficult to do given their height differences.

Chloe closed her eyes and for just a second hugged the girl with her forehead pressed against her upper back. It was comfortable there. She thought that if she shifted slightly, she might be able to fall asleep like that.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, and since it has *finally* happened, if I delete your comment, chances are that it was an accident. My bad, Lanel
Chapter Sixty: Eikon

April 14th, 2012 10:03 AM

Shamelessly, Max paused in her footsteps with a folding chair under each arm and watched as Chloe passed. *Goofy idiot,* she thought to herself not for the first time as the girl tried not to wince as she brushed, ever so barely against Dana. *You know,* Max told herself as she started to carefully walk a chair toward the edge of the gymnasium wall that did not already have bleachers above it. *It's kinda funny that, with my freckles and all, I'm not the one who got burnt to hell.* Chloe's skin was still pink and only just beginning to peel. To be fair, Chloe's burns had been nothing to laugh at; they had actually been somewhat severe since *someone* had decided it was smart to go walking around in the bright sun without putting on sunscreen. Now that the mechanic's pain had mostly passed, though, Max enjoyed gloating to herself that *she* was not the worst off. Hell, compared to Chloe she was more or less tan, something which never happened. *Not that either of us hold a candle to Rachel.* Speaking of Rachel, Chloe paused beside her and suddenly whipped her head around toward Max, as if she could *sense* that just moments ago, Max had been grinning at her. Then again, she was not sure she had ever stopped. Beside her, Victoria raised an eyebrow and caught Max's attention.

“Oh, Chloe's just jealous that *I* didn't turn five shades of red over break.” Max made sure to say this loud enough that then majority of the gym could theoretically hear her and was rewarded by a rude hand gesture from the artist as she steadied the short ladder Rachel was standing on. Logan stood at the bottom of Dana's. Together the two girls attempted to hang a banner from the scaffolding near one end of the room, held aloft by the old aluminum ladders.

“Not from sunburn at least,” Chloe teased, glancing back toward them but not abandoning her post even to give Max a piece of her mind. *How dedicated,* Max thought to herself as she and Victoria finally reached one edge of the old gymnasium and settled the chairs each were carrying down. Max took a second to unfold each of the chairs and then shoved them aside as Victoria did the same to her own. It was true that there had been any number of *other* reasons she might have looked a little red in the face over break, but she knew Chloe was just a *tiny* bit bitter about having had to spend an evening of their vacation laying in a lukewarm epsom salt bath to lessen the pain. At least, Max really *hoped* it had lessened the pain, because the bottle of aloe vera gel purchased from a drug store on their way back to the hotel had not been enough to really ease the girl's suffering.
“So what did you three do over break?” Victoria asked her. Max, who could not say that she had ever experienced anything quite as amazing as the trip they had only just returned from, did not hesitate to tell her. As they continued their work Max, recalled the trip in some detail: the bungalow Rose Amber had rented in San Francisco for a week, the time spent by the pool or at the beach, even a couple of excursions into the city. For the most part, it had simply been the three of them, though Rose was in a room at the hotel herself, she mostly left them to their privacy unless they all went somewhere together in the afternoons or evenings and they did manage to secure three days almost completely to themselves throughout it all.

“If you can name some typical touristy thing to do, we did it,” she confessed, feeling a bit guilty. “I'm talking the San Francisco zoo, which Chloe didn't care much for but humored us anyway-”

“What?” Victoria asked, sounding a bit dumbfounded. “Why wouldn't she-?”

“Yes, well, I kind of get her point,” Max said, eagerly. “It is kind of shitty to see animals trapped in cages for peoples' amusement, but we went.” Victoria's green eyes rolling did nothing to slow Max down, neither in hauling chairs from one rack to either of the walls they typically lined during Vortex Club soirees nor in recounting the trip. “Then there was the trip to The Castro and the Golden Gate Bridge, we even took a boat ride out to see Alcatraz Island, and I was a total monster and took them to like four art galleries and two art museums.” Max had to cut herself off there. The honest truth was that she could have gone on and on about any one of those events and had not even gotten to talking about various restaurants eaten at, or their trip to Pier 39. When she saw that Victoria was not just humoring her, not completely at least but looked to have had her interest piqued, Max realized why that might be. Art museums. “Victoria, their Museum of Modern Art has like, an entire floor for photography. It was amazing.”

“You're such a nerd,” Victoria shot back, but the smile on her face and the way she was looking at Max did not match the words enough to suggest any actual ill thoughts. In fact, while Max was confused about precisely what the look in Victoria's eyes was about, somehow it caused her to make a confession.

“I burned through basically the next four months' budget for film last week,” for a moment Victoria eyed her as if to see whether or not she was kidding and Max snorted before breaking into laughter. The blonde simply grinned at her, shaking her head and having apparently decided (rightly) that Max was completely serious. Max shrugged and made to return to the rack of chairs. The truth was that other than the sightseeing and way too many photographs, the week had been a tiny bit like the three of them living together. Except that they could never have afforded such an amazing place in a city like San Francisco. Max's parents weren't exactly poor but they probably wouldn't have been able to afford the trip, certainly not with its length and considering the kind of place they were staying in.

For a few minutes, Max mostly kept her tongue and listened to Victoria recount her own Spring
Break, which she said she was quite happy to spend in Seattle with her parents. It was enough to make Max feel a little guilty about not having gone home, but her family had been good sports about it. There had been talk of compensation in the form of one or two photos from the experience but Max figured she had time to choose some and send them to her mom and dad. Eventually, long after conversation had dried up and they were done with the particular stretch of wall they had been lining with chairs alongside Zachary, Courtney and Taylor, Max lost her cool again.

“I need to gush about one thing,” she finally confessed to Victoria. The girl waved her hand as if to say ‘if you must’ and crossed her arms one hand still clutching a bottle of water that remained half finished. Max reached into the old messenger bag which she had retrieved from where it sat as soon as it was clear they were both taking a break. A trio of photos that she had not felt like parting with even to put away safely in her room were freed from the front pouch, earning another shake of Victoria’s head. That being said, Max knew the girl was just giving her crap for the sake of giving her crap: photography was one of the things they shared in common. If they were going to bond over anything it was most likely to be that. Max loosed the first of those three photos from the pile and tilted it Victoria’s way. She knew the photo by heart already and had been tempted for almost an hour the night prior to absolutely abuse her abilities and go back in time to experience just a second of it, again. Rachel and Chloe were framed in profile in the photo in front of the ocean with a sinking sun between them. The star’s reflection on the water shimmered in roughly a conal shape, most pronounced in the area exposed between the two of them. There was just enough light left in the air that the features of their faces could be made out, even if a bit darkened and dimmed.

To Max’s immense gratification, Victoria made a noise of appreciation in the back of her throat and reached cautiously, askingly for the photo. Max handed it over without hesitation, watching long fingers carefully draw the picture up for closer inspection. Slowly, the slightly derisive smile shifted to a lopsided smirk. For a moment Max thought it was somewhat judgey and dismissive but the girl did not put the photo down, her eyes continued to work across it and after a couple of seconds which felt oddly like minutes, Victoria handed it back to her without a word, though the blonde did set her bottle of water down beside her. At that point, Max shamelessly exposed Victoria to the next photo, a sort of tight selfie taken in the bungalow’s kitchen that Max thought judging by her clothes in the picture had probably been taken somewhere on the third or fourth day.

At this one, Victoria was silent but when she took the photo that smirk vanished. There wasn’t a frown on her face, per se, but while the tilt of the girl’s lips was upward at least, it did not look like any kind of happiness Max had ever seen. Still, Victoria looked at it for about the same amount of time she had the one prior and passed it back. Unsure what the sudden shift in the girl was all about, Max almost hesitated before passing the third one over. This one was by far and away her favorite after the beach. It had been taken by a random passerby, but it featured Chloe on the day she received her bad burn, reddish-pink in between Max and Rachel somewhere in the heart of the Castro, a neighborhood that had become something of an LGBT mecca long ago. Framed surprisingly well in the background (God, I’m such a photo snob) a large flag baring all the colors of the rainbow flew unashamedly. Chloe, despite obviously being in some discomfort by that point, had been the one to insist they stop for the photo and her smile was perhaps the largest, though Max rather thought that the fact that Rachel’s eagerness was not marred by the concern she and Max both had started to develop for Chloe’s health was impressive.
The look on Victoria's face faded slightly but it was in this fading that Max recognized the look for what it was: a sort of sad smile that Victoria was trying and failing to cloak. Max retrieved the photo when it was offered to her but she couldn't resist trying to understand the look. Was Victoria sad that things were not great between herself and Courtney? Had her break been lonely? Slowly she put the pictures away, giving herself time to think. It seemed to Max that the right thing to do in this situation would be to say something but she wasn't sure what would help.

“I don't think I've ever seen you look that happy before,” Victoria told her all of the sudden as Max finished setting her bag aside again, which was surprising. Max wasn't sure what she had been expecting Victoria to say, but it certainly wasn't that. Shit, she's been having a rough time.

“I don't think I've ever been that happy before, to be honest.” It probably should have sounded like a depressing statement, but it wasn't. The week in San Francisco had involved some of the most amazing moments of her life. Many of them had been intensely personal, others had been kind of world-reinforcing. Switches had been flipped, processes set into motion that Max did not think could ever be undone, to top it all of, she thought that that week had been enough to finally convince Max that there was a light at the end of all of the dark in front of her. She knew hope was a dangerous thing, but she also knew, now, its power. “It was a good day. I kind of want to borrow Kate or Brooke's scanner and put that last one up on the internet.” The downside to working with exclusively analogue cameras was the difficulty in getting a photo digitized when one absolutely wanted it preserved.

“You know,” Victoria drawled as she stood up as if to return to work. Max followed suit, leaving her bag on the chair beside her. “You could always join the 21st century and get a digital camera.”

“No fucking way,” Max insisted. “Polaroids are where it's at.” There were four tables lined up near the bleachers which needed unfolding and positioned near the door to the gym to act as a kind of barrier to anyone who might want to make away with free refreshments. Judging by the fact that most of the chairs had been laid out and Juliet and Sarah had almost finished with the sound equipment on the far end of the room, that seemed to be the right place for them to return to work. Across the room, Chloe and Rachel were helping Taylor and Courtney lay out a series of streamers reaching from the lattice-like framework around the small stage the dj was supposed to be on to the edge of the stage, so that they would frame part of it like a curtain. Chloe's a champ for helping out on her last Saturday off. Though, it looked like they all had a reprieve coming soon in the form of lunch, since the room was almost ready for that evening.

“Max, polaroids haven't been 'where it's at' since 'where it's at' was an acceptable phrase to say out loud.”

“Whatever you say, Victoria,” Max told the girl, this time the one guilty of rolling her eyes. “I guess I could get a cheap digital camera just for fun. It could be cute. Maybe I'll see if mom and dad will get me one for my birthday. It would probably result in me cutting down on film so....”
She knew that no matter how little they said about it, they had more than indulged her passion in photography.

“That's the spirit, Caulfield,” Victoria teased her. “Now, back to work.” They were joined shortly into setting up the first table by Rachel and Taylor. Max did not pay a ton of attention to anything beyond moving the tables but she did occasionally catch sight of Rachel, who at one point gestured toward Victoria. Victoria was still holding her end of the table Max held, but her eyes had wandered to Chloe, Juliet and Courtney as they continued their struggle with the streamer curtain. Chloe was laughing at something one of them had said. Max would have been willing to bet William Price's old camera that it had been Juliet, though, given Courtney's relative discomfort around Max, Chloe or Rachel.

“You know you should go talk to her,” Rachel told Victoria as the two pairings passed one another, Rachel and Taylor going back to retrieve the fourth and final table and Max and Victoria still carrying the third to its position. Victoria frowned and paused, forcing Max to slow and wait with her. Rachel, for her part, crossed her arms and came to a stop to at this as Victoria glanced her over once and then sighed. “What?”

“It's just- you're right,” Victoria admitted. “I'm just not sure how to start.” As if that was a signal, Max turned and lowered her end of the table to the floor.

“Courtney, could you trade off with me? I need to bother Chloe for a second.” When the brunette looked up, nodded briefly and silently from across the room and started toward them, Max turned back to see one of the three blondes she was stood beside beaming at her and another glaring daggers. All things considered, Max thought both that this had been the right move and perhaps a little too nosy. Then again, she was a nosy bitch and there was very little any of them could do to stop it. Max strolled off across the yellowed floor toward Chloe and Juliet shamelessly, though Chloe had yet to return to work staring at Max as if she thought, correctly, that Max was up to something. Rachel makes me do all kinds of things I shouldn't do, she thought to herself. God, I love having partners in crime.

Max couldn't help but review the change in Victoria. Contrary to what a few people were whispering in the halls, it had begun long before Nathan proved that he was an animal who would turn even on his best friend. Maybe it had taken a fair amount of time but at this point Max considered Victoria a friend. She was pretty sure Victoria connected far less with Rachel or Chloe than she did Max, but that actually made sense. They shared a lot in common: photography, living in Seattle, forceful personalities. Speaking of Seattle, Max had not quite gotten up the courage to admit to Victoria how often she used to visit her parents' gallery, the Chase Space. Max also thought that if her parents could see Victoria's work, the kind she turned in on a near daily basis, they would be proud. Sometimes it felt a little cool to her but Max thought that came down to the almost tactical way Victoria handled lighting and framing.
As for Nathan, the boy was not precisely absent that day from club activities. Even as Max joined the fun of hanging and arranging streamers, she could turn an eye up to the bleachers and see him glaring around the room as if everyone in it owed him something. It was not the first time, nor would it be the last. He knew he was beginning to be isolated andouted even if he played it all off as lies, as jealousy or as being bullied. It had had its consequences for everyone, though, including Max who had been contacted while on break to talk to her parents about a ‘disturbing rumor’ which had made it to them, that she might have been the victim of a sexual predator in the school. Telling her parents the truth (at least the truth which did not involve time travel or Rachel being the avatar) had been the most painful part of the that vacation, even if Rachel and Chloe had followed her from poolside back into the bungalow to sit with her while the discussion occurred.

Almost as hard as the conversation which might have been the hardest in her life was her parents’ constant reminders through texts or phone calls that she could be withdrawn from the school any time she wanted. The threat of what might come if Nathan stepped out and attacked someone else was about all that kept Max from considering herself happy. Not only would it mean there were another victim, someone else to experience what she had gone through, but Max was not entirely certain that her parents would let her remain at Blackwell no matter what if they caught wind. That being said, Max wasn't sure how they found out in the first place. They had been unwilling to divulge that bit of information.

Max, Rachel, Chloe, Victoria and Taylor separated from the rest of the committee after too long. It was as much about the cafeteria being done as it was the honest fact that Max couldn't stand looking over her shoulder and seeing Nathan staring down imperiously at her. While the weather was somewhat warmer than expected, it was also far from ideal for an impromptu lunch session. The good news, as far as Max was concerned, was that the chinese place had agreed to deliver the group’s hefty order in a relatively reasonable frame of time, so Max settled into a seat and looked around at the extended lunch table. Who'd have thought when I first moved back that we'd be sitting down together for lunch? Unfortunately, even good times for her seemed to be marred by Nathan Prescott sooner or later.

“So,” Taylor started during a break in conversation about party preparations. “What do we do about Nathan tonight?” It seemed that Taylor had come to fully embrace the idea that Nathan was trouble. The idea that she counted herself among those taking on any responsibility for his actions was new and unexpected. “I mean, the party's where he's probably going to try something, right?” This was among the most forceful and assertive acts the girl had ever taken without prompting so, as much as Max wasn't in the mood to talk or think about Nathan Prescott at any length, she answered.

“We'll be watching him most of the night,” Max told Taylor. There were no immediate objections from Chloe or Rachel, so she took that to mean that the plan was still on. “If you two want to help out, that wouldn't hurt.” As Rachel was going to speak, Chloe suddenly reached out and put a hand on her shoulder and Max's.

“That was them,” she announced, gesturing vaguely to the road.
“What?” Rachel asked, looking slightly annoyed to be interrupted.

“The food,” Chloe told her, slowing her voice to emphasize the last word. Max rolled her eyes. Chloe was acting as if she had not eaten in days. The bluenette was out of her seat before Max knew what was happening. Okay, I guess that means Victoria and I better do our part. As Rachel and Taylor rose to follow Chloe from the picnic table outside of Blackwell Academy, Max matched eyes with Victoria, who looked momentarily deep in thought. Max gestured toward the main building.

“Let's go grab drinks,” she said, pulling from her front pocket a small, wadded up plastic bag that would do well for carrying drinks for five people, some of whom wanted more than one. This seemed to snap Victoria out of her reverie and the girl shrugged. Nonetheless, they were only a couple of steps away from the table when the reason Victoria seemed a little out of it became obvious.

“How in the hell do you do this shit all the time?” Max was, to say the least, confused. Could the girl have meant the Vortex Club parties? Victoria had been doing that a long time before Max and Rachel joined. (Max still had not had the heart to tell any of them that they had joined just to spy on Nathan.) After a moment, Max raised an eyebrow and slowed as she hit the front steps to the school. Victoria sighed and made a frustrated gesture as if she might want to wring someone's neck. Drama queen.

“I mean you're generally nice to everyone, you don't care what anyone thinks about you, you're a good photographer and even after what Nathan did to you, you're more worried about everyone else.” Max sighed, this time.

“I don't think I can be any other way. It's not in me.”

“Why is that?” Victoria asked, suddenly sounding somewhat aggressive as if she had just caught Max making a false point in some debate she did not know they had been having. “It's okay to protect yourself, you know.”

“It's just not the way I work.”

“That's admirable, but stupid,” Victoria grumbled, pulling the front doors to the school open and setting off for the soda machine as quickly as she could without breaking into a jog. “Pisses me off that I still envy that.”
“What do you mean?” Max asked. What was it that Victoria Chase envied about her? It was actually almost a laughable idea. Why would Victoria feel the need to feel any kind of envy or jealousy?

“I don't know, I guess I sort of admire you sometimes.” Something about the open way Victoria spoke drew Max's attention and her eyes back to the girl. As uncomfortable as Max felt hearing that, Victoria looked uncomfortable, too.

“Thanks,” Max told her when she found words again. Unfortunately, by that time they had already found the pop machine meaning an unnatural silence had grown up between them. Cutting through it felt a bit like taking a machete to some tall and endangered plant. “You know, I like your photos too. They're kind of Avedon-esque and that seems to really work for you.” In a moment, the entire air about the girl changed. Max did not comment on it, but she had this strange feeling that the wide grin that bloomed on Victoria's face would have found its way there no matter what she wanted. “But really, Victoria, all I'm trying to do is try to figure out how to get everyone through this when we know it would take something huge to bring Nathan or Jefferson down.” She felt guilty for speaking this thought aloud as soon as she did it, but it simply slipped out. Max paused by the pop machine and glanced about to see if anyone else had heard her. No one looked to be around, but Victoria's smile had gone and she was staring at Max.

“What do you mean about Jefferson?” Victoria asked, far too loudly for Max's taste. “Has he done something at the school?” The truth was, Max thought as she struggled with how to talk about this with Victoria, that he had not. Except of course that she suspected he was teaching Nathan things he must certainly should not be. Or maybe even that hasn't happened yet. I don't know. The worst part of all of this was not having any sort of inside information, anymore. If she could just figure out how far their connection had gone, everything would be alright.

“Would you even want to really know, Victoria? I know Jefferson was a hero of yours.” Instead of answering, Victoria simply rephrased her question.

“Is there something you know that I don't?” This came off a little more forceful, a little more standoffish, so Max stalled for a moment as she began to dig several quarters from her pocket and feed them into the machine one at a time. A couple of cokes for each of them would come out to about ten cans, which would be a pain to carry back. She hoped the bag did not rip. Meanwhile, Max finished weighing her options and decided on doses of the truth.

“I think Nathan and Jefferson are working together,” she muttered, just loudly enough for Victoria to hear from where she stood only a foot or two away. Actually, the girl was unnaturally close to her.
“Why do you think that, or is it just those news articles you read making you paranoid?”

“The only proof I could offer is stored on a flash drive that isn't mine so I'd have to steal it and it probably wouldn't be enough to convince you, anyway.”

“I don't understand why you think he's up to something,” she confessed. “Okay, sure, the shit he did in the past was shady, but do you know something. That's all I want to know.”

“I'm convinced by what I saw,” Max lied. She had not seen anything, at least, not first hand. Unless one counts the text messages, she reminded herself. Okay, maybe she had seen something.

“That's good enough for me,” Victoria decided, quite suddenly and then the girl took a step or two back. “I'm being careful like you said to, but I... I'm thinking about letting my parents take me back to Seattle.” At this, Max straightened up, passed the remaining quarters to Victoria and pressed the button for the first drink before kneeling down. She wanted time to think but knew that perhaps there had been enough long, drawn out silences during their talk. If a conversation was characterized more by its pauses than anything else, she thought that that was probably a bad sign. After every couple of cans were emitted, Max paused to pull them from the slot and lower them safely into the plastic bag sitting on the floor between her knees.

“I actually get it,” Max eventually landed on. “Frankly, if it wasn't for Chloe or Rachel, maybe I'd go back. My parents found out over break somehow and now they're dropping hints for me to leave to get away from him, but my girls are here and I like Blackwell even if I wish it wasn't run by Sean Prescott.” At this, Max looked up and received a confused stare in response. I forget that not many people think deep enough about the Prescotts to understand this one thing about the school. Somehow it was hard for her to keep track of the fact that Victoria had not always been a part of their conversations, had not always been part of the bullshit on their shoulders. “Just think about it-how much easier would it be if we could just come out and say what happened, if... if others could?” Max did not want to give Stella's name despite the fact that it was more or less common knowledge, by this point, that Stella was one of those who Nathan had attacked.

“Other people have gone through this too,” Victoria mused quietly, a little sadly. Guilt rose in the girl's face, which was rather out of place in Max's experience. “They're staying. Just like you.”

“Yeah, they are,” Max told her, pausing in their retrieval of drinks to make sure that Victoria ditched this line of thinking immediately. “It's everyone's own choice, but either way this doesn't have to last much longer.” For emphasis, Max reached up and slammed the button for another coke. The machine above her spat it out and as Victoria had been doing the entire time, the blonde slipped a few more quarters in.
“What do you mean?” Her voice serious now, Victoria was watching Max quite suddenly as predator to prey. That, too, made Max somewhat uncomfortable.

“I mean I'm going to do something about it before anyone else gets hurt. I'm tired of this.”

“What?”

“I don't know. I've been trying to figure it out for months now, but every time I turn around there's this wall in the way: Nathan is from a wealthy, powerful family and no one has any direct evidence of what he does.” As soon as she let slip this frustrating problem, they returned to the task at hand. It only took a minute or so more to retrieve the remainder of the drinks and start back toward the picnic table. Max was still tentatively watching the plastic bag like a hawk for signs that it was about to tear open and drop the drinks all over the floor when they reached the front doors of the school and Victoria started the conversation up where they had left off.

“Maybe it's time we get some,” Victoria told her. “Physical evidence.”

“It's not so easy. It can be... really hard for people to come forward with physical evidence, right?” Max thought of Stella, for instance. With what had happened to Stella, Max wasn't sure she wanted to learn anymore than she already had about it. Max quite worried that if she learned anymore about Stella's experience she might find out that her own attack had been a little more involved than she could remember through the haze of the drugs that had been in her system that night. She swallowed against nothing. “What could be easier to do is make people realize that Nathan is—unwell.” Max chose the word carefully when all she wanted to do at the moment was call him every shitty name she'd ever heard and make up a few to boot. “Maybe force him into treatment?”

“How?” That was Victoria for you. She asked the hard questions in the simplest way possible and kept pushing that point if you tried to avoid answering. Max wondered how many times the girl would repeat that question: 'how' if Max chose not to answer. The good news was that she had an answer for Victoria, an idea that she had been chasing around and around her head for some time. The question was more about how effective it would truly be. If Victoria truly had no idea how much at the school revolved around the good will of the Prescotts, then she might not see what the risks with the plan were.

“Honestly, I have a digital copy of Nathan's school file hidden away somewhere. His real one, not the one Wells keeps in his office.”

“So?” Stop it, Victoria.
“So,” Max said, quietly as she saw that their chosen picnic table was not yet populated with food or people. “So it has its actual record in it. Every fucked up thing he's ever said or done in a class. His actual grades, the time he went ballistic on Eliot, the time he threw a chair at me and hit Hayden instead?”

“I didn't realize that's what that was,” Victoria told her, and Max paused as she felt the girl reach out and place a hand on her wrist to stop her in her steps. They stopped only a few feet from the table and from where Max stood she could see Chloe, Rachel and Taylor returning from the parking lot, laden down with plastic bags baring a bright red dragon on the front.

“It was,” Max told her, slowly, looking the disturbed girl in the eyes. “Nathan does enough shit that he should have been expelled and forced into treatment a long time ago, but where does Wells get most of the money for the school? Sean Prescott. He's never going to be expelled, not without something serious happening in broad-fucking-daylight.” Victoria released her, but she shook her head slowly as she asked Max what her plan was. “Oh, that's the only part of it that's simple: release the file to the local paper, the school paper, nearby news agencies, all of the students, all of the staff, all of the parents. I could include everything I showed you about Jefferson too.” At this, Victoria gave a nod and then started again for the table, not speaking.

“If you decide to move back to Seattle,” Max told her, feeling a small twinge of anxiety all of the sudden, “give us a heads up, okay?”

“You think I'd actually be missed?” Victoria asked her as the two of them sat down and began distributing drinks across the table, the excess resting in a bag in the center of it. Chloe, Taylor and Rachel reached the table, setting bags down one after another. Almost as soon as the first bag opened, even before a container opened, Max could smell the delicious meal ahead of her. Oh god, I missed this.

“You would, by a lot of people,” Max told Victoria, choosing her words carefully to keep Victoria's privacy even as the rest of the table began to key in to the fact that some kind of conversation had been taking place. If the three of them had been talking, they grew silent as they began to distribute food around the table. Victoria was apparently very aware of the fact that they might be listened to, but still opened her mouth and responded to Max in a manner that left Max's cheeks warm for reasons she couldn't understand.

“Does that include you?” Confused and a bit flustered by the girl's tone, Max turned her eyes away from anyone else at the table, even Victoria.

“Yeah,” she admitted and then silence fell over the table. For some reason, when Max looked up at
the sound of Chloe clearing her throat, she spotted Victoria smiling to herself from a few feet down the bench. Chloe settled into a seat on Max's left and passed her a carryout container that was marked with an abbreviation for Max's food order. After retrieving a plastic fork from the pile, she dug in without saying anything else. The one thing she hated about ordering out was that she was always convinced she was about to break the plastic fork. Especially when digging into a large container full of pork lo mein. After a few seconds, even though Victoria had finished passing the drinks out to the table at large, Max noticed that beside her, Chloe was not eating. She looked up.

Chloe was not eating for the reason that she was staring at Max with a playful grin on her face. What's going on? Max thought, suddenly feeling like the butt of a joke she had never heard the opening lines to. In a manner barely perceptible to Max and thus probably imperceptible to the others, Chloe jerked her head, just slightly, toward Victoria and raised her eyebrows. When Max's only response was to raise one of her own and stare back, slowly chewing her food, Chloe looked a little disappointed. You're not making any sense.

"Sooo," Chloe started, her voice low and quiet, but frankly not quiet enough if she wanted to be sure no one else overheard. "What did you two talk about?" For the moment, Taylor and Victoria were engaged in conversation and Rachel seemed absorbed enough in her pepper chicken to give the two of them some privacy. That was only going to last so long. Then there was the matter of the tone of Chloe's voice, sing-songy. There was something going on that Max thought she should know about and in that moment she wasn't a fan of secrets.

"How she was doing and what we were going to do about Nathan," Max told Chloe once she'd swallowed the bite in her mouth. Her brow did not unfurrow as Chloe gave her one long, searching look and then shrugged. "Why?"

"No reason," Chloe told Max immediately. She had answered awfully fast for someone who pretended to have no real vested interest in the conversation though. The bluenette freed a fork from the bag in the center of the table and as Max popped the tab on her drink, she decided she wasn't letting Chloe off so easily.

"I don't believe you," she told the mechanic.

"That's probably smart," Chloe advised her conspiratorially and then opened her container. At this point, Rachel had caught onto the conversation and was now watching and listening with some open curiosity. Max couldn't see Victoria through Chloe and thought it would look suspicious to lean around her in that moment, but Taylor was still talking, so maybe there was still some privacy at play. "So what do you plan on doing?"

"Let's talk about it later," Max told Chloe, both because she wanted privacy for some of the things she wanted to suggest or ask of Chloe and Rachel and because she thought moving this
conversation away from the topic at hand was the real motivation Chloe had for her question. When the girl pretended to pout for a second, Max reached up with her left hand and patted Chloe on the shoulder once, hard. “Hey, see, I can do *that* now without it hurting. Isn't that awesome?” Rachel snorted and Chloe stuck her tongue out at Max shortly before stuffing a fork full of fried rice into her mouth. “So,” Max asked, beginning to feel a little annoyed, “what was it that you thought Victoria and I were talking about?” Apparently, she spoke a little loudly.

“My lips are sealed,” Chloe swore through a mouthful of rice. Behind Chloe, Victoria had leaned forward suddenly and was watching the both of them with abnormally wide eyes. Only, she was not staring at Max, she was looking at the back of Chloe's head as if trying to communicate something to the girl. Max's stomach turned and she lowered her fork back into noodles, leaving it there standing straight up as she glared at Chloe. There were secrets being kept and she was getting the feeling they involved her. Not even the look of hybridized fear and aggravation on Victoria's face could keep Max from pushing it.

“If your lips were sealed you wouldn't be driveling rice down your shirt,” Rachel teased Chloe from across the table. Max did not even look at her. In that moment, if one wasn't helping Max pull Chloe's teasing secret from her, she wasn't interested. As Chloe swallowed, the girl glanced between Max and Victoria with conflicting looks of smug satisfaction and guilt crossing her face. Looking past Chloe to Victoria, Max matched eyes with the girl once, only to see her turn immediately away, face red. 

**Oh, oh shit.** The switch flipped rather quickly in that moment. Max turned her eyes on first Rachel's face and, seeing no help in the girl's curious gaze, looked back at Chloe since Victoria was staring down at her meal as if it was the most interesting thing in the world. **Victoria's not into Rachel, is she?**

Immediately unsure about exactly what in the *hell* to do, Max looked down at her food and reached without lifting her head for her coke. Food and drink were safe. After a few seconds of an unnatural silence settling over the table, Max glanced up. Chloe looked guilty, Rachel's eyes were as wide as Victoria's had been moments ago and in that exact same moment, Victoria began to speak to Taylor loudly as if nothing had just happened. Max continued to eat in relative peace and silence, trying to fathom the new information presenting itself. **No one confirmed anything. You know nothing, Max Caulfield.**

“Got a text,” Rachel declared several minutes later. Max lifted her head from her nearly empty container to see Rachel brandishing the phone. A few conversations had taken place around Max which she had missed entirely, so this was not surprising. “I'm off to meet up with Logan, Hayden and Dana. Gotta go pick up the refreshments.” As if eager to get away from the table, Rachel stood, grabbed her fork, newly closed food container and then stepped around the table toward Max and Chloe. She kissed first Chloe and then Max on the cheek and when Max thought that the moment was over and Rachel was going to all but dash away from the table in record time, Rachel whispered something directly into her ear.

“*You lost the bet,***” Rachel told her. Max recalled making the bet in question, that Victoria was holding some sort of secret crush on Rachel. She regretted making it, too. Her mouth was full again
by the time that Rachel ruffled her hair up, earning a muffled protest and then left to go find the other members of the Vortex Club. Watching her go, Max rather wished she was going with. *I really need to relax before tonight and Chloe needs some chill time too, even if I'd rather corner her and give her shit until she spills everything she knows.* Max rose to her feet a couple of minutes later and turned to Chloe.

“We should probably get going, we've got some stuff to go over before the party,” Max told her. Chloe looked up, confused, from where she sat with a spoon still in her mouth. It was a cute enough gesture that Max might have laughed under normal circumstances. She did not, then and there.

“Max,” Victoria called. Max shot her head around to look at the girl a little more quickly than she intended and heard it pop a bit. “I hope we can meet up before the party.” Max nodded her agreement but had some difficulty with meeting Victoria's eyes. The truth was that part of her was a little annoyed that this had come up now of all times. *Chloe's in trouble.* As for the 'stuff' they had to go over before the party, that stuff mostly involved Chloe Price in her arms as they cuddled up for a nap while Rachel was off getting the beer.
Chapter Sixty-One: Bryto

April 14th, 2012 12:32 PM

Rachel had to admit one thing as they turned onto some back road in Bruss. At the start of the school year she would never have predicted that she, Logan, Hayden and Dana would have been going on any kind of car ride together, much less on a beer run for a Vortex Club party. For the most part, the trip had been taken up recounting their spring break, something which Rachel had happily contributed to. Now, though, the car was quiet. A sort of tension had started to spread over the car as soon as they turned off of Bruss's main road. There were plenty of people in Arcadia Bay seedy enough to sell beer to teenagers but none of them that were quite stupid enough to potentially make a spectacle of themselves by handing off beer to be dragged back to the snooty private school that practically overlooked the town.

The tension, Rachel thought as the car fell silent, was not between the people in the car. It was not even about the state of the neighborhood they were driving through. It was about the club. Nathan had been threatening for some time that if people didn't start 'showing him the respect he deserves' he would see to it that they would lose their connections for the parties. At this point, the club as a whole was pitching in a little more than they ever had before to make up for the funds that Nathan had stopped contributing. They could not keep that up for long and Rachel knew it. Hell, Nathan knew it. They had managed to secure the basics though: a couple of kegs and the solo cups. To top it all off, Hayden had convinced a friend to emcee for them for significantly cheaper than whatever asshole Nathan had in mind would have charged.

Rachel kept her eyes peeled nonetheless as they passed into a slightly more rural part of Bruss. The houses were not well kept, many of them looked as if they had been abandoned for some time. Hell, the nicest looking homes around them were the trailers, many of which looked as if they might never roll again. She had never particularly been on this drive before. Neither had Max. As the car slowed and Logan turned the nose of the car toward a driveway leading to an old, two story home that was unpleasantly reminiscent of the now absent Bowers residence. Rachel's eyes slid sideways toward Dana. Dana did not seem to be bothered at all. In fact, if anything she looked bored and seemed relieved when Rachel looked as if she might break the silence, a relief which faded when Rachel merely licked her lips and turned to stare out of the windshield.

Almost as soon as the car shifted into park, Hayden turned back, winked at her and then threw the
front passenger door open. Logan climbed out after him but not before pressing a button which caused the hatchback to open at the rear of the car. As for the residence in question a door opened there, too. Not the front door of the house but instead the side door of the old, crooked garage. It looked as if their connection had been waiting on them. Rachel stared at the man who emerged from it, arms folded across his chest as Hayden and Logan approached for about thirty seconds before his angular nose, massive sideburns, perpetual sneer and shitty mohawk struck her as familiar and she realized who he was. Oh, fuck me. Rachel ducked her head down, suddenly. Hopefully, the skeevy fuck hadn't seen her at all. Rachel grabbed the magazine Dana had set aside several minutes ago, opened it and immediately pretended to be reading it.

“What are you doing?” Dana asked her suddenly, sounded both mystified and close to laughter. If you only knew, Rachel thought.

“Chloe sort of hit that guy with a bottle once, a couple years ago,” Rachel told her. The moment stood out, bold in her memories as the moment she and Chloe had first made any connection. We were forged in fire from the start. “I was there, too. He and his buddy were trying to fuck her up at a concert, it was a whole big thing.” She'd heard the man demanding to know if Chloe knew who he was only a minute or two before that and had decided to keep a close eye on Chloe as soon as it looked as if they had not been done with her. Rachel glanced over the top of the magazine. Certainly it looked as if the man hadn't noticed her, since he was looking through the garage door as Hayden and Logan emerged with the first keg on a dolley. “That was so long ago,” Rachel mused out loud as she raised the magazine back up to block out her face. Dana chuckled. The Firewalk concert felt like another lifetime. It had definitely been another Rachel, one who hadn't yet swapped the love the masks received for real connection. Back then, Chloe had been a lit firecracker ready to go off at the slightest excitation.

“Are you serious?” Dana asked her, when Rachel did not change her tune. As soon as Rachel nodded, the girl began to laugh again, which did nothing to stop Rachel from smiling behind her magazine.

“Yeah, she got him right in the eye with the blunt side of the bottle he was trying to cut her with.”

“She was a hellraiser,” Dana told Rachel, shifting in the seat as if to better obscure Rachel from view as she leaned in to their discussion.

“Was? ” Rachel said, disbelieving. “She would fuck him up again right now without hesitating if he tried the same shit, and so would I.” The truth was that for a while after the concert, whenever Rachel caught sight of the man in town, she used to get very nervous that he was going to see her. I thought he went to jail after Merrick disappeared. Now she simply did not want him to spot her, remember her and refuse to sell them beer. Eventually the boys made it around to the hatchback and lifted the first of two kegs into the back. The vehicle shifted under the new weight and as the man in question approached the window closest to her, Rachel buried her face deeper into the
magazine. It occurred to her that she had not focused on either a photo or a word since the moment she picked it up. For all Rachel knew she could have had her face in a nudie mag and would have been none the wiser.

A few moments later, the second half-barrel keg settled into the back and the hatchback slammed shut. Rachel had never particularly checked to see how much beer was left after a party or how it got out of the gymnasium or where it went. If it weren't for the “Prescott Protocols” they wouldn't even be able to get the beer in. For a moment the boys stopped nearest to Dana's window, talking with the man about something Rachel did not want to listen in on. In response, Dana immediately put on a convincing 'gossiping girl' persona which would have annoyed Rachel at any other time. The fact was that listening to Dana act so unlike herself, rambling off at the mouth about who looked like they might be pregnant, who was thinking of trying out for cheerleading next year and whose ass looked big made staying hidden and calm behind the magazine more difficult. It probably did its fair share in hurrying the conversation outside of the car along and after the skeevy guy with his exaggerated sideburns stepped away from the car, Dana let out an exhausted sigh as the boys moved toward the front of the car.

“It'll never understand how people do that,” Dana exclaimed. Rachel lowered her magazine as the driver's side door opened and Hayden settled into it, instead of Logan. Come to think of it, Rachel thought, I have no idea whose car this is.

“Me either,” Rachel told Dana as Logan lowered himself into the passenger seat and Hayden shot a curious glance in the rearview mirror at them. “But it worked. Also, I'll be sure to tell Chloe you thought her ass looked fat.”

“Look, I was groping for the shitty things people say about each other,” Dana defended herself, which only made Rachel laugh again. She was glad in that moment that she hadn't felt the need to put on her favorite jacket since before they had left for San Francisco. It might have reminded the man a bit too much of that night and made him recognizing her inevitable.

“P-H phat, maybe.”

“Does anyone even know what that means anymore?” Hayden asked Rachel as he put the car in reverse. She could feel the difference in how it handled with the kegs laying in the back, covered by a blanket.

“I sure don't.”

After what felt like far too long of a ride, the vehicle pulled to a stop by the cafeteria loading doors.
Almost as soon as Hayden put the car in park, Rachel unbuckled her seatbelt and made a quick apology to the car at large for bailing on them. Logan seemed as interested as usual (which was to say, not at all) and Hayden and Dana were quick to wave the apology off. That was all that Rachel needed to ease herself out of the vehicle, leaning down one more time to call a goodbye through the open back door and then retreat for the back edge of the campus. Given that security was already going to be conspicuously absent from the area around that side of the school building, Rachel chose to take full advantage of it and try to stay hidden.

It was not too difficult to reach the fencing around the back of the campus without being stopped. At that point she just followed the fence until, phone buzzing with a fresh text in her pocket, the side of the dormitories came into view. As far as she could tell from a distance there was no one out front, so Rachel veered right off toward the stairs up to the door. Actually, it's sort of weird no one's around. Maybe everyone's just hanging out before the party. As she eased the front door open, Rachel heard sound from the television lounge. Someone was chilling out watching something. Maybe even several someones. It did seem like a good day to stay inside.

Back up on the second floor the air conditioning did a good job of keeping the day's heat at bay. (Pun not intended.) Still, Rachel considered stopping by her room for a moment to change into something a little cooler. There was, of course, nothing saying that she couldn't steal a pair of shorts from Max if the need arose. With that in mind, she continued on toward Max's room. So, Max has plans about what to do about Nathan? I can't wait to hear this shit. They had been tossing back and forth ideas about how to handle the asshole for months. If Max had finally landed on a solid plan, Rachel was more than game.

When Rachel knocked on Max's door, it took a moment or three before someone answered. Max rubbed at her eyes even as she opened the door and, upon seeing Rachel, stepped aside. Chloe was still in the bed trying to wake up. They were sleeping, Rachel thought, guiltily. Not only had Chloe decided to help out on her day off, Rachel had come along and interrupted her nap. Rachel shut the door behind her and glanced around the pale room. Max for her part, greeted her with a quick pat on the shoulder and, instead of returning to the bed, settled into her chair at her desk, running a finger across her laptop's tracking pad. Sitting up and shifting around so that her feet were hanging off of the side of the bed, Chloe yawned loudly through her greeting.

"Hey," Chloe called once the yawn was done. "Grab me a drink, please." Her voice was throaty, a little rough, so Rachel did as she was bade and crossed to Max's mini fridge as the girl worked on getting her laptop loaded up. She started by securing a coke for each of them and then turned back to Chloe who reached up to catch one. Rolling her eyes, Rachel handed it to Chloe instead. Her reflexes were never as good as she thought they were when she first woke up. At least Chloe did not try to argue.

"Let's get down to business-," Max declared, in a sing-songy voice.
“Yeah, yeah,” Chloe muttered, popping the tab on her coke. “Defeating the huns.” Max did not turn back to look at them but Rachel could almost hear her frown at her ruined fun. Chloe sounded exhausted. It just made Rachel feel a little worse that Chloe was helping on her day off. What a champ. “Business, right; business like what Max is going to do about Victoria.” Rachel swiveled her head around to look at Max, who suddenly stopped typing and then turned in her chair.

“Shutty,” Max warned Chloe, grumpily. Chloe responded with a sleepy smile. Rachel had a few things to say on the Victoria issue, but she did not chime in. Quite frankly, she thought Max ought to be talking to Victoria at that point, but if Max had an idea about what to do about the bigger problem, Rachel was listening. “It's time to do something about Jefferson and Nathan. I say we release both of their actual files from school and everything we have on Jefferson.” This was not a new thought or a new plan at all, but instead an old one. Except that this time, Max apparently thought it would do something. Rachel was not sure what had changed but eventually she settled down onto the bed with a can of coke all her own and pressed her knee into Chloe's. The girl winced slightly as if the burn on her lower leg was still painful. Rachel moved her knee.

“Who to?” Chloe asked, which if Rachel was not mistaken was exactly how this conversation played out the last time.

“David, for starters,” Max informed them, as she turned back toward the laptop.

“What about Juliet?” Rachel suggested. Max shrugged one shoulder.

“She wouldn't have time to print anything,” Max argued as she began to drag a copy of several files into a new, blank folder on her desktop. That was a fair point, Rachel thought, but Juliet might be able to help in other ways.

“Right, but she could distribute the information to people she might think it smart to send it to. If any of us gave it to her personally and asked her to pretend she got it in an email,” Chloe started, letting the thought trail off. Rachel nodded her agreement, but Max could not see her.

“Juliet goes on the list anyway, definitely putting the entire school mailing list down. Teachers, students, parents, the whole thing. I'll text her a heads up ahead of time, or maybe a preview.” I think that might be a good idea. Besides, Rachel thought and then decided to voice the rest aloud.

“With this timing, the stories getting out about the shit Nathan's been pulling might get more traction,” she added. “This could make it a little more awkward for you, Stella and Victoria.” Max paused in the middle of compiling her little dossier and turned back around in her chair, looking thoughtful. She was clearly still waking up, which was why Max was probably speaking a little
more bluntly than she might normally. Rachel did not take any offense.

“I don't think anything's going to make it better for them and I don't think Victoria would mind, but I didn't think about Stella.” Then the girl's face hardened. “No,” Max said, shaking her head. “It's way too late to worry about that. I don't like it but this is the only chance we've got of getting through the Sean Prescott wall. KBAY 7, Juliet, David, the school's mailing list, anyone else? I've almost got the file ready.” Max gestured behind herself, whacking her hand rather loudly against the side of the laptop screen, hard enough that that side of the machine lifted up from the desk and popped back down. Max winced and turned back to check that the laptop was still working. When she did not immediately curse, Rachel craned her neck to look at the screen. “Oh and Wells is getting a copy, so he knows everyone knows what he's been doing.” When Max returned to gathering files, Rachel grinned at Chloe. Unsurprisingly, she looked equally eager. They had done a whole lot of nothing beyond watching Nathan for a long time. *Maybe we just needed clear heads.*

“Wells *should* have to see it, but the school board needs to get the email, too.”

“I like your vindictive side,” Chloe told Rachel, in a low voice that bordered on sultry.

“Keep talking like that and I might have to show you more of it.” Before Rachel could tease Chloe any farther, Max called out her name. Rachel turned just in time to see the girl underhand throwing her phone toward the bed without looking. Pleased with herself, Rachel yanked it out of the air. “You want I should text Juliet, boss?”

“Absolutely. Tell her she's getting hers in 20 minutes, everyone else gets it right as the party starts. I don't want Nathan to be able to stop the party going off and I want everyone to have an eye on that son of a bitch when this gets out.” Max popped the knuckles of her right hand and began to type. When Rachel leaned back to look at the screen, she seemed to be logging into an email service Rachel had never seen before. *Maybe it's that one she used to use when she was 'researching' the Prescotts.* Either way, Rachel had a job to do while Max did hers. She unlocked Max's phone and decided to give Chloe a job of her own: pillow. Rachel scooted down the bed a ways and leaned back, her head coming to rest in Chloe's lap. When the bluenette stuck her tongue out at Rachel, she responded by pulling a face of her own and then got to work.

*Me*

In about 20 min u r gonna get an anonymous email. Don't worry – everyone else gets it right before the party. Please protect your sources.

*Juliet*

What are you talking about?
“The biggest problem,” Chloe said as she took advantage of Rachel lowering her hands to her sides and began to run a hand through Rachel’s hair, “is what to do if this doesn’t work.” The skater’s point was a valid one and it was not lost on either of them: Rachel was watching Chloe’s face, the way her lips moved, the curve of her chin, the general expressiveness too closely to ignore her and Max froze in place, no longer typing her email. They simply did not know what to say to that point. The truth was, without the backing of physical evidence that anyone has harmed anyone else it would take a while for action to happen if at all.

The handful of fights Nathan gets in at school can be played off as the pangs of growing up; a problem, sure but not worth expelling, especially not when you’re a rich white boy. The school could pretend to ignore the rumors about the rest of it. If this doesn’t work, we will have to try something else. We can’t expect magic. For the next few minutes as Max typed away on the email, they bounced ideas off of one another as to what to do next. Again, though, they came up empty handed. About the only thing good to come of the conversation was that Rachel had been allowed to stay there, with her head in Chloe’s lap paying at least as much attention to the girl’s fingers running through her hair as their fruitless discussion. Whenever Max turned around in the process of making a point, Rachel saw more and more stress on her face, as if the discussion, or perhaps its futility, was taxing her emotionally. Eventually, lips pursed slightly, Max went quiet and returned to typing her message. Rachel could read Chloe’s concern in the way she set her jaw. Girl wears her heart on her sleeve.

Max's phone went off.

Juliet

What are you talking about?

Max?

Max?

What the fuck did you just do?
“You sent it off?” Rachel asked. Max turned around in her chair and, looking a little relieved, nodded before exhaling slowly. “Well, Juliet definitely just got it.” Rachel lifted the phone back up to eye level and composed a response.

Me

You get first peek, full release tonight, right before party.

Juliet

I knew you were up to something. If I were into the fairer sex...

Me

Careful, this is Rachel, and I will totally tell her you said that.

Juliet

Fair enough. I'm going back to my room until the party. Don't come over. Have stuff to do.

I fucking bet you do, Rachel thought, chuckling to herself as she handed the phone over to Chloe. Chloe's response was a grimly satisfied smile. Rachel understood. This meant that one way or another the gloves had come off. It was on. Once the party starts, the shit hits the fan. Two minutes or so pass with the only sound in the room being that of Max's fingers on keys before the girl turned away from her laptop and nodded.

“It's done,” Max told them both, looking fairly grim herself. Faintly, from not too far down the hall, Rachel caught wind of another voice. Through doors and walls, she wasn't entirely sure what they were hearing, but it was definitely Juliet exclaiming. “I'd say she's having fun,” Max muttering. Rachel was willing to bet that whatever Juliet had just said would not be fit for polite company. Max lifted out of her seat and approached the bed to sit down on Chloe's other side. That did not stop Rachel from reaching up and brushing the back of Max's hand softly as the girl passed, nor did it discourage Max from squeezing her own. “Got it set up to send out at 7 on the dot. Nathan will be in front of a lot of people when that email goes live.” After a moment, Max stood right back up, shaking her head.

“Did you forget something?” Rachel asked her, sharing a concerned look with Chloe.

“Absolutely. I forgot that I'm getting the fuck off of campus until party time. One way or another I'm going to Up All Nite Donuts. The only question is am I buying a dozen for myself or are you
two going to spare me eating them all alone?” When Chloe laughed, it was a real laugh and Rachel took a moment to revel in the sound. As it turned out, the donuts were delicious but the real value of their trip had been in seeing Max relax enough to talk about something other than a Jefferson or a Prescott. Their donuts were a reprieve both sweet and ultimately short lived.

They were sitting in Max’s room listening to music when six-fifty came. Quite without a word, or letting on that anything had changed, Max rose from her spot on the bed between Rachel and Chloe and walked over to her laptop. The entire atmosphere of the room became serious as Rachel and Chloe both checked the time and realized what was going on. Kate, who had been slowly but surely coming to accept that she, Chloe and Rachel had wildly different tastes in music, did not seem to notice the tonal shift when she looked up from what she was reading and tried to read the room, instead.

“Kate,” Chloe started as Max turned to shoot a significant look at Rachel and Chloe both.

“Oh, is it time for you guys to go?” Rachel nodded as the girl rose from Max's futon, smoothed down the front of her skirt as if it was wrinkled and made for the door. Rachel spoke up to get her attention before she could say her goodbyes.

“Almost, but first: do you have any plans tonight?” Kate shook her head no, a dubious look on her face as if she thought that Rachel was about to try to convince her to go to the party. “If there's ever a night not to change your mind, to stay inside, lock your door and not open it for anyone, this is gonna be it.”

“What do you mean?” Kate asked her, no longer sounding dubious as much as concerned.

“Most of the school's not going to realize it,” Max interrupted them as she hit the enter button on her laptop very loudly. *Gotta go for that dramatic effect,* Rachel wanted to tease her. “But we're sitting in a changed Blackwell right now.” As if that bit of overacting on Max's part was not enough, Chloe tilted her head back and laughed, maniacally. *I love my goofy girls.* “When you get back to your room, check your email.” No one else spoke and certainly no one acknowledged Kate’s attempts to get more information out of them. As far as Rachel was concerned, Max deserved to be a bit dramatic about this: if it came back on her, it would come back hard and while Max was more technologically savvy than Rachel or Chloe, Rachel knew enough to know that Max did not have the hardware to be truly anonymous.

Rachel was eager to step out of the dormitories and into this new Blackwell.
Chapter Sixty-Two: Aristeia the Third

April 14th, 2012 9:45 PM

It was odd, but Chloe had gotten used to the parties, to a degree. She had certainly gotten used to thinking of them as time spent with Max and Rachel where, even if for a few minutes, they could be close to one another all at once without worrying about anyone or anything else. The last time they had treated one of the Vortex Club parties in this manner, though, Nathan Prescott had struck at a target. Admittedly that was likely to have been a different Blackwell Academy entirely, but it was not worth the risk. Just shy of three hours prior, Max had released a series of documents under a pseudonym to the entire student body, all of the school's employees and the parents of the students within. It had only taken half an hour before people at the party started to stare openly at Nathan.

That was what Chloe was doing, now. All pretense set aside, Chloe was on Nathan watching duty. Max and Rachel had each taken half hour turns watching him, and Victoria and Taylor had pitched in on their own shifts. It was, it seemed, Chloe's turn. While Max and Rachel indulged in the music, in a beer or whatever else they were going to get up to, Chloe tried not to let the loud tunes, the flashing lights or the crowd of people around her distract her from the boy with the light brown hair who was glaring back at her from a chair against a nearby wall. Chloe leaned one elbow on the edge of the refreshment table, where someone who Chloe did not know or recognize manned the keg. Resting her head on that hand, Chloe did not break eye contact with the boy shooting daggers in her direction. There was no longer any pretense to be maintained between them all, not now that the school was talking not just about the rumors relating to Max, Victoria and Stella but also about Nathan and Jefferson's school files.

Chloe did not look away from Nathan even as she freed a couple of folded bills from her pocket with her left hand and slapped them down on the table beside her. Nathan had not moved for almost two hours. At past parties he had occasionally deigned to descend to the level of the commoners and dance with someone who did not attend Blackwell or drink beer with someone none of them knew. Tonight, while Nathan clutched a red solo cup that clashed with his reddish-brown jacket, he wasn't talking to anyone and he was not dancing. That was fine by Chloe. There was no telling what he might be able to get away with if he disappeared into the crowd of people paying more attention to their body or their partner's than any drinks they might be carrying.
As for company, anyone connected to Blackwell who so much as saw Nathan was looking at him differently: sure, there had come to be a large amount of people who distrusted the boy after the rumors had surfaced but now Chloe saw the question in everyone’s eyes. It was one which Chloe knew contributed to the days in which Max could not eat, the nights in which she could not sleep. ‘How dangerous is he?’ Sometimes, Nathan tried to interact with people, though. This mostly consisted of staring angrily, lips curled in a sneer. So far, Chloe, Courtney, Taylor, Max, Victoria and Rachel had all rated this, though briefly Hayden had made an appearance in the gymnasium and Nathan had not been able to look the boy’s direction. It used to be that Hayden would defend Nathan to anyone who badmouthed him. I guess he just needed to see who Nathan really was. Hell, not even that much of it, either. Just once, just one peek. Maybe everyone else will figure it out as easily.

After a moment or two, her blind groping for the beer she had just purchased paid off. She tried not to think about how much that she would like to be in that crowd of people whose edge started some thirty feet in front of her. She tried not to imagine being pressed against Rachel's back or the feeling of Max’s hands on her own. It did not help anything. On occasion, Chloe would break eye contact to check her messages and shoot a very short response back to Steph, who seemed to be keeping her updated on what was happening in the science lab. As best as she could gather, the crowd was smaller than usual, Warren Graham was trashed beyond all description and Hayden and Justin were keeping him company. The occasionally rather geeky boy had apparently shifted past mildly upset about something which neither Steph nor Brooke could get him to talk about to ‘goofy off his ass’. Steph, apparently, preferred him upset. Chloe had to agree: see, when Warren Graham was angry, it was disturbing, but when he was just mildly annoyed, he tended to be hilarious. In that way, the boy reminded her of Max, only significantly less attractive to Chloe.

Past that, Chloe knew that the rest of the crowd in the room consisted of Dana, Taylor, Juliet and, though no one was entirely sure what had motivated him, Daniel Dacosta. Given that he had never gone to a Vortex Club party to her knowledge, Chloe could only say that she hoped he was having fun. Good thinking on Brooke's part to bring him to the lab. That's where the real fun's to be had. Chloe lifted her head from her phone to return to staring at Nathan, who had gone to staring down at his own phone as if unbothered by her gaze. I swear to fuck as soon as my shift's over, I'm gonna go down there and toke up. The truth was that the music played at these parties had never been her taste and it was doubly not her taste when she did not have her girls with her.

Summoned, no doubt, by the very thought, Rachel and Max emerged from the crowd somewhere near enough to her that when they began to approach it caught her eye. God, has it been a half hour already? Time flies when you wish you were anywhere else. Turning away from Nathan briefly, Chloe focused in on the girls, on the way Rachel turned back to seize Max by the hand, the slight shake of the photographer's head, the soft smile. Somewhere a few feet off to the right, Victoria emerged from the crowd, too. She looked as if she might have been dancing with someone. Chloe wondered who briefly before returning her eyes to Nathan. Too bad it wasn’t Max. Then again, Max hadn’t really said what she thought of the whole idea of Victoria crushing on her. Chloe hadn’t really considered what she thought of it, either.
A few steps away, Max pulled the two of them to a stop and Chloe's eyes slid sideways briefly to see Max line up and then snap a photo of Rachel. Courtney, who had been sitting not too far away from the far side of the doors to the gymnasium, got up to join Victoria and the two angled for Chloe even as Max and Rachel did. Then, Nathan did what might have been the most annoying thing he could have done while still in the gymnasium. Sneering, the boy slid his phone into the pocket of his doubtlessly overpriced jeans, made some sort of gesture she had gotten used to observing in him that involved touching the top of his right cheek and then stood up. *He's touching the scars, maybe? Does it every time he sees Rachel.* Either way, if the boy wanted to leave the gymnasium he had three options, unfortunately two of those doors were fire exits and touching either one would put an end to the party and bring trouble down on them all. In short, he was going to be forced to walk by Chloe.

Victoria and Courtney pulled to a stop beside her as Nathan approached. Rachel and Max were talking, flirting by the looks of things a few feet away, almost clueless as Nathan slowed nearer to Chloe and her sudden companions. Chloe saw his lips move, but whatever snide remark or cutting insult the boy shot at the two of them went unnoticed, swallowed up by the music, never to be known to anyone but himself. *What a fucking shame,* she thought, facetiously. Chloe's left hand rose and pulled the beanie down further over her hair as her right brought the cup up to her lips. If Nathan thought he was getting away, Chloe told herself as she drained what remained of her beer, he had another thing coming. A hand pressed down into her shoulder, as if to stop her from rising as Nathan approached. Victoria, looking down at her, shook her head twice, pointed to herself and yelled *something.* While she could hear the girl's voice, the music was just too loud to make out her words. The implication was obvious: Victoria was going to follow and watch him. At this point, Nathan passed through the doors and out into the hallway. Victoria turned without a word, leaving a confused looking Courtney in her wake, and followed.

Courtney, Chloe was given to understand, had done *something* to mend fences with Victoria earlier that day, but now stood lost without any input from the blonde. Chloe didn't have time to worry about her, though. She pushed to her feet immediately. *Bad idea letting her go,* Chloe decided. *I wouldn't let Max follow Nathan out of the gym alone.* *Shouldn't have let Victoria.* Chloe had just barely reached Max and Rachel, jaw clenching when Victoria disappeared from view, turning past the doors to pursue Nathan. *Yeah, that's gonna be a big no from me.* Reaching out, she shook either girl's shoulder. It had only been a second of hesitation, but it had been enough. Victoria had looked so confidently down at her, as if it was no big deal, that for a moment Chloe had wanted to shrug and go have a smoke while Victoria took over.

Chloe gestured to the door that the blonde had just disappeared from, as emphatically as she could and then made for it. When she glanced back, Rachel and Max were following. The music was so loud that Chloe had had time to get out into the hall and realize that there was no sign of Victoria or Nathan before she could explain to her girls what had happened, but as she did it was at a yell and she was already walking toward the center of the school. She had gotten a step or two before a hand closed around her forearm and Chloe turned. The hand belonged to Rachel, who shook her head when she realized she had Chloe's attention, gesturing to Max's back as the girl shot forward quite suddenly. Chloe blinked, confused, but followed. *Trust Max.*
When they reached the center of the school, there were still a few people milling about, some having bought a soda or a bag of chips from the vending machine and still others talking. It made it nigh on impossible to see down either of the other hallways but that did not stop Max from turning and making toward the front hall. At this point, Chloe fell in lock step with Rachel. How common had it become for the two of them to chase after Max as she hurried forward, propelled by some sixth sense that they had only come to understand in late October? *Shit, that's what this is, she rewound!* Chloe turned her head toward Rachel, whose eyes were wide as she hurried to keep pace with Max. The photographer had broken out into a run just a little too casual to be called a sprint. *I fucked up!*

Max did not lead them out of the school and toward the dormitories, instead veering off for, of all places, the girl's restroom. What was strange was the way that Max froze upon placing her hand against it, turned back and stared not at Chloe and Rachel both, but pointedly at Chloe. It was not a condemning gaze Max fixed on her, something telling her that she had done wrong in letting Victoria go alone even for a few seconds. It was *fear*, *fear* for Chloe. She couldn't say she understood it, but if it was important she would before it was too late. Slowly, agonizingly slowly, Max pushed the door open just wide enough for her to ease in sideways. After sharing a look, first Rachel and then Chloe followed suit.

Generally, the bathroom was what they expected. Half of the lights were on so it was rather dim, but it was a restroom, blue tiles and all. Once upon a time, Chloe had graffitied the place up very nicely, but now her artwork was mostly gone. Instead, the most conspicuous thing about this particular girl's restroom was the boy on the far end of it. The door slid shut behind Chloe, who did not speak because Max stood a step or two in front of her and Rachel with one hand held up. Nathan's back was to them and he seemed so enthralled in what he was doing that he had not noticed so much as their interest. Unfortunately, what he was doing was yelling as he shoved Victoria hard against a wall. The boy did not notice her eyes land on Max, Chloe and Rachel over his shoulder. He simply kept yelling.

“ *You don't get to judge me. You betrayed me!* ” Nathan was too old for his voice to be cracking so much, but it was and it made him sound even more unhinged than she already thought him. As far as Chloe was concerned, she did not know what they were waiting for, but Max remained frozen, her back to Chloe and Rachel with one hand raised. *What's she waiting on?* Victoria's eyes returned to Nathan and she tried to sidestep him, only for him to slam her once more against the wall.

“I didn't *betray* you, Nathan, I swear.” Once upon a time, when Chloe was younger and particularly hurt, she had imagined the sound of Victoria Chase's voice panicked, trying to avoid Chloe throwing down with her. It had been the petulant, angry fantasy of an embarrassed but ultimately unmotivated child, but Chloe remembered it. Back then she had imagined the sound as being vindicating. In reality, it was hard to listen to. *Victoria was* panicked. She *was* confused. Chloe was too, what in the name of *hell* was Max waiting for? Chloe shifted on the spot and glanced toward the mirrors along one wall.

“You sided with those *fucking* dykes!” Setting aside Nathan slurring them, Chloe learned
something disturbing in the moment. There was no calm, rational face attached to Max's reflection, no sign she was planning something or thinking. Instead, her face was cold and frozen in fear. Her body was frozen in fear. They weren't acting because Max was scared.

“They didn't do anything wrong,” Victoria told him, and then, finding her fire, she spat, “you did! You fucking drugged me, Nathan. How could you? I trusted you. You were the only one at this school I trusted like that. I told you shit.” Victoria's eyes slipped back to the three of them and this time Nathan caught on. The boy turned to his left so that his remaining eye could get a fix on them, one hand still reaching out to pin Victoria against the wall. The boy's face was dark red which made its usual sharp angles seem more dangerous than before. His left hand reached out, pointing an accusatory and almost banishing finger at them.

“That's a lie that they told you, but you know what, you betrayed me before that, so you deserve to be lied to!” Unhinged, he stacked lie upon lie, disregard upon disregard. Max's face began to transform. Pale pink lips began to rise in a sneer not unlike Nathan's own, her dark blue eyes widened. It was not the typical Max kind of anger but it was one she had seen before. The girl's airborne hand closed into a fist. The situation is escalating. You got us into this mess, Chloe, get us out. “You stupid bitches don't have a clue what you're messing with.”

“Take you hand off her, right now,” Chloe called past Max. Her voice echoed off of the walls of the bathroom, sounding unimpressive even in her own ears. The right side of her body was cold. No, Chloe thought, shooting a glance left toward Rachel. The left side of my body is warm. If she looked her thespian in the eyes, she would see the fire rising. They were in a small, enclosed space and every second that ticked was marked by an escalation in tension.

“I'm sorry,” Victoria told them, oddly enough focusing her attention on Chloe. “He just grabbed me and told me if I said anything he'd kill me.”

“Don't worry about it,” Max insisted, slowly setting her messenger bag down on the ground beside her. “This is why no one follows him alone. He doesn't fight fair.” Fight fair? Chloe wondered. With one last great heave, Victoria pushed at Nathan who responded by throwing all of his weight against his right hand, pressing her back hard into the wall, hard enough that Chloe heard the thunk of her skull against tile. What does she mean, fight fair?

“This is your last warning,” Rachel insisted.

“Shut the fuck up!” Disturbingly, instead of screaming this at Rachel or Max or Victoria or even Chloe, Nathan had turned at the last second to yell right into the closed door of a nearby stall. Oh fuck, he's off the deep end. That realization made it all the worse when she realized why his left hand might be reaching into his jacket. Whether Nathan was even cognizant enough to realize it or not, the entire situation changed the minute his hands started to move. He doesn't fight fair, Chloe
thought. Max had been trying to warn them all: he had a gun. “I will kill you all and it won’t fucking matter! No one will care! None of you can get away with this!”

“You will bleed out on this floor before you touch anyone in this room.” The words came out of her girlfriend and childhood friend’s mouth, but the voice was not hers. It was another’s. It was another Max Caulfield’s entirely. She had last heard it clearly threatening to bash Frank Bowers' head in with a bat if he ever touched Chloe again, and at that time all he had done was stop her from walking in front of Damon Merrick's knife. Max's slowly growing fury had reached such palpability, that Chloe felt like she was developing a headache. “Let Victoria go!”

“Max isn’t lying,” Chloe hissed at Rachel. The blonde looked at her in confusion for half a second and that half a second was all it took. The boy's hand disappeared into his jacket and Max took a step forward. Chloe did, too. The muscles in her left shoulder and arm tensed as she shoulder checked Max Caulfield. She had not done this in something around five years, but Max had always been someone she knew just how to knock off balance whether it was physically or mentally. The brunette never saw the hit coming. As Max fell sideways into and through the door to a stall, Chloe kept running. Max screamed her name. Metal glinted in Nathan’s left hand as he extended it and his right lost its purchase on Victoria's chest.

Chloe closed her eyes. She felt the connection of her body on Nathan's and heard his head crack back into the wall behind him. Victoria, it seemed, had gotten out of the way. When she did not feel pain or hear a noise that sounded like a gunshot to her, she opened her eyes and pushed off of the boy. He stumbled forward once and then slipped, falling to one knee. Chloe glanced about once, saw that Victoria was frozen only inches from them and then turned her eyes back on Nathan. The world was cold. Her heart hammered in her chest or the bass had just dropped to such levels as would be wont to blow out the gymnasium's sound system. Whatever emotions she felt were negative and all draped in a kind of adrenaline-fueled panic. She did not think she could analyze them but she seized onto the one closest to a familiar friend: contempt.

“Victoria. Get Max out here,” Rachel called from what might have been the end of a long hallway, miles and miles away. Whether Victoria moved or not, Chloe was not sure because in that moment sense returned to Nathan's eye and he looked up at her with rage, with panic of his own, with the most damnable sense of unbridled fear in his eyes. She wished she understood what he was so scared of, but he was the one with the gun. He was the one who had sexually assaulted people, he was the one who had threatened all their lives. Whatever voices he was hearing, whatever faces he saw which were not actually there, whatever was screaming for him to be the best, to be superior to everyone around him, it did not matter. Chloe saw the movement of the hand holding the gun as a rightful threat and reacted in kind.

She had never kicked anyone in the chest with these damned, heavy combat boots before but it produced a satisfying sensation in her leg when she did. The air drained from Nathan's lungs. His gun hand dropped, but unfortunately he remained a threat, so she stepped once, hard on his left hand. When he did not release the gun, she assumed they were at a standoff. When he regained his breath, she was fucked. Except, maybe not. Chloe felt the intense warmth flooding around her. Pale
orange reflected off of the tile walls. Nathan's eyes, already wide and feral as he gasped for air, looked far too large to belong to a human being in that moment. Those eyes left Chloe and slid to the blonde with the long, thick braided hair behind her.

“You didn't buy that electrical malfunction bullshit, did you Nathan? I thought you were too smart for that.” The sound the boy made after Rachel's little taunt was inhuman. It was not something the human body should have ever been able to produce and Chloe did not think its memory would let her sleep for some time.

“I didn't fuck up, you fucked up,” Chloe told the boy and then for the first time felt the satisfaction of punching Nathan Prescott across the jaw. He crumpled immediately to the floor, releasing his hold on his gun. Chloe kicked it, sending the cold metal sliding across the bathroom floor and then stood tall as she rounded on Rachel. The blonde's hair shifted to and fro in winds that Chloe had not even noticed a second ago but could not help but shiver under, herself. Nathan's unconscious form held Rachel's undivided attention, her hungry attention. A small, pale orange ball, the size of a fist danced where it sat cupped in Rachel's left hand. Beneath its surface, it moved almost naturally and she saw it for what it was: waves of fire. Rachel was beyond angry. This was the kind of Rachel who could burn down forests. Chloe backed toward a sink. “Calm down, Rachel, he's done.” Rachel's response was to shake her head and open her mouth to say something. Chloe did not let her get that far. She would burn him if he so much as twitched. It was possible it would even feel as natural – as good to her as punching him in the jaw had felt to Chloe. Though it was certainly a long shot, Chloe reached back and turned the sink behind her on full blast, angling her hand to splash cold water across Rachel's face as hard as she could.

For the most part, the diverted jet of water struck the blonde in the neck and not in the face but it did its trick. Confused, Rachel almost stumbled backward. For a moment the thespian was stunned as the fire she held like she was about to throw a softball faded away. Then, bizarrely, she laughed. Chloe was not sure what Rachel was feeling when she laughed, because her face was contorted still with a kind of white hot hatred, but she laughed. At this, Chloe reached out and grasped Rachel's right hand. The blonde's eyes focused on her.

For just a moment, everything that Rachel had been feeling continued to flow. Beneath Chloe's hand, Rachel was warm enough that it was a little unpleasant to hold onto her, for the first time ever. The room continued to experience unusual meteorological conditions in the way of wind strong enough to cause the doors of the stalls around them to shudder and occasionally open before slamming shut. The girl's face remained beet red. Every second they waited was a moment closer to the time Nathan awoke and became a threat once again. They needed to get him out of the way and then get out of there. She squeezed Rachel's hand tight, not letting go due to the warmth but also not trying to injure the girl.

“I need your help, now,” Chloe told Rachel. The headache from before had not been imaginary and now that Nathan was unconscious and Max had presumably calmed down, it was fading. Behind them, Max and Victoria were nowhere to be seen: even the photographer's messenger bag had vanished. Slowly but surely the, frankly, reasonable desire to cause Nathan some grief faded from
Rachel's eyes. Neither girl spoke as they released each other and seized Nathan Prescott. He was heavy enough that it took effort and coordination but a few seconds later instead of sitting on the floor crumpled over, he was sitting, slumped fully clothed, on a toilet seat in a stall. Rachel's breathing was still slowing to normal. Chloe's had not even begun. That did not stop her from getting an idea as she looked at her handiwork.

“What are you doing?” Rachel hissed at her as Chloe reached into her pocket. The large sharpie came up like a faithful servant eager to be of use and Chloe bit down on the cap, pulling the marker free. “Are you fucking serious?”

“The fucking seriousest,” Chloe insisted, playfully around the marker cap in her mouth and she leaned past Nathan to scribble on the wall beside him.

*Here I sit, broken hearted,*

*Full of shit and SO outsmarted*

*I've got no class, so take no chances*

*I drug girls at school dances.*

*Nathan Prescott, 2012*

When Chloe thought she heard him groan as if he might be coming to, she grabbed Rachel with her right hand and without bothering to cap the marker, pulled the girl from the room. She had no idea if Rachel was exasperated with her or not. She did not care. The action, petty as it was, had been very grounding. Chloe felt more like herself when she pushed out into the hall, caught sight of Max and Victoria standing only two or three steps away looking as if they had been arguing about whether or not to go back in and then gestured with her head for them to run. She took the lead, freeing the cap of the marker with her right hand, placing it on the writing utensil and storing it away.

“He's coming to with a sore jaw, it's time for us to leave,” Rachel said, in response most likely to some question that Chloe had not even heard. She thought Max had asked something of the girl, far too quietly.

“Leaving the party was a shitty idea,” Victoria suddenly called as Chloe angled for the gymnasium.

“Probably,” Chloe told her, as loudly as she could as she glanced back at the blonde, “but now you
“What?”

“You know he's not going to cool down.”

“I'm getting the fuck out of Blackwell,” Victoria declared as they reached the edge of what Chloe liked to think of as 'Able-To-Hear-Yourself-Think Land.' Here, no one looked at them, no one seemed to know anything had happened. *Were people looking at us before?* Chloe had not noticed. She had barely noticed the floor beneath her feet, the lockers along the walls or the two sets of open double doors they had passed through. Chloe glanced down at her left hand. It looked like shit, with abrasions across the knuckles. She was moderately impressed at how little it hurt. As for the blonde photographer's declaration that she was leaving Blackwell, it seemed to refer to the larger scale, moving away. This was evidenced by Victoria following them into the gym. *Max is the only one of us that can help with that, all things considered.* Still, Victoria needed words in that moment, judging by the lost, frustrated look on her face as she glanced around the gym and then started for the refreshment table. It just so happened that in that moment Chloe felt some kind of way about the idea of her leaving because of Nathan Prescott and she was not sure there was anything she would not say or do with the adrenaline still pumping through her.

Chloe turned on the spot and examined both Rachel and Max. Rachel did not seem to be paying much attention to her surroundings. She continuously started to raise and look down at her left hand and then lower it. When Chloe brushed against that hand, she did not jump as if she was in pain, so whatever was happening was emotional, mental but Rachel's face was blank. She had, Chloe realized, retreated to the safety of a calm and dispassionate mask. Max would not match Chloe's eyes, though she looked more guilty than angry. *Okay, so the girlfriend's not gonna hate you for pushing her into a toilet,* Chloe told herself and then smiled once at both girls and stepped away. *It was for the best. I don't want to know what she was going to do to Nathan.* Chloe reached out and placed her left hand on Victoria's shoulder. The girl froze and turned her head, no longer reaching for the cup that the, frankly, nobody behind the table was offering her. Chloe leaned in close and all but yelled into her ear.

“You need to talk to Max about what happened tonight.” If anyone could help the girl parse through the feelings she was having, it was Max. Unlike Chloe who would have remained at Blackwell just to be a boil on Prescott's pampered ass, Max was likely to support Victoria if she made a rational choice to leave. Chloe was just concerned that in her current state, Victoria wasn't making any rational choices. This concern was reinforced when, as soon as Chloe released her, Victoria looked pointedly away, picked up the offered cup of beer and began to drain it far too quickly without leaving the table. *This is gonna go downhill fast,* Chloe thought, *but we can't leave. Here there are witnesses if he tries something.* She wished she had thought to pick up Nathan's pistol.
Victoria was halfway through her third beer when Taylor and Courtney showed up. By this point, there had been absolutely zero sign of Nathan and lot of them standing around the door was beginning to attract raised eyebrows. Communication passed between Chloe, Rachel, Max, Victoria, Courtney and Taylor but it was almost entirely silent. With some frustration, the blonde still wearing those damned pearls finished her third beer and joined them in making an escape to a quieter part of the school. Personally, Chloe thought as she followed Max from the gym, she hoped they could stop by the science classroom. Either way, the moment she can hear me, I'm telling Max to talk to her. Victoria was surprisingly well composed, and Chloe gave her credit, but the crossed arms and the withering looks she gave anyone who so much as glanced at them as they passed were bound to upset someone.

No Nathan Prescott waited outside of the gym, nor among the people lining the hallways. Maybe he was still in the bathroom, sitting in the stall lamenting his failed attempt at revenge. Maybe he was back in the dormitories. Chloe did not care as long as he stayed far away from the six of them. Everyone else she cared about was either safe in their room or in a classroom with several other witnesses. He would not be taking anyone from her, not tonight. By the time that Chloe heard any member of their group clearly, they were practically standing outside of the science classroom. Yet, Max veered away and toward the wall opposite of it as she spoke.

“We sent the email, to everyone,” Max was confessing to Victoria, who had the good graces to shut her mouth and hide the stunned look on her face after only a second or two. “What are you so shocked about? I warned you I wanted to do something like this.” Victoria shook her head and answered with a vague hand gesture. Taylor slowed down behind Victoria but when she reached for the other photographer, Victoria jerked out of her grasp.

“No one touch me for a bit, okay?” Victoria asked, her voice surprisingly level. Chloe turned her attention from them to Rachel. While Max gave Victoria the run down on the email and what they hoped to accomplish with it, Chloe watched the blonde beside her. The thespian's face was still blank, but her eyes had come back to life and she responded to realizing that Chloe was examining her by reaching out and lacing the fingers of her right hand into Chloe's left. It was comforting.

“Listen,” Max was saying, “David's like a dog with a bone. If he just bites, something will come of it, sooner or later.”

“I'll think about waiting,” Victoria finally said. “I'll think about it.” At this Max fell quiet, arms crossing over her chest and turned back toward Rachel and Chloe. “I really want to get fucking wasted,” Victoria admitted to someone. Chloe did not know if it was any of the three of them, or Taylor or Courtney. Chloe was interested in only Rachel and Max in that moment because she knew that several things had happened to the two of them in that bathroom and for the last few minutes she had stood in the gym unable to speak to either of them.

“Same,” Rachel chimed in, quietly. Rachel had lost her cool, had been ready to burn Nathan. Max,
on the other hand, had been poised to enact some serious violence on him or get herself shot in the process. In Rachel's case, the fight, the danger of the gun might be to blame for her rage. In Max's though, Chloe had seen and felt the progression of fear to anger. The fear had not just frozen Max in place before the anger came to wash it away, it had also driven her to run with a specific destination in mind: the girl's bathroom. Max had traveled back in time. She had seen something in another timeline which had tipped her off as to what was happening and the idea that it might have been severe enough for Max to throw caution to the wind and risk her life was unsettling. Now that she could talk to them, Chloe, her of all people, could not find the words. She stepped forward, releasing Rachel's hand. Her left arm tightened around Rachel's shoulders and her right encircled Max's and she pulled both girls in.

The lot of them smelled of sweat and Rachel was still unnaturally warm, but Chloe did not mind. She did not make to release either of them even when she felt someone tapping on her shoulder. Hell, even after Max voiced her concern about Chloe continuing to hold onto them, she didn't stop. She wasn't sure how to put words to it but she had had a realization in that bathroom. As much as she was just fine to put Nathan Prescott on his ass a hundred times, she had not been affected in the same way as either of the two of them by the night that Nathan had hurt Max or maybe she had somehow come to be in better control of her anger than either of the two of them. She was not sure which of those two options had more disturbing implications, considering how she used to be ready to fly off the handle at a moment's notice, but no matter which was the case, there was a risk of losing these two every time something like this happened. Especially now that Nathan's going for guns.

After she had had her fill of holding onto them both, Chloe released her hold and turned to look at who had been trying to get their attention. Taylor stood in wait behind them, looking markedly uncomfortable. Chloe couldn't blame her. A few steps away Victoria and Courtney were talking, though as to what about, she didn't know. Slowly, Chloe untangled herself from Rachel and Max and slid her hands into her jacket pockets as she smiled sideways at the fourth girl, tilting her head questioningly. Taylor, for her part, cleared her throat and did her best to fix a concerned look on her face instead of one that suggested she knew she had intruded upon some kind of intensely personal moment. Then again, it was hardly her fault: they were standing in a hallway of Blackwell Academy with the occasional strangers dotting the wall.

“I guess I just wanted to know if you guys thought there was any real chance Victoria – or anyone else- is going to be safe?” Taylor liked to get down to business where Victoria was concerned, it sounded like. Or, was she (rightly) concerned about herself? Either one made sense to Chloe. “I mean, with Nathan like this... I don't know that he's going to calm down.” The girl rubbed awkwardly at one arm with the opposite hand.

“If the rumors about him go wider spread and reach everyone, especially after the emails that went out tonight, then maybe, yes,” Chloe started, looking sideways toward Max. “But I don't know that anyone who has actually had to deal with his bullshit is really on board with that.” If those 'rumors' got around and gained traction, it would mean that, effectively, everyone knew precisely what Nathan had done to Max. This was something of a double edged sword as it opened her up to Nathan accusing her of any number of things, including willful participation in his debauchery
paired with heavy drug use. The truth of the matter was that while Max might smoke a blunt a week, at the most, she was not guilty of heavy drug use. Hell, most of the time Chloe thought the term to be improper to apply to Justin and if that was the case, then Max was in the clear.

“It's kind of too late for me,” Max admitted suddenly, lowering her voice. “Enough people know that it might as well be common knowledge. Even if it's 'just a rumor' like Victoria.” At this point Taylor gave a slow nod as if to show that she understood and then made as if to start back for Victoria and Courtney. Chloe watched quietly, feeling Rachel's arm snake around her waist, as Max reached out and took the girl by the forearm. Taylor stopped firmly in her tracks. The blonde looked down, past her white and black striped top to Max's hand and then raised an eyebrow toward Max. “Do me a favor and don't trust Mr. Jefferson. There's a reason he's tripped off all of my alarms. I think Nathan's his favorite student.”

“Are you being stupid?” Taylor asked, pulling her arm free. It was not aggressive, nothing about her response was. Mostly she looked confused and a little amused, to boot. “You're his favorite student. Do you even listen to him?” Max shook her head and Taylor's voice lowered. “Max's photo is a prime example of using natural lighting to frame your target.' On and on and on.” Chloe snorted. It wasn't that it was amusing or even unbelievable that Max had earned the (hopefully) unsuspecting man's admiration. She was, after all, an amazing photographer. It was just that Chloe suspected by the look on Max's face that this was so far from a compliment that it wasn't funny.

“I tune him out as much as possible,” Max told Taylor, bluntly, eyebrows knitting together. “Unless he's giving us content for the test.”

“You should hear how he praises your photos. There's a reason he's always asking you for answers.” For the first time Chloe heard Taylor speak with a sentiment that was separate from her near hero-worship of Victoria. Taylor, a photography student herself, was jealous of Max's skill, both real and perceived. She was jealous that a famous photographer thought so highly of Max. Oh god, you poor fuck, if you only knew. If she only knew? It wasn't as if Chloe knew a ton of what Mark Jefferson was about. Max had exposed bits and pieces of the other timeline to her, but had not done so in much detail. The majority of what Chloe knew, she had gathered from flashes in dreams. She could remember one shot, of a man who might have been Jefferson in the dark and a gleaming needle as it touched her neck. Chloe threw her arm over the shoulders of a distressed Max.

“You're just too damned talented,” Chloe teased the girl, pulling her in tight. When Max seemed to acquiesce, moving in close to Chloe's side, she brought her arm down from the photographer's shoulder to her waist, wrapping that arm tight around Max. Max's mood, however, didn't improve. Instead the girl looked somewhat contemplative. It was as if Taylor had just told her that the answer to life, the universe and everything equation was 42, instead of the fact that her least favorite teacher considered her his favorite student. Taylor, it seemed, certainly looked to be completely unaware of the importance of what she had just said. That was alright. Max shifted her bag's weight on her shoulder and hummed.
“Thank you for the warning, Taylor.”

“I didn't think it was a warning, but if you're sure Jefferson's so bad, maybe it was.” This was not dismissive, it wasn't a ‘you're overreacting’, it wasn't even joking or mocking. Taylor looked as if the fact that Max had not responded positively to hearing that she was Jefferson's favorite student had been enlightening, the answer to a question of her own. I wonder what she was asking, Chloe thought, beginning to feel uncomfortable. Only an arm's length away, Rachel stood quietly observing them all. Chloe hated that observation, it felt as if Rachel was disconnected from them and that felt absurd. She reached out and grasped the thespian by the forearm until she came in close. It was Max who had the free hand to embrace Rachel. Chloe just did herself the favor of not letting Rachel go.

“Listen, Taylor,” Max said, emphatic as she stared at the girl from over Rachel's shoulder where Max's head had all but nestled. “I absolutely think he's bad. He's shit. He's the worst there is. I think there's something broken and fucked in his head and if he and Nathan are getting buddy-buddy – and you can't deny Nathan acts different in his class, now – then it's not good. It's dangerous for people. People who know too much.” Even as Rachel and Max broke apart, Chloe all but rolled her eyes at the phrasing. Taylor, on the other hand, nodded as if she was being told that it was raining that day, and she should take an umbrella with her.

“In other words, you're telling me to play stupid?” Taylor asked, suddenly grinning as if she had heard the funniest thing in the world in the dim light of the school hallway. When Max nodded the blonde all but relaxed and glanced back toward Courtney and Victoria who were talking somewhat quietly to one another. “I know how to play stupid,” she promised, waving a hand dismissively. “You and Victoria should learn.” Chloe laughed, and this time it was loud and open. Maybe Taylor hadn't been wrong. Max frowned. “You're both the same like that: you're so smart but you never know when and how not to say something that could get you in trouble.” On that front, Taylor might not be entirely correct, but it was still funny to hear that someone, anyone, had noticed Max's tendency toward being grandiose.

“You know, you'd be shocked how good she is at not saying things.” At this, Max wilted slightly under Chloe's arm. Yikes, didn't mean it like that. “No offense,” she tried quickly, not removing her arm but turning guiltily to look at Max directly. “I just mean when there are big things you have to keep quiet, it's easy to forget to say the little things too.” She met darker blue eyes, eyes which grimaced slightly but acknowledged her clarification and then, frowning herself, tried to let the moment pass. God, can you just not fuck up anything else today, Chloe?

“You know, you'd be shocked how good she is at not saying things.” At this, Max wilted slightly under Chloe's arm. Yikes, didn't mean it like that. “No offense,” she tried quickly, not removing her arm but turning guiltily to look at Max directly. “I just mean when there are big things you have to keep quiet, it's easy to forget to say the little things too.” She met darker blue eyes, eyes which grimaced slightly but acknowledged her clarification and then, frowning herself, tried to let the moment pass. God, can you just not fuck up anything else today, Chloe?

“Look,” Taylor started, turning away from the both of them to Courtney and Victoria. “I really wanna check up on her.” That was fair. Victoria had been through a lot and despite the fact that Courtney and Taylor knew little about tonight's escapade – as far as Chloe knew – the tall, thin blonde looked less like herself than usual as she and Courtney talked. Quiet and not as bombastic, Victoria pressed back against a locker as if it was all the support in the world, all she would need to
stay standing. *I never thought I'd say this about someone who brought Victoria down a peg, but if Nathan had to step on legos barefoot every morning when he got out of bed for the next thirty years, it'd totally be too lenient.* Chloe looked sideways at Max to see if she was alright and beneath her new sweatshirt, Max looked to be a little warm but otherwise not too upset if the neutral look on her face was anything to go by. Chloe reached across herself to grab Max's free hand and found it waiting for her. She did not respond to Taylor as the brunette turned away. Instead she pulled Max forward and began to run her left hand through the photographer's hair, pressing her lips to Max's forehead.

“We need to figure out where we're going. Can't keep standing here.”

“Chloe, Rachel,” Max suddenly declared, grasping tightly to either of them with either hand. It forced Chloe to release her so she could step back enough to look the shorter brunette in the eyes. Max was speaking just loudly enough for Chloe and the thespian beside her to hear. Rachel had been all too quiet over the last few minutes, Chloe wasn't sure if it was Rachel processing her feelings or what, but she wasn't about to find out. “Victoria's about to have one *fuck* of a breakdown and I don't know what to do.” This was disturbing and enough of a departure from talking about Jefferson that as Taylor got entirely caught up in talking to Victoria, Chloe eyed them. At this point, Ms. Chase looked more angry than upset but Chloe knew that was how many people protected themselves, acting angry. When prompted by Rachel grunting and gesturing for her to go on with one hand, Max continued. “I just got back from looking for Nathan. If he's on campus, I couldn't find him for almost an hour.” Considering that the girl speaking to Chloe hadn't left her side since Chloe and Rachel had emerged from the bathroom, she had to assume Max had just rewound. “And Victoria's about to have a meltdown and it's going to be ugly.”

“Get over there,” Chloe told Max without hesitation, gesturing with her chin to the three girls only a step or two away from them all. Rachel's response was to nod and then bring her hazel eyes alive without the benefit of the fire that said she was considering turning someone into a pile of ash. “Nathan's probably in his room, nursing his bruised ego, breaking all his expensive shit in some little bitch fit. Get over there.” When the brunette in front of her responded with an eyebrow raised, Chloe released Max entirely. “You're like, the only one who can calm her down at this point.”

“Why's that?” Max asked her.

“Jesus,” Chloe hissed. “I love you and all, but sometimes you're a daft fucker.” Max did not look as if she had been off on a journey, chasing Nathan around campus. Then again, save for the small trail of blood leaking from Max's right nostril she did not look any different than she had moments before, except for, perhaps, the dumbfounded look on her face as a result of how Chloe talked to her. She was surprised, nonetheless, as the brunette disengaged from them and immediately walked past Taylor and even Courtney to rest her hands on either of Victoria's shoulders, hunch slightly and begin talking to the blonde. “Fuck, she might be the only chance Victoria even has,” Chloe told Rachel.
“You know something?” Rachel whispered as she embraced Chloe once, tightly, perhaps as worried as part of Chloe was about Max connecting emotionally with Victoria. Chloe did not look too deeply into the tight arms around her shoulders. “You were kind of hot putting Nathan on his ass.” The shorter blonde slouched even more to bury her face into Chloe's neck. Chloe wouldn't have minded except she thought she detected the hitch of a sob in the girl's throat.

“Doing it was kind of hot,” Chloe promised her. “I looked in a mirror and almost got lost when I saw myself.” Rachel laughed into Chloe's throat. “I'm serious,” Chloe insisted, rubbing at the blonde's back softly. “I'm too hot for words.”

There was almost a minute after that, during which Rachel did not move. It was a minute in which no one bothered the lot of them. No sound rose that was too powerful from the gymnasium or the science classroom opposite of them, in which Chloe's roommate and several others were having a smoke. It was a minute in which Chloe watched Max over Rachel's shoulder as she talked to the wealthy blonde. When that minute was over Victoria's hands rose to cover her face. Max looked awkwardly at Taylor, Courtney and then to Rachel and Chloe. Chloe could only nod emphatically as she felt Rachel press closer into her. There was nothing Chloe could do to help and perhaps there was nothing she was supposed to do. The smaller brunette reached around Victoria and began to rub at her back even as Max tried to talk to her. Chloe thought it was a pointless endeavor: Victoria had been swallowed up by a grief they could not entirely see. Eventually, the two photographers walked down the hall, Max supporting Victoria, to find some privacy to talk in. Chloe did not bother them.
Chapter Sixty-Three: Metochos

Chapter Notes

I've made the decision to go to two chapters a day from now until the end, which is very, very close. I hope folks enjoy. Also, yeah, it's time for That Chapter.

Disclaimer: Anything familiar to you, I don't own. This is a work of fanfiction for personal amusement, fulfillment and a bit of self-therapy. I make nothing from any of it.

Chapter Sixty-Three: Metochos

April 22nd, 2012 11:34 AM

Max collapsed back on Rachel's bed and stared up at the text message she had just received. The one thing she was fairly certain of was that the message was important, that its sender had a genuine need to talk to her. Unfortunately, since Max knew where the girl who had reached out to her was, she had a good idea that seeing her meant leaving the relative safety of the top floor of the Prescott Dormitories. Outside of breakfast on weekdays and school hours, she did not do that anymore. Lots of the girls who understood what was happening were the same way. Just over a week prior, Max, Rachel and Chloe had gambled that by releasing the information they had on Nathan and Jefferson, they could make Blackwell a safer place.

And hadn't that just backfired spec- fucking- tacularly? She rolled over on the bed and looked out toward the rest of the room. Rachel had never gotten around to really decorating the year prior but this year she was letting her freak flag fly. Max still didn't know much about half of the bands featured in posters strung across the room's four walls but Chloe and Rachel bonded over them and occasionally Max joined the two of them in listening to that music. It was angry music and sometimes helpful when she needed to have fire and not fear. Ever since Monday, though, those days had been few and far between.

Victoria

Can we talk? It's kind of important. I wanna meet up.

If you're not busy, I mean.
Max stared at this, having read it for the fifth or sixth time while she put off answering, or even deciding on an answer. In the end, there was only one response she was capable of giving: yes. She could not help but worry with a part of her brain that the talk Victoria wanted to have was about whether or not she was going to leave Blackwell Academy, after all. Chloe and Rachel had tried to convince her to stick around and Max had even done the same thing later that Saturday night, when they were far from the thumping bass of the music. *Just give it a day or two, I said. Everything's gonna change.*

It still took everything she had to have faith that this was going to work out in their favor, everything she had not to rewind to a photo taken outside of Up All Nite Donuts before she had released the files to anyone, even Juliet. Blackwell *had* changed, but she was not sure it was for the better. Nathan had become more violent and threatening than ever. Ostensibly he had only broken school property so far, but Max had heard from Daniel that Warren Graham was taken to the hospital in the middle of the night, Wednesday. The official story was that he had fallen in the shower. Max did not believe it. She had heard no specific updates on him, but Brooke had told her that at least he was set to be released today. She could not help but think that Nathan had had a hand in that. As for Jefferson, he had 'addressed concerns' to the satisfaction of Principal Wells by hosting a Q&A at a school board meeting. He continued to favor Max and Nathan over the rest of the class.

*Me*

Okay. Um, where?

*Victoria*

By the vending machines.

Then there was Wells himself, who had spent the week using a portion of the morning announcements to invite 'EwindF,' the username Max had sent the files out under, to expose themselves and open a dialogue. There was also all the potential that the Vortex Club's next party, next week, would be its last as Nathan was effectively no longer a member. At the very least, if the parties continued they would never be the same again, likely to be tamer than a middle school dance. Max wished Rachel would hurry back from the restroom.

*Victoria*

By the vending machines.

*Max?*
Okay. Five minutes?

Victoria

Okay.

What had been intended to fix Blackwell had done the opposite. Max's stomach had relocated itself somewhere near the soles of her feet when she overheard David reminding Wells of his 'camera proposal.' David had attempted to set the school under constant surveillance after Rachel's disappearance in the other timeline, Max knew, but that had been a ways down the line. More than a year out. As for the head of security himself, David was more strict and militant with students than he had ever been. If you laughed too hard, he was watching you, if you breathed too hard, he was watching you and if you coughed too loudly he might taunt you by asking what you were smoking. There were, all told, no signs that he was doing anything about Nathan or watching him any harder than usual, though he certainly responded to almost a report a day about the boy.

Rachel returned about a minute after she agreed to meet Victoria. As the door opened, Max rose to a sitting position and watched as Rachel entered. Once she knew the girl was back, she slipped her feet into her shoes and reached for her bag sitting on the floor at the foot of the bed. Rachel slowed when she watched what Max was doing. Max knew that the girls were getting worried by her unwillingness to go around campus outside of school hours. Hell, she was worried. The thing was that the more she was out on the grounds of campus the more she was at risk of falling victim to Nathan's inevitable revenge plot, or having something thrown at her or getting hit by something the boy swung at her.

Max was scared.

“Going somewhere?” Rachel asked her, her voice low, a little confused and a bit patronizing.

“Victoria wants to meet up.” It was going to be impossible to come up with any good reason for the girl to stay with things as they were. If Victoria was done with Blackwell, Max understood. She was beginning to see less and less reason to stay, herself, though the biggest reasons had not changed at all. Chloe and Rachel were still here. Hell, so was Steph.

“Ooooh,” Rachel all but crooned. The tone was teasing, taunting. Max knew that in that moment
the two of them were imagining different conversations entirely. Max thought that Victoria was asking her to come say goodbye. Rachel thought that Victoria was going to ask her out. “What are you gonna say?” At this, the blonde plopped herself down on the edge of her bed but for once Max did not join her. She stood in the center of the room relatively ready to leave but knowing she had a minute or two before she needed to.

“If it's about that I don't know yet,” she lied. At least, she lied partially. There were a few questions Victoria was going to have to answer before Max decided how she felt on the topic of a potential Victoria crush. “If it's about her leaving the school-” Max sighed. “I'm going to tell her good luck wherever she's going. We thought we were helping but we made it worse. I'm scared most of the time, I don't blame her for being the same way.”

“You have been staying in your room a lot,” Rachel said, suddenly slightly uncomfortable judging by the way she rubbed at one arm, slow up and down gestures. “We just weren't sure when to bring it up.”

“I'm scared that Nathan's coming after us.”

“I mean, after what happened to Warren and Daniel,” Rachel shrugged. Max furrowed her brows.

“Daniel?”

“Yeah, the way Hayden tells it, Warren got in the way while Nathan was pushing Daniel around.” Max could believe that. Nathan liked to pick on people who couldn't or wouldn't fight back against him almost exclusively. It was not the story that Daniel had given her, but Max rather thought he might have been scared to tell the truth.

“God, he's going to explode soon, big time and we – I'm the one at fault. We fucked up. It backfired. We fucked up big.” There was no time to sit and feel sorry for herself. Max grimaced in Rachel's direction, waved her left hand and made for the door, intending to promise to be back in short order. The blonde rose from the bed, stopped her by reaching one hand out and grasping Max's shoulder and then pulled her close. Max did not fight her. She closed her eyes and leaned her head against Rachel's shoulder as the girl's arms curled around her lower back.

“We did the best thing we could think to do – the only thing we could think to do.”

“It doesn't feel like it.”
“Text me when you get into the building?” Rachel asked, not releasing Max as if she was going to hold the photographer until she agreed. That was not the best motivation: why would she want Rachel to let her go? Except I have somewhere I have to be. Max sighed. It was important to get through either of the potential conversations the two of them had theorized Victoria needed out of the way. It wasn't leaving Rachel behind for a few minutes that bothered Max. It was going out there at all. “Max?”

“Yeah,” Max promised. She shifted the weight of her bag on her left shoulder and patted Rachel on the back with her right hand, eventually rubbing circles over one shoulder blade. “I will.” Slowly, Rachel released her and Max turned back toward the door. There did not seem to be anything else to say or if there was Max did not know it and Rachel did not say it. She shut the door behind her and, quiet as could be, made for the door leading down to the staircase. No sounds came from down below that spelled any particular trouble or even any notable activity on Nathan's part. Not that she was entirely sure what she would be listening for, anyway. For one paranoid moment, she paused with her hand on the knob of the door at the end of the hall and imagined Nathan lying in wait for her just outside of the door, ready to push her down a flight of stairs. Then, Max breathed out, dispelled herself of the notion and pushed the door open. Don’t be dumb. Victoria wouldn't set you up like that, not even under duress.

Once outside of the dormitories, she realized she had no interest in walking the usual paths. So as much as she hated to slow herself down and make herself late, Max stuck to the back edge of campus, hugging the back fence and walking through the grass, which really needed a mowing. She felt the tops of each blade press against her ankles. The school paid outside help to do that, as Samuel's work kept him busy elsewhere on campus more often than not, but for some reason whoever it was had not done the work. She doubted it was a budget issue, so Max felt a tiny bit of curiosity, but for the most part her focus was on making it to the school doubletime without catching sight of Nathan or anyone she thought might tell him where she was, which at this point there really wasn't anyone. No one had even seen Eliot hanging around Nathan in about two months.

At one point as she approached the back of the school building the familiar dark blue of the security crew's uniform caught her attention from around the side but whoever wore it was smaller than David and probably not quite as tall. As such, she did not tense up. To top it off, she wasn't hassled. Isn't it funny how easy that was, David? The building was unlocked during the day on weekends since it was used for club meetings including, as it turned out, the prom planning committee. That was the meeting that Victoria was supposed to be in, though Max wondered how much more they had to plan this close to prom. I'm not sure what to do about prom. She supposed that if they went, the three of them would simply go together and anyone feeling judgmental on that front could go fuck themselves. Then again, Max chuckled to herself as she realized that it might mean seeing Chloe in a dress for the first time in years. She shrugged. There would have to be a photo, at least, if that happened. Which I'll have to hide so Chloe doesn't destroy it. Then again it was not beyond Chloe to show up in a tux. Or sneakers, jeans and a tee. The big question was whether they would all make it until the prom without some great disaster happening to make them want to leave the school.
Under some circumstances, empty hallways might have been taken very well. As it was, they just
seemed like long stretches of space where Nathan could sneak up from behind her and – whack –
she would be gone without anyone being the wiser. Thankfully, after a few seconds she both saw
and was seen by someone, after all. Victoria, who had snuck away from the committee meeting to
text her, leaned back against the snack vending machine with her arms across her chest. When their
eyes matched, the blonde raised a hand.

“Hi.” This was neither her most verbose greeting nor was it laced with an overabundance of
emotion. If anything, she might have been saying the words ‘let's get this over with’ instead. Max
didn't know what to say to that, so she tried to offer a smile that did not look nervous and sickly
which was how she felt. Rachel had really made things worse by suggesting that this conversation
might be about Victoria's feelings but Max had not realized how much worse until she spotted
Victoria standing there in wait, arms crossed over her dark top and tapping her toe in a sandal
whose price Max almost definitely didn't want to know. She would never understand why Victoria
dressed so extravagantly even for lounging around the school. “Do you think we can go
somewhere private?” Victoria did not even save this question for Max drawing close enough to
speak normally. There's no one around,

“Uh,” Max glanced about for the nearest classroom. “Sure.” Her eyes landed on the familiar
setting of the science lab and she stalked right over to the door instead of continuing any closer
toward the vending machines. It opened under her grasp and Max stood there, holding the door ajar
a crack and watching Victoria as the girl came to her senses. It was somewhat awkward to stand
and wait on her, but then that just made Max understand why Victoria hadn't been willing to wait to
start speaking until they were closer together. One felt useless standing, silently, waiting for the
other person to meet up with them. Or maybe you're nervous about everything right now and
overthinking it and need to SHUT. UP. Max snapped back into focus and hoped that that particular
bit of mental dialogue had not played out across her face. So often when that happened people
made assumptions about what you might be talking about.

There was, as it turned out, no one in the classroom. Max planted her ass in a chair at the nearest
table as Victoria let the classroom door shut behind her. After a moment or two of that hesitation
that was not just uncharacteristic of Victoria but offensive to her headstrong nature, Victoria joined
her. What she did not expect was that instead of talking, the minute they each sat down an
unnatural silence would descend upon them. From the look on the blonde's face, the way she toyed
with her necklace, she was trying to find the words to start. Max found herself wishing she had
bought a soda first to have something to do with her hands during the silence. She did not want to
look as if she were rushing Victoria to speak. The girl looked, judging by the way she was holding
herself, as if she might have had a rough night's sleep. Bad sleep was often worse than no sleep for
the brain's processing power, in Max's opinion.

“What is it, Victoria?” Max finally asked softly after some time had passed. She did not check her
phone to see how long it had been but the silence had stretched from uncomfortable to agonizing,
so Max could safely assume it had to have been a minute or two, right? At this, first frustration
then resignation crossed the girl's face and she released her hold on her necklace and settled both
hands on the table in front of her. That being said, she instantly began to drag her nails across its
surface. Maybe Victoria, too, was having difficulty with what to do with her hands.

“So I think you know this by now,” Victoria started, sounding as if her words were mere wisps of
wind and then building up to her usual volume and forceful nature, the one that demanded to be
heard. “But I think I kind of might have a bit of a crush on you.”

“There were a lot of qualifiers on that one,” Max noted as her stomach turned. Fuck. Rachel was
right. This meant that in the next couple of minutes Max was probably going to be forced to ask a
couple of ugly questions. Maybe all of those qualifiers on the admission of nothing more complex
than a crush would have to be where she started. “Why's that?”

“Yeah, well, I've never been super sure one way or the other,” Victoria told her, which made little
sense to Max. She had known the minute her crush developed on Rachel that a crush was growing.
She had even tracked the difference in feelings felt for Chloe from the moment someone else’s
thoughts and mind left hers to do their thing. How one could be unsure about a crush was beyond
Max but she wasn't exactly offended by the statement, just dubious. “Just what?”

“Just what?” Max prompted her when it sounded as if Victoria might trail off, might lose the head
of steam she had been building. She wanted to talk to an honest Victoria, the authentic Victoria, the
real thing: blunt, assertive, confident at least enough to speak her mind as she always had.

“I've acted like a huge dick to people,” Victoria admitted. “Part of it comes down, I think, to what
you said: I think I was insecure. And most of that has nothing to do with you, it has to do with my
mom and dad and me and what I want to do and how I want to prove to them that it's worth
something, that I don't have to be some famous artistic photographer to be a good photographer, to
be successful. Some of it was because I felt like I had to compete with you, because here came this
new girl out of nowhere who becomes Drewer's favorite overnight, who takes these really cool
shots and hardly ever seems to hesitate. I hesitate all the time when I'm taking photos.” Max did
not believe that last bit. She, too, hesitated constantly. Victoria on the other hand was a charging
bull when she lined up her shots, and more often than not the ones Max had seen looked, if a little
clinical then at least precise, clear cut. Certainly looking at them would not suggest hesitation.

“And maybe some of it was because I felt like I had to compete with you and hey, Victoria, you
might be a total closet case. I hated that idea.” Strangely enough, Victoria sounded the most herself
as she reached this bit. Max didn't like that idea. Was it possible that Victoria had a tendency
toward self-deprecation that Max had never noticed before?

“Go on,” Max prompted once more when it looked as if Victoria was waiting for her to interrupt.
“I just, I know I was a dick to other people, too, like Chloe, who just got caught in the crossfire or Kate who really didn't deserve all of that but I just was and that had nothing to do with you. I'm not making excuses, I'm just saying that's what I did.” Victoria had not come to any kind of conclusion, so again Max stayed quiet. It was almost like Victoria was having some of these thoughts for the first time and Max was just intruding upon those private thoughts. “I'm trying to change, at least, kind of. I'm trying not to be a dick and there's something else.” The something else had to be big, because Victoria's eyes widened slightly and Max could swear the girl was breathing slightly harder. Come on, out with it, damn it. “I guess I was wondering if - if you're okay with it and if it's not going to cause other problems because I don't know how any of what you, Rachel and Chloe have going on works - if maybe we could just go out somewhere some time. Us two.” Oh. Max realized that Victoria's heavier breathing, the wide eyes, the way her hands worked against each other, these were all very familiar signs. She was not all too different from this when highly embarrassed. Max felt a bit embarrassed in the moment, too, though not as much as Victoria.

“The thing is,” Victoria added, voice slowing, words quieting, “unless something huge changes, I'm leaving Blackwell after prom. This is all way too much and if I wasn't part of the prom committee I'd be gone already. I kind of need to know if I have a thing for you before I go. I'm already gonna leave Blackwell because I'm scared of Nathan and - and I guess Jefferson. I don't want to leave being scared I might be into someone, even if it's... you know -” Desperate to change the tone of the conversation slightly, Max channeled her inner Chloe, to a degree.

“An extremely cute, talented, funny and intelligent girl?” Victoria had the wherewithal to laugh once, but it still sounded a little nervous, a little forced even if a lot of the other outward signals of anxiety were vanishing.

“Humble too.”

“Oh, you have no room to talk,” Max shot back, this time the one to cross her arms over her chest, trying to give a playfully judging look about her.

“Maybe not, but I stand by it. I'm into you, you know. So I wanted to ask. If you don't want to I understand. It's not exactly some huge declaration of undying love or anything – not exactly romantic but-”

“Victoria, I've wanted to say this to you before, a lot, but shut up.” Max reached out and patted the girl once on the back of her hand, just a signal to suggest she was not trying to be a dick. “This sounds like a plan, but speaking of, planning the date is on you, because I'm absolutely clueless.” This time, Victoria's laugh sounded more realistic if a bit taunting in and of itself. That was more Victoria's default, though.

“I thought you were cute, talented, funny and intelligent? Couldn't someone like that plan a date?”
“You thought I was cute?” Max shot back, grinning widely. To her surprise, Victoria did not break in any way. If the girl was endeared or annoyed by her playful teasing she did not show it. Victoria for the moment, simply looked like Victoria. If anything she sat a little taller than usual, as if a weight was off of her shoulders. “Really, though,” Max continued when she thought she might have seen a small quirk of Victoria’s lips. “You’d be surprised how miserably awkward I can get about shit. So, um, you’re leaving?” Max asked. The subject change was abrupt and hardly to equally pleasant conversation, but it was important. *It also means Rachel and I were both right. Take that, Miss Amber.*

“I mean, Nathan's off the deep end and I don't feel safe and Wells doesn't care.” He really didn't. Or if he did, he did not care enough to do anything or help anyone. He was probably more concerned with how 'EwindF' had had the school's mailing list. “Besides, you barely leave your room anymore, you know what I mean.” Max wished, in that moment, that Stella had somewhere to go, that she could leave Blackwell. Outside of classes, Stella was basically in her room constantly, too. *She doesn't have my parents to go back to. Just assholes.* Victoria sighed. “This sucks. I thought I'd come here, learn a lot about photography and then go on to big things. When one of my favorite photographers was going to be our teacher I thought it was going to be amazing but it's hard to pretend like he doesn't seem creepy, now that we know what we know.”

“Jefferson's charismatic but it doesn't make you forget,” Max muttered sympathetically.

“And to top it all off, I did lose my best friend. He's not just violent, he's crazy. You heard him that night. He was talking to like, seven or eight people in a room with just four of us.” Though Max had only personally witness it happen once or twice, Victoria had told her privately about Nathan’s behavior later that evening when it became clear she was not going to be able to keep it together to stay at the party. They had retreated together to the girls' dormitory and let the locked door be their guard while they talked in the hall, at least once Victoria had been able to talk again. “Did you know that he accused Rachel of being some kind of witch or something?” Max wanted to laugh and she certainly tried but that had been a point of some concern for Max. As far as she could gather from Rachel and Chloe’s recounting of what had happened in the bathroom after Victoria had pulled her from the room, Rachel's rage had led her to threaten Nathan with fire. Knowing as Max did the depth of Rachel's guilt about her first encounter with the boy, she could not imagine what the blonde had been thinking or feeling.

“I didn't bring you here to whine to, though,” Victoria said, almost admonishing herself. When Max opened her mouth to tell Victoria it was alright, that they all needed to vent sometimes, the blonde raised a hand as if to dismiss it, so Max fell quiet. “I just wanted to talk to you face to face and get your answer, and I have.” At this, the heir to the Chase line brightened slightly. “Also, I guess I wanted to tell you sorry in person, no matter what you said about a date.” Max swallowed at the word *date* but she had other concerns.

“Sorry about what?”
“I'm sorry about a lot of things, but right now that I'm too scared to stay when you and Stella aren't.” Max wanted to reassure the girl, tell her that she thought that if Stella had a place to go, she would. Max wished she could tell Victoria everything that she knew and why she couldn't leave herself. Instead, she had to lie by omission because fuck, the truth sounded crazy. There was no coming out with part of the truth about why she was staying either. If the day arose that she told anyone else the true story about her time at Blackwell, it would have to be all or nothing and that meant dragging Chloe and Rachel with her. Max did not care for that idea.

“At least we both live in Seattle and can meet up this summer, if we want.” Again, Victoria smiled slightly, yet at this instead of agreeing to the idea or not Victoria got to her feet and announced she had to return to her meeting. “You're probably right,” Max agreed. Maybe the conversation had gone on long enough considering their pasts and they just needed to take some time to process and think. “But I'm gonna be waiting on that date.”

“You better be,” Victoria promised her before crossing to the door of the classroom. Max wondered how that was going to go. She realized, watching Victoria open the classroom door and wave a goodbye, that she had never been on a date with someone to see if they 'clicked.' Max waved back and kept her seat for the moment. Sure, she had date nights with Rachel or Chloe or occasionally both of them but that was entirely different. They had already been pretty well together when those started.

Me

So, uh, guys? What do you wear on an actual date?

Rachel

Oh my god. Chloe, pay up. Again.

Steph

Brutal. Savage. Rekt. God damn, Chloe, how does it feel getting taken to the cleaners?

Chloe

I for one think we should be paying attention to the fact that Max has a date. I think focusing on silly bets is really juvenile at a time like this.

Rachel
Me

You guys are so helpful. Also, Victoria's leaving after prom.

Steph

Ouch

Max was in a tentatively better mood when she shut the door to the girl's dormitory behind her. She considered going back to Rachel's room but decided almost immediately to stop by her own first. Theoretically, no one in the girl's dorms would let Nathan up onto the second floor so she felt safe up there and did not rush. Once in the room, Max changed into something a little cooler. The day felt warmer than she expected for April. During the process she continually became distracted by her own thoughts and sat on the edge of the bed parsing over details of their conversation: Victoria's slightly self-deriding language, the way Victoria had no response to the idea of meeting up with her over the summer. In the moment she hadn't been sure what to say to the girl, now she realized she had several questions which only Victoria could answer. Max knocked on Rachel's door as soon as she felt like she was out of her thoughts enough to dress and be around people.

It was Kate and not Rachel who let her in. Rachel's nose was buried in what was probably Kate's English essay but she still looked up, smiled slyly and raised her eyebrows twice, suggestively. Whether this was teasing about Victoria or just her boasting about being correct about the topic of conversation, Max did not know. When she had hugged Kate and ascertained that the girl was having a relatively good way, she went quiet and let Kate return to reading Rachel's essay, too. Smart girl would have hers done by now, Max reminded herself. Ah, fuck it, tonight. She settled down on the edge of the bed near Rachel while the two read their papers and checked her message, sifted through the few photos on her phone and generally tried not to be a nuisance.

Something felt off about the air in the room but Max took it to mean that maybe her mood was not as improved by her talk with Victoria as she had thought it would be. When both girls had finished reading and sharing their notes, Max felt a slight tension in the air which only intensified when Rachel asked if either of them wanted to go anywhere. Max tried to use humor to deflect from the fact that the moment the idea of going back out there rose up, she felt uncomfortable and nervous. It did not work, but Max followed through anyway.

“I've been outside once already today, but if you're leaving campus, I'm in,” she said, smiling ruefully. The thing was, Rachel did not buy into the humor of the statement as a default and even Kate was looking at her thoughtfully instead. After a moment, Kate nodded, slowly.
“I get it,” Kate told her. Judging by the next several seconds of silence they had mutually decided to stay in.

“Are you doing okay?” Max asked Kate, trying anything to improve the mood. Rachel began to toy with her phone.

“I'm kind of disturbed about what's happening.”

“I get that,” Rachel chimed in, looking up. “It's getting tense around here.” *Rachel with the understatement of the century.* When prompted about what she did over spring break, their slightly more conservative friend all but jumped from her seat. Eagerly, the girl recalled going back home, meeting up with friends from church.

“It was quiet there. I kind of miss it.”

“Summer's almost here,” Rachel told Kate. Max did not know what to think about that fact. *Summer was* almost there. A long break from school was coming which meant leaving Nathan Prescott behind in the dust. It also meant leaving Blackwell and Arcadia Bay and thus Rachel and Chloe. Max was not a fan of that idea.

“I'm kind of disappointed,” Kate said, instead of responding to the Rachel's point. “I'm disappointed they didn't punish Nathan or do something about Jefferson. Especially because the rumors have to have reached them about the other stuff Nathan was doing.” Kate did not match Max's eyes when she said this. Max was fairly certain that those rumors *had* reached Wells. She had once considered going to Wells and telling him flat out, rewinding if it backfired, before reminding herself what had happened in the other timeline the day Nathan killed (or nearly killed) Chloe in the girl's bathroom.

“Wells isn't going to do shit,” Max told Kate with some certainty. “Remember, the Prescotts basically fund this school. Nathan will have to be caught in the act.” The conversation had suddenly become rather uncomfortable. It did not look to Max as if her mood could take a much larger downward turn until, after a while, Rachel looked down at her phone and announced it was dinner time. When the blondes both looked up from what they were doing at the time, it was to stare pointedly at Max.

“I'm not hungry,” she told them, immediately. She did not want to go out there. She did not want to run into Nathan, whose violent tendencies seemed to manifest themselves as often if not more often than they did not. By now, Max figured, he knew it was her, Chloe or Rachel who had released the information that had resulted in his even more severe isolation. Ultimately, her goal had been for
him to be forced to get treatment or be removed from school grounds, either way he would theoretically stop attacking people. Neither had come about, he was simply being *ostracized*. Max looked into Rachel's eyes and saw the way that this conversation was going to go before it even started. Having skipped breakfast and lunch, Max not wanting to go down to dinner was a Bad Sign. She knew what the right answer was, she just couldn't give it. She honestly had no appetite and the idea of eating just to eat made her stomach churn. “I'm just not super interested, but if you two wanna go on down, go for it.” Rachel shook her head.

“Max, please eat.” The request was genuine, it was soft, it was not judgmental. It was completely reasonable, except that it was not.

“I'm *not* going down there.”

“Then I'm bringing you something back.” Rachel insisted, reaching out as if to rest a hand on Max's knee. The girl paused halfway there, asking permission with her eyes. Max only felt hurt in the idea that she had somehow sent off the wrong signals, made Rachel feel as if she was putting distance between them. She met Rachel's hand with her own and gave it a squeeze.

“You don't have to,” Max assured her.

“I do.” She watched Rachel and Kate leave, the latter of which had become very quiet at Max's refusal to join them for dinner. She hoped Kate wasn't upset, but reading her face was difficult sometimes when Max did not feel her best. Rachel let Kate exit first before she paused, halfway out the door and leaned back in. “I'm seriously worried about you, Max. I want to help. I'll do anything, just tell me what it is.” The truth was, unless Rachel had the ability to make Nathan and Jefferson both go away, Max didn't know what the girl thought she could do.

She sat alone on Rachel's bed for several seconds after the door shut behind her girlfriend. She sat, knees pulled up to her chest, ashamed. She knew she probably shouldn't be ashamed, but it was there and hard to deny. It was one thing to sneak down and into the school to meet up with Victoria. It was another thing to go sit in a room where Nathan might be, or where he might show up, when she already felt the far too common feeling that actually eating might make her sick to her stomach. It was guilt, and she knew it. Max leaned sideways and fell over on Rachel's bed, her head hitting the pillow as she exhaled. She didn't mean to, but she went through the list of things she felt guilty about.

It was long and some of it objectively was not her own fault but also objectively made her hate herself in retrospect. It hurt to parse the list, but she did so, she always did that when she disappointed Rachel or Chloe or made them worry over her. It didn't help that the shitty state of campus was *her* fault. She did not know what to do about any of it. It didn't take long for her to go from guilty to angry at herself. There was no way she was going to ruin what was otherwise a nice
day for Rachel. Max left her bag in the girl's room but got to her feet and stormed out of the dormitories.

She was going to join Rachel and Kate for dinner and if Nathan was there and he tried something, then he tried something. It wouldn't be the first confrontation with him she'd been involved in and probably not the last. At least it would be public. As long as she didn't catch her off guard he was going to have a much harder time with her than he had had knocking one of Warren's teeth out, plus whatever else he had done to the boy.

Max Caulfield wasn't sure who she was angrier at as she pushed the front door to the dormitories open, herself or Nathan.
Chapter Sixty-Four: Tiresias

Disclaimer: Anything familiar to you, I don't own. This is a work of fanfiction for personal amusement, fulfillment and a bit of self-therapy. I make nothing from any of it.

April 23rd, 2012 3:33 PM

It was still fairly early in the afternoon, but Rachel could have sworn she had been awake for a full day already. She leaned back against the picnic table, raising an eyebrow at Max as the girl knelt and then snapped a photo. No one was particularly sure where Steph was and what she was up to, but they waited patiently for her. Chloe for the most part had been on her board or talking with the two of them about just how much work had sucked the Saturday prior, but seemed to be in a good mood, looking forward to the four of them hanging out. Max, on the other hand, had been a little photobug since classes let out. There had been, mercifully, several willing participants (Hayden, Logan, Dana, Taylor and Courtney) to sate Max's desire to photograph just about fucking anything. Max had already explained it as a coping mechanism, it was how she dealt with not running back to the dormitories. Rachel understood that. She couldn't help but feel bad for Stella, though, who had bolted from the school building at the sound of the final bell or Victoria who would be moving away next month.

Max is hard on herself, but she's doing her best.

Today was a day for serious talk, yet it was hard for Rachel to start. Blackwell smelled of freshly cut grass, and the weather was in the sixties which was just barely too warm for Rachel to go back to her jacket but not so warm that she was uncomfortable. She liked the sixties. All told, she thought it was almost nice out there, especially with spring in full bloom. Max had had plenty of inanimate photography subjects since they had emerged from the school.

Just talk to them. It's no big deal. Except, it was. Today she was going to talk to them about something that might ultimately mean their separation. That thought made her feel cooler than a moment before and not even in a pleasant way.

“I've been thinking about something,” Rachel blurted out when it suddenly became really uncomfortable to fathom the implications of their talk. Chloe paused in playing with her phone to look over at Rachel, perhaps perturbed by the sudden, loud volume and high tone of her voice. Rachel swallowed against the tone, because she saw that not only did it make Chloe concerned, Max had jumped. The brunette was now watching her from two or three steps away looking incredibly uncomfortable. Max was uncomfortable a lot lately, but this time it looked potent enough to remind her of shortly after they first met. “I've been thinking and I think my mother's right. I want to go into acting and the Film, Theater and Television department at UCLA seems like the best place. If I keep my grades up and my mother does talk to her friend... I could make it in.”
Even having tried to keep her voice calm, this all came out at once in a rapid word vomit. It showed, too, because even Chloe looked a little shell shocked when she finished. Rachel almost didn't dare to look toward Max. The bluenette smiled a little, as if to say she understood what Rachel was saying and then turned, not in avoidance but to check in on Max. Hesitantly, Rachel did the same. The girl was rooted to the spot, which was at least an improvement on the idea of her bolting back to the dormitories and shutting them both out. However, she had eaten once in the last two days and Rachel was worried about her. The idea of upsetting her, adding to her depression or anxiety was enough to make Rachel lose her appetite. Well, almost.

“What about you guys?” Rachel prompted, desperate to try to jar Max out of whatever state she was in. Not to mention, if she could get either of her girls talking then the desire to beg Max to go back in time and somehow stop her from saying anything might go away. Not that that would help Max. *Fuck, this was a bad time. Of course it was a bad time.* Of course it was, the school was like a prison for Max and she did not enjoy being out in the yard. The girl was despondent more often than usual, probably helped along by a slowly developing sense of isolation and even Chloe had felt the stress of the changes at Blackwell, though that probably had had something to do with being threatened by Nathan during Chemistry the day before. “Have you thought about what to do after Blackwell?” She knew they had, but no one else was talking and she needed someone, anyone to speak. Rachel didn't know what the consequences were of standing up and going to Max, letting on how worried she was about her. That occasionally backfired tremendously.

“I guess my biggest thing is that I want to be with you two,” Chloe told her, finding her voice to a degree, though unable to keep the quiet tone of slight fear out of it. Rachel smiled at the girl, but when Chloe said nothing else, she became a little concerned.

“What else do you want to do?” Chloe shrugged in response.

“I can keep doing what I'm doing now, I guess, only more.” As if oiling an old hinge, the punk's words came quicker after that. “I might also study chemistry or physics.” Then, mercifully, Rachel received a boon and muscles in her body she did not know she had been holding tight relaxed. Max spoke, joining in on the conversation. Her chilled out, relaxed tone was obviously fake and forced but the girl crossed the gap between her and the Rachel and Chloe.

“What do you want to do with either of those?” Max asked her. Chloe's response was to shrug committally.

“I don't know yet, but there *are* some cool options with Chemistry especially,” Chloe said and Rachel wanted to laugh because for a moment, despite both of her girls looking as out of sorts as she felt at the discussion, something about 'cool options with Chemistry' brought to mind Chloe as a Walter White sort of character. When Chloe narrowed her eyes at Rachel, she knew she'd been caught. “What are you about to laugh at?” Chloe asked her, suspiciously.
“Can you just say, 'We've got to cook!' in a really gruff voice for me?” Max snorted and that was music to both of their ears because even Chloe's lips upturned. The punk rolled her board back and forth in front of her across the table as if considering Rachel's request.

“Now, say my name,” Chloe grunted in a poor facsimile of a 'Tough Guy' voice.

“Heisenberg,” Max intoned, dramatically.

“You're god damn right.” Max seemed content not to push Chloe any further and so Rachel chose to do the same. This was not the conversation they needed to have but it was the start, it was progress. There was just one part left to be played in this conversation and Rachel turned guiltily toward Max as the momentary amusement faded from the photographer's face. She rotated the old polaroid camera in her hands, over and over. Rachel remembered the day that Max had sat down and explained to her exactly how much that camera meant to her. She wasn't sure if Max had ever told the whole story to Chloe, but watching the way the girl toyed with it made Rachel realize that Max was feeling more vulnerable than Rachel had seen her in a long time. The worst part is, Max was trying desperately not to look at Rachel. She knew what was wrong. Talking of going to LA in a potential future might leave Max upset.

“I want to continue with photography, now that I'm back into it,” the girl finally admitted. “Like, really back into it. I know I have to find something else to do, too, though. I had an idea a while back but I kind of decided it wouldn't work.” This was Max engaging, maybe not with the idea of Los Angeles, but with the idea of a future, a future that did not take place at least sixty percent on the grounds of Blackwell Academy. Rachel wasn't sure whether to pounce on this or stay silent and let Max continue if she wanted to, but the girl continued to spin the camera in her hands and stare down. Chloe was not so hesitant to speak.

“What is it?” Chloe asked. “You should go for it, whatever it is. If you want to.” When Max shook her head in answer, Rachel tried a softer touch.

“Why not?”

“I was thinking about something that's kind of in law, but I don't think I can... you know, morally.”

“Why's that?” Rachel pushed again. She regretted doing so immediately when Max looked up and locked eyes with her for the first time since she had mentioned UCLA.
“Frank Bowers, Damon Merrick,” Max told her. This time it was Rachel's turn to look away as her stomach twisted. Maybe today was the day to go any further down this line, but Rachel stood and approached Max, not quite willing to find out what Chloe thought of the topic, yet. Max did not pull away, did not flinch, did not even tense up. Instead when Rachel wrapped her arms around the girl and rubbed at her back softly, Max leaned against her. “I just don't want to be alone,” Max confessed, and Rachel felt the way the girl's body shook with a soft, muffled half-sob. “And if that's not enough, then that sucks, but it's true.”

“I didn't mean to push either of you,” Rachel told them both as she pulled back from Max but kept one arm around the girl's shoulders. Chloe shook her head as if to try to reassure her. “I was just thinking about it, because I hope that whatever happens, we can be together.”

“Yeah,” Chloe agreed. “Me too.”

“Me too,” Max echoed.

“Are you sure?” Chloe asked, her voice suddenly changing drastically as she too rose to her feet, hefting her board under one arm and approaching. Max raised her head, confused as the bluenette locked eyes on her. Rachel was equally confused. “I mean, after all, you've got that date on Sunday.” Playfully, Chloe nudged the girl in the ribs with her right elbow. To Rachel's surprise when she looked Max over, the girl did not look upset so much as nonplussed.

“You never paid up from your first bet with Rachel about Victoria, much less this one.” That was true, Chloe had neither declared Rachel's awesomeness to the school nor shared a coke with her. Strictly speaking, that meant that Rachel might need to think of a way to collect on her debts. The air of the conversation was lighter, but Rachel understood what Max was thinking. She did not want to be without the two of them either and that was why she had been trying to bring this up for over a month and a half. Next time, fuckhead, maybe you start with that. Rachel tried to beam at Chloe's sudden sour face when suddenly Max's elbow dug hard into her side.

She turned to look first down at Max's face, only to see that the girl's attention was fixed somewhere. Only about ten feet away from them, Samuel was hauling a weed whacker over toward a tree, as if to clean up around the edges of it. When Chloe had also caught on to what – or who – Max was trying to gesture to, the photographer raised her eyebrows to them. Neither of them seemed to know exactly what Max was trying to convey, so Max gestured to the man and muttered that this was their chance to ask him questions. It was true, there looked to be no one around, not even the conspicuously missing Steph who would either show up soon or Rachel would be forming a search party for. That didn't seem like an exaggeration when Nathan was prone to fits of petty violence that tended to land people in hospitals. At Max's insistence, the three of them eventually found their way over to Samuel. Rachel noticed that the man looked as if he was hunching a little
bit more under the weight of the weedwacker. For being a fairly active man who was not precisely elderly, he looked as if he was just not in great condition, sometimes. When they greeted him, it was from a respectful distance. It still took the man a second to straighten up, blink and then clutch his gloved hands together as if in some gesture of serenity that Rachel did not understand. Also, the dark purple gloves clashing with his light blue jumpsuit also struck Rachel as strange, but she was not sure why that might be. Samuel was a strange dude, but ultimately seemed to just be content helping when he could and feeding his squirrels.

“Max Caulfield, Chloe Price, Rachel Amber,” the man started in his almost dreamy voice. Sometimes, he reminded her of Mr. Keaton. Other times he struck her as closer to Luna Lovegood of Harry Potter fame. “What can I do for you all this fine day? Well, as fine as it can be, when everyone hides inside.” Come to think of it, they really had not seen that many people out and about when she considered that almost an hour had passed since school let out. Okay, but where's Steph? Rachel thought.

“How are you doing, Samuel?” Max asked him. Something about Max's voice was surprising. It was not all that differently than Max sounded when talking to Steph or Stella or even Kate. It was kind of an 'old friend' kind of tone. She had let on that in the other timeline the other Max had talked to Samuel a fair bit, but Rachel wasn't sure if her Max hadn't done the same or not.

“Samuel keeps busy,” the man promised, laughing at himself. Maybe that was an understatement. “And that is quite a boon in troubling times. Then again, you didn't come to talk about Samuel's duties at the school, did you?” Rachel chuckled.

“You're right. You try to keep it a secret, but you're probably the smartest guy here, even counting most of the teachers,” Rachel told him. This was one part buttering him up and one part a sneaking suspicion that they had come to have that Samuel had access to knowledge that he just shouldn't have if he were a normal person. Max insisted that in the other timeline he had known all about her powers. She had difficulty saying why she believed that, as retrieving specifics from her fragmented memory of the events of that timeline was not always possible. Rachel tended to believe her feelings on the subject, though and even Chloe had come around eventually.

“Samuel doesn't try to keep any secrets,” the man argued waving his free hand as he lowered the machine in the other to the ground. Rachel wondered if it was her imagination or if the grey streaks in his hair had widened since the school year began. It wasn't that she had any idea of how old he actually was, but there was something young about parts of his face. She glanced back at Chloe and Max, wishing they would take charge of the conversation, either of them. Then again, approaching him today had been Max's idea. Actually, Rachel was a little disappointed in the three of them for never having done so before. “But, that is high praise. Thank you.” At best, Rachel thought that that was Samuel deflecting and at worst, lying. It made her look at the man in a new way. Maybe he wasn't vindictive or malicious but he might also not be the harmless man he looked like. Maybe that image was curated.
“Can we speak bluntly?” Rachel asked when neither of the girls behind her had spoken. She felt more like being blunt with him was a good idea after confronting the possibility that maybe Samuel pretended to be just slightly bright while actually being incredibly so.

“I'd never ask someone to dull their words,” Samuel said. When none of them reacted, he smiled briefly. “Sorry, Samuel likes his jokes.” Rachel shrugged. While not exactly funny, once processed the comment was at least witty. It wasn't going to distract her from asking her question, especially since Max had gone suddenly mute. Even Chloe was not speaking though when Rachel glanced at her, her arms were crossed over her chest and she was smiling smugly back at Rachel. This is revenge. Rachel did have a tendency to put Chloe on the spot but that was at least half about Chloe being the better public speaker when she wasn't pissed off beyond all self-control.

“Have you ever seen someone at Blackwell who could do something, you know, something amazing?” Again, Samuel's half dismissive smile rose to his face. At least he had not laughed this time.

“Rachel Amber should know better than most: everyone here can do something amazing. This school is full of talent.”

“What she means,” Max tried, suddenly cutting across what would have been Rachel's slightly annoyed response to his deflection, “is have you ever known someone who can do things that people shouldn't be able to do?” The smile did not vanish from his face, but he also did not laugh and something about the smile grew a little sharper, a little more real. Rachel took a step back and lightly nudged Max forward.

“Samuel wonders,” he said, raising one hand to his chin. The man's odd speaking habits aside, he seemed completely developmentally and intellectually capable. He was just eccentric. “If he had, those people would probably be keeping it a secret, guarded by their friends and loved ones.” At this, the man's eyes narrowed slightly and he locked his gaze in on each of them in turn. Rachel pondered if this thought what it implied, that he knew about their abilities and that they were covering for one another.

“Samuel, are you one of these people?” Rachel asked him, now a little more calmly. That might make sense, if he truly knew about their abilities.

“Samuel is just Samuel,” he said, which Rachel actually tended to think was a nonanswer. “And the thing Samuel values the most is being able to help those who need it, whether it means keeping the school clean or answering strange questions out in the open, in the middle of the day.” Or whether it means keeping their secrets? Rachel wondered. Pairing that thought with him stressing, 'in the open, in the middle of the day' and Rachel got the feeling they weren't going to get a direct answer to this question.
“In the other timeline,” Max whispered as she drew close to Rachel, “he definitely knew.” At this Max stepped past Rachel and Chloe entirely and slipped her hands into her pockets. “Are there others, Samuel?” Max asked.

“And what if there were, Max Caulfield?” For a moment, the brunette looked genuinely stunned by the man's response. Not only had both of them all but admitted to having some kind of unnatural ability to each others' faces, but Samuel had not really said no. It really looked like the man was keeping names to himself. *It looks like he's known things we could have learned this whole time,* Rachel thought. After a moment of contemplation Max answered, but it sounded lame even to Rachel.

“If there were, I think I'd want to know.”

“There are many reasons people keep secrets Max Caulfield. I think you know plenty about secrets.”

“And how do you always know those secrets?” Chloe asked, speaking up for the first time. It was no longer about playfully making Max and Rachel talk for once. She was tuned into the conversation the same was the rest of them and had to know that they were on the verge of maybe learning something world changing. *Or maybe we already have.*

“Oh Samuel? Samuel just notices things sometimes,” the man promised, as if returning to his innocent, know-nothing pretense.

“Yeah, right.”

“We won't keep you much longer,” Max insisted over Chloe's unamused response. Samuel gave a brief shrug as if to say he had all of the time in the world. “There's just one last question, because you know, you notice things and seem to have the pulse of the school.”

“Oh course. Samuel enjoys being able to help.”

“What do you think it's going to take to make Blackwell safe again?” Max asked. This was such a massive tonal shift that Rachel shivered for the first time all day. She felt the fingers of Chloe's left hand intertwine with her right's. There was no pretense of thoughtful pondering, no pretending that his words carried no weight or that he was just a simple janitor and grounds keeper that no one
paid attention to. The question seemed to have struck Samuel as heavily as it had Rachel. The man lifted his eyes and uncharacteristically locked them with Max's. He never really made eye contact with people unless making some serious, weighted statement.

“Tragedy,” Samuel responded, his face growing genuinely sad. Max shifted uncomfortably on the spot. “Some things can't be fixed, Max. Some tragedies can't be avoided with good timing.” The man's gaze lingered on her a second or two longer than Max seemed fine with because she stepped back from him and all but ran into Rachel. “Or burned away,” Samuel looked past Max, who turned around, to Rachel. “Or resisted.” When he looked at Chloe this time, Rachel felt the girl's hand tighten in her own. “But sometimes it's kind of like a bad fire: new growth can result.” The man smiled briefly at them all in turn. Rachel felt as if his eyes had lingered on her the longest, but the shiver did not come this time. “Old Samuel better be getting back to work, girls. It is a good day, not one for looking behind, not one for being lost and not one for looking ahead.”

The man turned back to his weedwacker, picked it up and started it in one fluid motion, the sadness wiped from his face. Rachel backed away. Chloe and Max did the same. She did not turn until Samuel had begun his work around the base of the tree. Then, after several seconds of closing the gap between them and the picnic table that they had been seated at before, Rachel looked around. They were far enough away now to be heard over the sound of the machine, but had not quite reached the table when Rachel gazed back at the man in his pale jumpsuit and watched the way he crab walked around the tree, hunched forward. She would definitely never look at Samuel the same way again.

“Did I imagine that, or did we just actually learn something?”

“I don't think you imagined it,” Chloe cut in, not releasing Rachel’s hand. Max nodded

“That was the most direct I've ever heard him be about anything,” Max mused.

“Not me,” Chloe told her. “Not by a long shot.” At this even Max was so interested in the statement that Chloe had to wave both her and Rachel off to get them back on topic. Rachel planted her ass on the bench at the picnic table and waited for someone to say something.

“I mean,” Max started, “So many implications. He might have powers, he knows we do, he might know others who do and is keeping a secret for their sake. Maybe even other students, here at Blackwell. But there's one thing we learned for sure.” The girl's look of wonder faded. It was a fairly haunting effect, so Rachel almost didn't want to ask what that was. She still did. As Max settled on her left and Chloe on her right, the photographer continued. “We learned that something really bad is coming. Tragedy.” Tragedy. I wonder if he means it in the theatrical sense. When Rachel thought about it, they had all the pieces for a classic tragedy here: star crossed lovers, jilted parents, supernatural forces beyond the understanding of man and one driving force uniting them
all into one or two important plotlines: neutralizing the threats to the school. The question was who
the character to tragically die was going to be. Rachel hoped it was not one of them.

Rachel and Max were waiting for Chloe and Steph in the parking lot nearest the lookout and the
park when they finally pulled up in Chloe's truck, Pompidou sticking up from the seat between
them, great tongue lolling from his mouth. She smiled to Max, who grinned in response. The dog
looked excited as hell. As the two of them watched from the edge of the lot, he attempted to spin
around in place on the seat, in the process tail whipping both girls still in the truck. Rachel was
trying not to think too much about the place. It had been an important location to Rachel,
meaningful. A large park with an overlook above it from which to survey it, it was both where
Rachel and Chloe had first laid eyes on Rachel's mom and the sight of her first major fire.

It was the place, Rachel suspected as the bluenette leapt from the truck, trailing the end of
Pompidou's leash behind her, where she and Chloe had first genuinely bonded. The grass in the
park had regrown. There has been new growth. She didn't shiver again, but the day suddenly felt
cool enough that she wished she had her jacket, after all. That's silly, she told herself, having not
worn it since early April, since before San Francisco. I do have that patch I should put on it,
Rachel remembered.

"Are you doing okay?" Max asked her as they watched Chloe struggle to get Pompidou to stay
calm and Steph stall getting out of the truck for some reason. Rachel still wasn't sure what had
taken Steph so long, but the girl had not been in the greatest mood lately, so she had thought it best
not to push.

"It's weird to think someone out there might know what we can do other than Steph," Rachel told
her. Chloe leaned through the door to talk to Steph, though what about or even what tone the
conversation had, Rachel couldn't tell.

"It is," Max agreed. "I get the feeling he learns things from dreams, somehow."

"Like Chloe?"

"Maybe, but maybe not. He doesn't seem like the type to go into peoples' dreams at night." They
had all but decided that he was like them in some manner, whatever his reasons to keep quiet about
it were. "You know, I wonder who else might have powers around here?"

"David has Super Douchery," Rachel submitted, smiling despite herself. At the truck, Steph pushed
her door open.
“Juliet’s probably like, bat hearing or X-Ray Vision and we know Hayden’s got Superhuman Patience, he was friends with Nathan for how long?” Rachel glanced over at Max. It was clear that the girl had relaxed. Then again that might have as much to do with being off campus and theoretically far away from Nathan’s grasp than anything else. When it was clear that Steph and Chloe could see them, Rachel took Max’s hand and started to lead the photographer up toward the Overlook. Even from just the top step, Rachel could tell that Culmination State Park looked much nicer than the last time she had been there. That probably had something to do with it not being on fire, though. God, that was so long ago, she mused as she approached the old binoculars set along the edge of the lookout. No one had repaired the broken one: its change box still sat busted open after Chloe had retrieved their last quarter from it.

There were people out there playing. A couple of boys looked to be throwing a football back and forth. It could be Logan and Zachary, for all the casual passing that went on, but it probably wasn’t. A couple played by a new bench with their very young child. Rachel didn’t need binoculars to recognize them: the way they stood, the love and affection they showed each other was familiar from a distance. Rachel elbowed Max and pointed out toward them. It took Max a second to see what she was pointing at, but eventually the girl smiled softly.

“Chloe and I stole wine off them once,” Rachel told her, amused at the memory. “Right here.”

“I know,” Max told her, patting her on the hand. “I was watching. It’s a shame you weren’t a better method actor back in the day, I don’t think Chloe would have let you live the CPR down.” Floored, Rachel stepped back from Max. She crossed her arms over her chest and stared pointedly, this time not at the couple but at Max Caulfield who she hoped was about to take her meaning, that she had better start talking fast, or else. Max chuckled a little nervously but Rachel wasn’t sure this was exactly a laughing matter. Dumbfounded, Rachel listened.

“I was here that day. I was here when the fire was set and since I’m being honest, I was also at the Firewalk show.” At this, Max turned away from her and far from appearing worried or upset, half sung under her breath. “’cause we’ve waited all our lives, and now's our fuckin' time,” The girl was not exactly singing the song with the same passion in her voice that the vocalist did, but Rachel had heard it time and time again since that night and while it was possible Max was lying as she had certainly sat in on a listen or two of that Firewalk EP, she didn’t think that Max had a reason to lie and say that she was there. Holy fucking shit.

“I can't believe you've never told us.”

“It's never come up before.”
“What hasn't?” Rachel turned back. Chloe was doing her best to keep Pompidou from tearing her off of her feet as he strained at his leash to sniff at everything, but eventually he pulled Chloe along toward them. Steph trailed behind the girl. Steph looked fine if a little tired, maybe a little sore even. Rachel figured that if Steph was in a poor mood or something had happened, they would learn about it sooner or later. Steph was not the quiet type. Then again, in that moment she was looking between Chloe, Max and Rachel with unbridled curiosity, mouth shut as she tried eagerly to hear what was going on. Rachel knelt down when Pompidou came running over to them, but, almost as if taunting her, Max stayed standing, humming the next couple of bars of the song in question.

“Chloe, Max was at the Firewalk show,” Rachel told her. “The one at the mill. And she was here, the day we saw my mom... and the night.” Momentarily surprised, Chloe was jerked forward a step or two as Max turned back to face them and Pompidou shot from beneath Rachel's petting hands toward the brunette who always gave him ear scratches.

“I wanted to make sure that coming here didn't somehow disrupt things,” Max said, voice-half serious. “Besides, after you two ran off into the crowd together, I stayed around for the show. It was badass.”

“Are you fucking with us?” Chloe asked her as Max knelt down beside Pompidou.

“Always,” Max promised before beaming a grin up at Chloe. Rachel found Steph mirroring that smile a bit disturbing but chose not to comment on it. Steph and Max were so often in it together when it came to giving Chloe grief. Rachel joined in as often as they let her but usually had her own ways of bothering Chloe. “But I'm not lying about this.” As for Rachel, she stared at the side of Max's head blinking. She wasn't upset, just surprised. Then again, there was one question she had to ask. If Max had truly been everywhere back then -

“Why didn't you stop the fire?” Rachel queried, lowering her voice the minute she heard it come out hard and hurt. Max slowed petting the dog but did not stop. She did however, look up to Rachel. Rachel was fairly certain she had already confirmed her part in that first wildfire to Steph so there was no one nearby who should not hear what was going on. “I'm sorry,” Rachel started, shaking her head. “I-”

“No,” Max interrupted her, looking a bit as if someone, as if Rachel had just slapped her across the face. “It's okay.” It didn't feel okay. Blaming Max for something she had done did not seem like something which was anywhere close to okay. It wasn't Max's fault that Rachel didn't know how to control her temper, didn't understand her emotions and apparently had not grown as much in all of this time as she had hoped, if her most recent confrontation with Nathan was anything to go by. “You're gonna hate the answer because I hate it myself. I hate me for it.”
“You don't have to-” Rachel tried again, but Max only shook her head.

“I wanted to preserve the timeline enough that I knew roughly how things would fall out. Remember, I still thought I was someone else. I thought I had some specific mission. I worried that if I stopped the fire, Juliet would make it to the play on time and if that happened,” Max exhaled a shaky breath and stood back up, earning an almost affronted look from the pup at her feet. “If that happened, you two might never have- you know.” Max looked between Chloe and Rachel and part of Rachel couldn't help but wonder if Max had followed them back to her home that night. Probably not, but it was a possibility. “The one thing I never wanted was to come between you two. Even back then, you two being happy was the most important thing. And I'm sorry for that but I'm not as sorry as I should be.”

“Don't be,” Chloe insisted as she approached. Rachel rose to full height beside Max. Steph followed Chloe to them. “You weren't yourself.” Conflicted, Rachel turned and pressed her lips to Max's cheek. She did not pull back quickly, she let the kiss sit there for a moment before she did and then whispered into Max's ear that everything was alright. “Right,” Chloe agreed. “Because today's not about 'looking back,' right?” Perhaps echoing Samuel was not Chloe's finest decision, but Rachel didn't push it. They were at Culmination State Park, all four of them and Pompidou to boot. They could turn this into a good day if they chose to.

“Right,” Steph echoed. Once the four of them were down in the park proper, Chloe released Pompidou from his leash and revealed that the backpack over her shoulder which was stretched oddly widely had been keeping one of his favorite toys for him. Rachel took part in passing the frisbee, sometimes back and forth, sometimes out for Pompidou. She enjoyed watching the moment unfold, a warm spring afternoon, Max taking photos, Pompidou’s tail wagging insistently until such time as one of them threw the frisbee out and away from them all for him to chase after and bring back drool covered. She was so lost in a sort of reflection on how this fit or did not fit with all that she had learned that day, with everything that what Max and Samuel said suggested about the world, that when the frisbee came flying at her, Rachel was not paying attention. As a result, she almost had her legs taken out from under as Pompidou came charging for the toy.

Honestly, even with the knowledge that Max had been aware and watching more than Rachel thought she had, even with the idea that Arcadia Bay, that even Blackwell could be home to more individuals with power than Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters, the world looked ultimately beautiful. All of the ugliness seemed to be concentrated in an area of ooze emitting from one or two individuals. Rachel Amber did not see how tragedy could strike, not now. She ended their afternoon in the park sitting in the grass with a dog's head on her knee as he tried to guilt trip her into petting him with big, puppy eyes. She ended their afternoon in the park listening to the snap of Max's camera before the girl sat down beside her. She ended it watching Chloe and Steph passing a cigarette back and forth while Steph talked about the potential of animating for the company her father worked for. (Rachel rather thought that Steph's art could tell amazing stories if she chose to pursue that route.) Rachel ended that afternoon at the park, content. If there was tragedy coming, this was the calm before the storm and she was just fine enjoying that.
April 25th, 2012 3:00 PM

Relieved, Chloe got to her feet as the end of class bell finished ringing. She took a moment to stretch, shift her bag up onto her shoulder and flash a thumbs up to Steph beside her. The girl’s response was a brief smile before gesturing for her to go on ahead. Steph liked to hang about for a couple of minutes after class to go over her homework and Ms. Grant was always ready, willing and able. Chloe lifted a hand as she passed the teacher’s desk. She received a warm enough smile in response and then turned toward the door to the classroom. The first one out of it, Chloe might normally have held the door open a second or two and let someone get it for the people behind them, but she did not this time. There were bigger fish to fry.

Someone, it seemed, had been waiting on her. Eliot was dressed much the same as usual, though at the moment he was slouched forward, hands in his jeans and looking straight up at her. Chloe blinked, stopping just outside of the door when it shut behind her. This seemed to be some sort of cue for Eliot, because he stood up straighter, his face the picture of worry and concern and gulped visibly and audibly. Then he approached, one foot in front of the other quickly, right hand outstretched for her. Considering they had not so much as spoken in a long time, Chloe did not care much for the idea of him touching her and raised her hands, palm out to caution him to stay back.

Her general plan had been to get out of the room, go find her girls and scrap all deep thought in favor of helping Max choose her outfit for her Saturday date. After that, an evening with Steph and Pompidou had seemed in order considering how she felt generally tired. She hadn’t even planned on thinking too deeply about the whole ‘Max and Victoria going on a date’ thing. She had not intended to have to stop Eliot in his tracks. Visibly upset, the boy responded to her signal by pausing, face reddening in embarrassment. For a moment he looked down and then shook his head hard. It had been a couple of years since she heard Eliot speak to her in anything resembling a calm voice. Even now, it was tense.

“Chloe,” the boy started, sounding as if he wanted to say something but wasn’t sure where to begin. When he shook his head a sense of urgency poured into his face. Okay, I’m starting to get weirded out.
“What do you want?” she asked him, coolly. Oddly enough, he looked a little relieved at her response.

“What in the name of hell would I do that?” Chloe thought that to be a reasonable question considering some of their more recent interactions. Probably her favorite had to be the time he and Nathan chased Max off from the wrap party for the play last November as if they owned the place, yelling about ‘fucking dykes’ like the three of them weren't welcome. Though his voice was all helpfulness and desperation, it made no sense and did nothing to stop her from scoffing at him. If he thought they were going to go off alone somewhere to talk, he was nuts.

“Look,” he started, tripping quickly over his words, “I-I don't know what to do. We have to get to them before Nathan hurts her.”

“Hurts who?” Chloe's voice came out low, deadly, dangerous even to her own ears, a warning of imminent pain and violence.

“Nathan and Max left the photography classroom together a while ago.” That didn't make any sense. What it did do, though, was set adrenaline pumping nonetheless. She felt the urgency of the words in the immediate dropping and twisting of her stomach, in the way her arms grew rigid at her sides and the slight tension growing like a knot at the back of her neck. Chloe looked at Eliot Hampden. Once upon a time a younger Chloe had made a few bad choices when it came to this boy. She had attempted to write those out of her life long ago and him out not long after that. It was insane to her that she had once trusted him that much and now, now she looked at him warning her that one of the girls she loved was in mortal peril and all she could think was that he was lying.

“How would you even know that?” Chloe asked him, staring standoffishly at the boy. His deep green eyes rose to meet hers for the first time in a very long time and she saw simply emptiness in them. Hell, if she didn't know better she would have assumed he was high as a kite. Whatever happened next depended on his response.

“I know because Nathan told me his plan last night, but – but I can't let him go through with it. He's gone totally fucking off his nuts and I didn't sign up for this, I never signed up for any of this. I just wanted to be his friend, I didn't want any of this.’ This came out in a jumbled rushed mess, self-pitying and more than a little pathetic. She wasn't sure why, but instead of garnering any sympathy from her, the boy's words just made her feel like she was watching someone kick a puppy. Eliot Hampden was a little weasel who had cozied up to Nathan Prescott despite the boy being unhinged and violent and had even come back to his side once after having the shit beaten out of him during one of Nathan's breakdowns. Admittedly, Chloe and Rachel had caused that particular breakdown as a side effect of a petty revenge plot for the two of them ruining Rachel's
“Didn't sign up for what?” she hissed at the boy. Despite herself, she was getting angry at his fucking presence. What was worse was that this anger did not motivate her to inherently discredit what he was saying. He sounded genuinely cowardly in the moment, as if maybe he was worried about getting into trouble for his part in helping Nathan in whatever gambit the boy was at work on. *He always was a little cowardly shit,* Chloe thought as she looked at the boy in front of her. For some reason, she thought it in Rachel's voice.

“Hurting someone,” Eliot replied. Chloe swallowed. “We have to stop him.”

“I'm getting Rachel and then you're taking us to him,” Chloe told the boy, pulling her phone from her pocket as the door to the classroom opened and emitted one Warren Graham, followed by Brooke Scott. The two passed by, giving Chloe concerned, confused looks. Eliot raised his hands to her, as if to get her attention or stop her.

“You don't get it,” he told her, more urgently still. “They would have left like ten minutes ago. She's in trouble. We don't have time.” *Ten minutes ago?* Chloe cursed out loud and shoved her phone back into her pocket, gesturing toward the hall. If Nathan had really had ten minutes alone with Max, there was no telling precisely what he might have done. Her anger was beginning to turn to fear. Eliot turned without another word, his face still contorted in a kind of obsequious concern and made for the nearest door rather quickly. *I must be losing my fucking mind,* Chloe told herself. Then again, she had no choice. Max was the one with the ability to time travel, not Chloe. If Nathan was out for serious revenge, he might have already gotten it. *And if this is some kind of prank, Eliot's never going to know what it's like to fuck anyone else, because I'll make sure IT doesn't work anymore.*

The brunet with the buzzcut not at all dissimilar to Nathan's own led them out of the hall and into the air of a fairly warm day. Chloe mused on the idea as she followed that the two of them looked like skinhead rejects. She wondered if they realized how on the nose it was that people who looked down on everyone unlike them, mistreated women and in at least one case sexually assaulted people whenever they felt like it were going full on skinhead. Did Eliot even have enough humanity left to see the irony in what he was? Chloe shook the thought from her head as Eliot turned not toward the dormitories or the main path but to the back of the school building.

The thing that bothered her the most about all of this wasn't the idea that maybe Eliot had enough of a conscience left to change his stripes when he realized Nathan was going to hurt someone. It was the idea that Max would have left with Nathan at all. What could he have said or done to make her act so stupid? Why would Victoria or Kate have let her? *They wouldn't,* she thought, starting to get a bad feeling about following Eliot another step further. The problem was that there remained another option, that Nathan had threatened to hurt Max or someone else if she had not come with him. Since he apparently had no problem pulling guns on people, threatening to shoot someone in
the room if Max did not come with him didn’t seem out of the realm of possibility.

Eliot had already come to a stop at their destination when Chloe’s spidey senses tingled strongly enough that she decided she had played this out as far as she was going to without Rachel. Assuming Max was in trouble, which Chloe had no proof of, Max wouldn’t want them walking into a trap. Eliot was paused in front of a small, blank black door set into the back of the building. It did not lead into the school proper but Chloe thought she remembered Samuel once telling her that it was another route into the boiler room, once used to bring coal in from the outside. If Nathan threatened her with a gun, what would have stopped her from rewinding back to this morning at breakfast and warning us?

The boy did not seem to realize at first that he had lost her trust, or that she was kicking herself for being stupid enough not to come to that final realization before even leaving the building. Outside it was a beautiful spring day. Behind that door, Chloe thought, was some kind of hell. Eliot stood transfixed, staring at the door for a second as if it held all the secrets to life and the universe, as if he could open it with his mind. Just as he reached out for the handle, Chloe turned and bolted. She knew instinctively that she was faster than Eliot, that she could get away, go find Rachel, Max, Steph and put an end to whatever was happening here. What she did not know instinctively, what she had not expected was that Nathan was not waiting for her downstairs in the boiler room. When Chloe turned to run, she caught sight of the bright green grass, the few spring flowers spouting and the leafy tops of trees before she saw scarred, pale skin and a familiar looking buzz cut. She was glaring at by one organic eye and one artificial one and then she felt pain and shortly after that, very little else. Chloe’s eyes closed.

When she opened them again she was not on school grounds and it was no longer the bright sunny day she had been considering only moments ago. Instead, the familiar and comfortable sight of her back yard, the one in which she had countless memories of sitting out back, smoking while Pompidou ran and played, was the first thing she saw. Judging by the light in the area around her, it was somewhat near dusk. The first thing Chloe did was to sit up and pick a blade of grass from her hair, wondering tiredly what had happened to her beanie before the ambush she had just been a part of came back to her. She rolled over once onto her stomach to look behind her. There was no sign of Nathan or Eliot and certainly no sign of anyone else, either. Slowly but surely, she pushed to her feet. At first, she thought that something was wrong with her eyes: the world seemed to be a little hazy.

*Did I get hit over the head?* Chloe wondered to herself. The grass seemed poorly defined, the fence around her like a real life low res photo. Chloe turned toward the house to see that it, too, just looked off. Either way, if she was here there was all the chance in the world that Nathan and Eliot were inside, trashing the place or worse. Chloe angled for the back door, squinting to see through it into the kitchen beyond. Unfortunately the moment she did, the bottom of the door lifted from its position and began to rise up, dragging the suddenly off-color wall with it, more and more of the wall than physically possible. After a second, there was no door. *I’m not awake,* Chloe told herself as she turned to observe the fence at the edge of the yard change colors and then begin to grow, as if it was a living thing. There was no wind, despite the slight sway of the pale blue grass.
When she reached out for the edges of a dream, her headache only intensified. Most distressingly of all, she could not feel the edges, those boundaries only her brain seemed to be able to observe. Chloe looked down at herself, taking in her outfit and then realized that whatever her motivation for doing so had been, it did not matter. If she was asleep she could gain no useful information, not from something like what she was wearing or even where she was. Maybe her only hope was to find out what the parts of her brain that ached and tried to stay silent and undisturbed were thinking. I was dumb, I trusted Eliot, just a second or two too long. Nathan was behind me, he knocked me on my ass when I tried to get away. We were by the boiler room. I could be down there. I need to figure out what to do. I need help.

Chloe brought help, through sheer force of will. As if she were dreaming, when she called up the people in her mind, they came at once. That was not the right way to put it, either. It was more like they had always been there. She noticed Steph first. Steph looked as like herself as ever, though her left arm was crossed in front of her and her right rested atop it, reaching up to stroke her chin. The look on the other artist's face seemed to say that Chloe had really stepped in it this time. Next came Rachel, fierce, tall, proud. She did not give Chloe any grief when she came into being a few feet away from Steph. Instead, she looked like a soldier awaiting orders with an eagerness that was not playful, was not fun or cute. Max, deadly calm and quiet was at Rachel's side, grasping the girl's right hand in her left. Max was dressed in the long ruined grey hoodie she used to favor and her messenger bag was slung carelessly across the front of her, resting roughly above her right knee. Max looked ready to pick up a baseball bat. Behind the both of them, the man who she had first seen in her dreams when this strangeness all began was beaming at her from between and over their shoulders. Chloe did not know what this version of her father thought there was to smile about, but he did and it was an oddly comforting sight, or it would be if he and the others weren't all shifting, shaking, distorting oddly like the rest of the world around her. She noticed Kate and Brooke last. Kate's hands were clasped behind her as she stood in her usual warmer weather outfit, a small, serene look on her face. Brooke on the other hand was settled more like Steph only there was nothing playful about the look on her face. This was serious Brooke, this was let's get down to business Brooke. This was, 'I'm ready to roll initiative' Brooke. Chloe knew that she had no need to tell them what was happening because they were all her, simply embodied in the people she knew and loved. That did not stop her.

“I need to figure out what to do. Nathan and Eliot might have me out there. I got caught. I think I'm in trouble.” The ground beneath her feet flattened, became two dimensional like it was the floor of some cheap video game jungle. Chloe wasn't sure what else to say, so instead she tried to focus on the wavering phantasms of her friends, her family, her girls. It was easy to tune the rest of the warped, mercurial world out, especially because she could not really understand where she was except that she was not really sleeping, was she? Chloe tried to stay focused on the people in front of her but the moment she considered the thought that she was not dreaming at all, the yard, the house, the fence and even the sky faded away into the background, a background she realized had always been there, pale and translucent over her vision of her back yard. It was the familiar foggy gray haze of that world through which she accessed dreams when she willingly went looking for them. There, she existed with the people she had summoned and that was where she really was.
“They did take you,” Max told her. “You're sitting up, somewhere cool and a little damp. Your feet are tied to front legs of the chair. Your arms are tied behind you, too low of an angle. It hurts.” Strangely, at this last, the Max in front of her seemed to sound as if she were truly in pain and a little scared. After a second, Steph began to rub at her wrists as if testing whether or not they hurt her. Chloe wasn't sure what to make of that. Is it possible I'm aware of this subconsciously, and so my brain is trying to tell me what it knows about the outside world? Max scoffed at her, as if she could read Chloe's thoughts. Then again, one did not need to read one's own thoughts, did they? “No, one does not,” Max insisted, sounding a little frustrated as she worked her left shoulder round and around. The faux messenger bag moved, bouncing with her movement.

“They fucked up.” Steph declared suddenly. At this, the girl stopped rubbing at her wrists. She looked down at them as if in delight and as Chloe watched, familiar bruises formed around either one, as if David had grabbed Steph and squeezed at her wrists tightly as he once had Chloe's. “The ropes are just tight enough to keep your hands together but you can totally work out of them. It's gonna take time and effort not to get caught and it could get really uncomfortable, but you've got this.” Chloe did not feel as if she had anything. If what they were saying was true – if what she was saying was true – then she was trapped somewhere cool and damp, like say, an old boiler room with at least Nathan Prescott, maybe Eliot, too. The forms in front of her began to fade as Chloe shivered in fear at the idea of being at the mercy of either one of those boys.

“You have to stay strong, kiddo. If someone noticed you go off with Eliot, you'll be okay. You just have to stay strong until they come looking.” Chloe tried to focus on her father's voice but it sounded oddly distant and possibly even wrong, incorrect. Still, the focus was enough that everyone arrayed in front of her stabilized, or at least as much as ghosts swaying and spreading out like ectoplasm blown around in an invisible breeze could stabilize. Her father's shade was not the only one who had something to say on the topic.

“You know we'll always look for you,” Max promised her. “We'll find out soon one way or the other and I'll use my powers. You'll be back to us at any moment.” Not if I die. You can't save someone from death, remember? The thing was, Nathan was sick and vindictive. She had a feeling that even if he intended to kill her it was going to be after doing all manner of unpleasant things. Then again, maybe if she screamed, someone would hear her and come running. If he doesn't have me gagged.

“He doesn't.” Rachel promised her, trying to make her tone comforting, calm, as if they were talking about the weather and not the state of Chloe's waking, kidnapped body. “If I have to burn the school itself to the ground, I will get you back. I would do it in a heartbeat.” That sounded to Chloe like the truth, as everything else they had all said so far had done.

“Rachel is way more dangerous than even she knows,” Brooke suddenly chimed in, as if to support what the blonde had just said. “She can do great things. Terrible, yes, but great.” Chloe sighed and turned to take a look at her assembled self.
“If you could not quote Harry Potter at me at a time like this, that'd be great. This is serious.”

“That one's your fault,” Kate told her, in a voice that sounded almost like a hum. “We're you after all.”

“How can I stall for time?” she asked the lot of them.

“Talk to them,” Steph told her. “Get him talking. Even if he's angry, getting him to talk will buy you time. He likes to talk about himself.”

“Absolutely,” Max agreed suddenly, sounding that familiar 'I'm Going to Step up to the Plate' kind of eager. “Just let him rage out.”

“Everyone likes to talk about themselves when they think they've won,” her father chimed in from behind Max and Rachel. “Nathan most of all.”

“You can play Nathan. He's shaky, unstable. You and he may be alone down there, but to him, you're probably one of a couple people pissing him off. He's been hallucinating, talking to someone since he got you down there.” How much do I know subconsciously? Chloe asked herself. “And yes, Eliot's not there. It's just Nathan and whoever or whatever he sees and hears.”

“He might drug you,” Brooke warned her. “If he's got the stuff and it looks like you're a handful but you have to be like Max, you have to fight it. You've got to get your hands loose. If you can just get your hands loose, you'll be okay. Just don't slip out until you've got your chance, because he will catch you. He's paranoid as fuck right now.”

“And don't forget, he's armed.” At this last, Chloe looked back at the faux Max and her rather common sense warning. Chloe did not think she could ever forget the first time she had seen Nathan point a gun at the real Max. I really am not dreaming.

“You never were,” Rachel insisted.

“Think about it like this,” Max continued the girl's thought as the others began to crowd closer around the two of them. “There's a silver lining.”
“What’s that?”

“If you get out of this you get to try to figure out what the hell is happening right now. Sounds like a new part of your ability.” Almost as soon as Max answered, Chloe saw movement in the distance, in the hazy grey background. Her head jerked around to follow it. What might have been ten or fifteen feet away in the real world was the thin form of the brunette who had just finished talking, Max. Only, instead of looking like the Max in front of her, the girl looked like the Max she had eaten lunch and breakfast and had English with. She was definitely dressed in the same outfit: a pale tee and a flannel overshirt stolen from Rachel, a pair of ragged jeans and her hippie sandals from Los Angeles.

This new Max did not notice Chloe or the people arrayed in front of her. While much about her was kind of blurry and hazy like the people in front of Chloe, she was solid, a single shape and she seemed to be gliding in the void, arms outstretched and eyes shut. A few seconds later, a few 'feet' further away from Chloe, this Max vanished. As to how far she had floated, Chloe could not really guess. It was hard to measure distance in a world without any real points of comparison, without anything by which to gauge size. Every second she was distracted in here was another second that Nathan was left out in the real world with her body, but this was the first thing she had seen in the void between dreams which did not act as if it had come from her own mind. She did not know what it was or why it looked like Max. To be fair, before today I've never seen anything in here.

“What the fuck was that?” Chloe asked the others. Her father shrugged, an almost mindless look on his face. Of course they wouldn't know: she didn't. Almost the same place she had first spotted the other Max, three more forms came into existence. Like the first one, they did not interact with her or the shades in front of her. They did not seem to notice her. Max, the same Max was one of those three forms. Her hands were outstretched to either side, head bowed in an almost uncanny mimicry of prayer. Holding onto each of her hands, as well as each others, were a Chloe and a Rachel. As far as Chloe could remember, at least she was wearing the same outfit she had put on that morning, right down to the dark beanie covering most of her bright locks. That other Max's mouth continued to move as if in prayer and then she stopped talking, shut her eyes and was still. She could not say she remembered for sure about Rachel's outfit, but it looked about right. The three of them hovered there on the spot for a second before again, vanishing into the background of the grey dream haze. The cool confusion Chloe felt was cut through by a snarky voice in front of her.

“Guess we get to figure that out too,” the shade of Steph snarked.

“What do you guys think you, the real you, know how much you mean to me?” Chloe asked them, getting the feeling that she had nothing more she could do here except wait to see more apparitions in the darkness which she did not understand and which made her uncomfortable. There was no use to it. No matter what she did, the outside world was going to continue to spin and she was going to remain at Nathan's tender mercies unless she did something about it. Chloe wished she could see what she was walking into, but all she had were vague impressions: the smell of mildew, goosebumps, the sound of Nathan's voice. She wasn't sure where she was getting them from, but they were there.
“All of us who can know, kiddo,” her father assured her. Knowing what Chloe knew, sensing her decision to vacate this null space, he raised one hand as if to wave goodbye to her. It was so casual, so like the day he had walked out of her old home, walked out of her life for real. It was as if he really was just going to the grocery store. Or, in this case, as if she were. One by one, the phantasms before her visibly relaxed, closed their eyes and faded into the void. Chloe knew what to do. It was not much unlike pushing to the surface of a dream to become part of it, only in this case as Chloe began to almost swim up through the ubiquitous fog of the world around her, she did so with the intent to return to the waking world.

Her eyes snapped open but she could not remember making the decision to open them. It was a kind of instinctive response to the idea that she was trapped somewhere with Nathan Prescott. The light in the room was not strong enough to suddenly overwhelm her or anything. In fact, if anything she was being kept in a dark room. Lit by one exposed bulb overhead, the room consisted of an old cement floor, rusty pipes, wooden beams and a whole lot of cobwebs. A set of stairs led up, but Chloe did not turn her head yet to see where as, judging by the sound of Nathan pacing back and forth, mumbling, he had not yet noticed that she was awake just by lifting her head. Instead she slowly lowered it and took stock of the situation. Her hands were tied at the wrists behind her. Those arms, stretched down below her back, were wrapped around what seemed to be an old, wooden chair. She did not dare move to see how sturdy it felt. She could hear water rushing through one of the pipes she had seen before. Speaking of water, the whole damn room smelled of mildew.

“None of you get it. None of you understand what's going on, I am a genius, and all everyone wants to do is mock me, belittle me, order me around like I'm some sort of punching bag.” Chloe wondered if Nathan was on the phone with someone he felt owed him something or if he was talking to the same things he had been speaking to on the fourteenth, in the girls' restroom. It had certainly sounded as if he had an antagonistic relationship with them and the chip on his shoulder was larger than the entire state of Oregon. That much had always been obvious. Chloe twitched her left knee, hoping it would look fairly natural. There was definitely something in place to keep her legs still. Her knees didn't hurt despite her ankles seemingly being tied to the chair legs just as she had predicted in that hazy gray place, it was just the damned arms pulled tight around the back of this chair, already stretched to a point that felt near breaking which kept her in pain. Even if her legs had been free, she would have probably ended up tripping over herself, if she could stand up at all.

A few things clicked simultaneously. First and foremost, the rope around her wrists was thicker, coarser than that around her ankles. The Steph's shade had been right. Chloe could probably work her hands free but it wasn't going to be as easy or as quick as her brain had made it seem before, especially not while trying to be sneaky. Second, there were no other voices or footsteps in the room. Eliot probably was not present. What if he's on his way, right now, to lure Rachel or Max here the same way he did me? Third, her mouth was free. She could get him talking. Chloe lifted her head, opened her eyes and turned her neck as far as she thought she safely could. The edge of something large and metal, like a very old furnace, stuck out behind her. When she turned around, Chloe's eyes flicked to the stairs from before. They lead up half a flight, turned almost 90 degrees and proceeded another few feet up to a door, most likely the one she had been dragged in through,
judging by the light sneaking in under the crack at the bottom of the door.

“See, she's awake,” Nathan told someone or something to his left. Chloe could not see it. The haze of her unconsciousness had all but lifted, though her head hurt. Nathan's demeanor shifted almost immediately. He no longer acknowledged any of the phantasms which he must have been dealing with and the hands working against one another in frustration stopped and dropped to his side. He stopped pacing. “Do you know, do you know it's your fault? Do you understand that?” This question was directed at her. Even in the poor light it was impossible to miss Nathan's eye upon her and, more disturbingly, hard not to notice the way he licked his lips before he spoke. “This is all your fault.”

What followed was an exposition which floored Chloe. She was not moved by his words, nor did she come to see any imagined error of her ways. What she did learn was that Nathan Prescott had been keeping a mental tally of every offense, no matter how small or how imagined that she, Max or Rachel had ever committed against him. They had once been forced for English class to read the Odyssey, something which Rachel had adored and Chloe had found interesting if taxing at certain parts. One of those parts was referred to as the catalogue of ships, a recounting of which king and which kingdom had sent what ships and what men. Even reading it had put her in the mindset of listening to someone utterly drone on. What Nathan was doing now was not the same. Every word he spoke was laced with anger, passion, hurt. He believed everything he said, no matter how outlandish. Seconds passed into minutes. Chloe hadn't had to say a word to get him talking, he had been waiting for this moment. The vast majority of what came out of his mouth was nonsense, it existed within his own imagination. Some of it, of course, wasn't. For example, Rachel did have powers and had taken his eye, though he left out that it was an accident resulting from interrupting him sexually assaulting their girlfriend.

For her part, she did not stay immobile after the immediate dumbfounded surprise passed. Every time Nathan returned to pacing, looked away from her, stopped to go off on a diatribe to or against someone that only he could see, Chloe worked against the bindings on her wrist. All she really got for her trouble was the idea that the rope was very old and some very upset, abraded skin, but she tried. It was more than possible for her to slip out of these bindings. She knew it, but it was going to require more time and effort than she thought she could give it with Nathan so close to her.

“Do you get it now?” he asked her, all but spinning on the heel of one boot to glare at her. Chloe made sure to slow and then stop the movement of her wrists, straining against the rope. Chloe shook her head as he stared at her chest heaving and wildeyed. She did not get it.

“Half of that shit was in your head,” she hissed at the boy. “Listen, you know you're not well. You could still release me. I could still walk away and say nothing. There's no proof that anything happened, so you can let me go and you'll get off free and clear. Why don't we just do that, Nathan?” Chloe couldn't tell whether he was infuriated that she didn't agree with his minutes of
rambling or that she would suggest he let her go, but the boy growled, grabbed at his jacket as if to pull it off and then stopped. Chloe knew precisely why he stopped, too, because as he pulled one side of the jacket wide she caught the glint of the poor light above them on metal inside the jacket.

“Why would I do that?” Nathan asked her, seeming to come to his senses a bit. Either that, or he was pretending with his low voice and soft, cloying tone. “Right now, you're the one outsmarted. You're the one full of shit.”

“Seriously,” Chloe hissed. “Half of this is in your head and the other half is shit you bring upon yourself. Do you actually blame people for defending themselves from you?” She desperately needed him to start raving and soliloquising again if she was going to get free. He returned to his angry, manic state almost immediately, pacing the same five or six steps, talking to her but never looking her in the eyes as if he could not be reminded that she were an actual person in front of him. Chloe returned to trying to pull her wrists from the rope. She might have been imagining it, but she thought the rope was sitting further up her right wrist, as if it had shifted enough to give her a little bit of leeway.

“Oh, I made it up?” Nathan barked with an angry, derisive laughter. “I made up my eye, did I? I made up that stuck up dyke and her freaky fire?”

“I don't know shit about fire, but of course you didn't make up the eye. It was a horrible accident, but why should I feel bad for you? Think about what you were about to do to Max.” She thought about reminding him of Stella and Victoria, but she did not know what was going to push him over that fine line from ranting madman to 'willing to shoot.' Victoria had certainly been a part of the equation the first time he had drawn a gun on them. “All Max ever wanted was for you to get help,” she decided on continuing with this angle. If she could convince Nathan to feel a scrap of remorse, he might have mercy or at least let his guard down. In the meantime, I'm banking on Long Max Silver and the Dread Pirate Amber to come help a sea dog out. She knew her wrists were already beginning to feel raw. At this point she would rather the blood start to flow, to lubricate her escape attempt, than to continue struggling against the old rope. Remember, choose your moment to get loose. You've only got one shot and he's got a gun.

“Oh yeah, she said that,” Nathan snorted. His every word was mocking, dismissive. There was nothing sacred in sight or in mind. “She said that over and over from the first time I met her until that night. Badgering me, harassing me, judging me. You all think you can judge me. I’m Nathan fucking Prescott. I run this place. Hell, I run this town.”

“She wasn't judging you,” Chloe told the boy, voice rising in some desperation as she had to stop what she was doing because he had come to a stop to see – what? Did he want to see if she was impressed by his boast to own the town? Chloe's wrists were no longer aching as much as screaming at her. Fuck, I think if he looks away, I can actually get them out. Faintly she felt the sensation of warmth and wet on her hand. She was, it seemed, finally bleeding. Escape no longer
seemed like an out there fantasy made up by disparate parts of her terrified subconscious. “She gave a fuck. She cared. She wanted you to stop before you hurt someone else.”

“Else?” he asked, sounding frustrated and a little scared. “She was the first.”

“No,” Chloe told him as her eyes began to sting. The stress of the situation, the way his hand had begun to flex toward the left side of his jacket, they were summoning a lump somewhere deep in her throat. Did Nathan really not understand or comprehend that Max had been trying to help him? Did he really not see the hours she had put into getting him help before he hurt her, because that conversation which she, Rachel, Max and Steph had had they day three of them came back to Arcadia Bay from Los Angeles made it clear that Max had put in literal *days* in the span of two or three weeks just trying to get Nathan to take his medication, to see a counselor, to reach out to anyone who would help him. “No she wasn't. She wasn't the first to try to help you and she wasn't the first you hurt, either. You forget, but I don't. I stood up for you.” It was something she bitterly regretted now, but it was no less true and it did not hurt her any less that she had done it and been repaid with this. Her wrists ached and she worried that somehow he was going to notice her bleeding and find out what she had done.

“I never asked for that!” Nathan spat at her, quite literally. She felt his spittle strike her across the chin and despite her sincerest wishes to stay stable, it worsened the emotional strain she felt she was enduring. “I don't need anyone's help.” Chloe hated the small hitch in her voice, the small sob.

“You're so fucking wrong, Nathan,” Chloe yelled back at him. “Max has been trying to tell me the whole goddamn time she's been at Blackwell but I wasn't listening. I get it now though. You *do* need someone's help. That's the thing you've always needed the most but they had to stand up to your dad, too. You had to be *allowed* to get better, to want to get better. I think Samantha was trying to do that. I think that's why you hurt her. I think that's why she had to leave too.” Nathan kicked something on the ground which Chloe had not paid any attention to and even over her attempts to keep her tenuous grasp on calm she heard wood or stone skitter across the floor and slam into a wall on the other side of the room. No matter how scared she was or upset she was, she could remember the anger with which she had dropped Nathan to the ground or driven her boot into his chest. There had been no pity there, she had been unable to feel it before. Now, she wasn't sure if she finally felt it, as Max had always done, or if she was just *scared*. The not being sure was the worst. Her left hand felt warm and wet. It was disturbing to wonder if she had bled much in such a short time.

“You know *nothing* about Samantha,” the boy roared. “That wasn't *my* fault. She pissed me off. She deserved it. She had to be a nosy, pushy bitch like you and your little dyke whores!”

“I don't think you believe that,” Chloe said. “I think it's what you tell yourself so you don't have to feel bad anymore, but someone was there at the hospital that day. She heard you apologizing. She
heard you. I know you knew what you did was wrong.”

“You don't know shit,” Nathan insisted. He launched into a story about the event in question, something which had happened about the same time that Chloe, Max and Rachel were squaring off with Damon Merrick in the junkyard. Unfortunately, he did so by telling it, not to Chloe but to someone else. Someone who must have been standing in plain view for him, but was not for her. “Stupid bitch thinks she knows what happened, wasn't even there. I was there. Sam was bitching and bitching, telling me to talk to a doctor, talk to my sister, run away from home, go to the police and tell lies about my dad.” He's got to be twisting that around. There's enough to tell about his father he wouldn't have to lie. At this, Chloe realized that Nathan was not looking at her. While her heart broke for Samantha, a girl who Chloe had pushed toward Nathan because it had been obvious she felt great affection for him, she had to focus.

“She just kept talking and talking and wouldn't stop, wouldn't shut up no matter what I said. I just had to get that stupid bitch away from me. I pushed her back, I'm entitled to my personal space. It wasn't my fault she was a dumb whore who didn't know how not to walk in front of that biker.” Stop it, Nathan. Chloe wasn't sure if hearing him hurt because it was about Samantha, who she felt somewhat responsible for, or if it was because he was erasing the idea that there was enough human being in him to reach. Even if she got her hands loose, she was going to have to fight Nathan and she wasn't sure if she could do that with her arms aching, with her eyes blurring from tears or her legs tied to the chair. Please stop. It's my fault Samantha ended up in your path. I'm such a fucking screw up.

“The hair thing was my fault,” Chloe spat when it looked as if Nathan was about to turn her attention back to him. “I'm so sorry for that. It was stupid, juvenile, but Max has never tried to do anything but help you.” Instead of going off on another rant to this invisible person or thing, Nathan rounded on her and she was forced to stop working her arms against her binds. Chloe felt a bead of sweat roll down her face as the boy glared at her. She thought that the rope was pressing into the bottom of her left palm. She was not quite at the 'one tug and I'm free' stage but she had gotten somewhere. She was also now fairly certain that the blood coming from her was slow, but steady. She had not yet done any permanent damage. Of course I can't sit down here forever, either. And I really can't let him get behind me.

“You're not fooling me,” Nathan told her. “Your feminazi bitch released those files. She snooped around, nosy as hell like always and released those files and now I have to take care of you all because you're my problem and if I don't, it comes down on me.” Did that mean that Jefferson had told him to do this? Or worse, his father? It was not hard to imagine either option. Nathan's paranoia was beginning to rub off on her. For instance, she was starting to get concerned that something had happened to Max and Rachel. I'm so close to getting my hands loose, but then what? “You're not worth even a quarter of me. If I have to take care of you, so be it.”

“For who?” Chloe asked, suddenly, seizing on the idea that he might be willing to expose Jefferson to her if he thought she was already – already dead. Nathan did not answer. He simply returned to pacing, eyes shut, mouth tightly closed and that was when Chloe realized he was trying to work up
the courage to kill her. She had to push him. She had to stop him from reaching his kill point. “Did Jefferson threaten you?”

“I respected Jefferson,” Nathan hissed, but he did not open his eyes. Chloe began to pull at her left hand a little harder, hoping to feel the rope slide across her palm. It might even be, but it required jerking her right wrist back and forth, shifting that hand this way and then that as if rocking a car stuck in the snow. Slowly the boy’s hands rose to press against either side of his head as he paced. It did not look like he was trying to block his ears. It looked almost like he had a bad headache and was trying to placate it. “I thought he was going to be amazing to learn from but he just wanted to use me like the rest of them. Everyone always wants to use me. Just like Victoria. Use me for a couple of years and throw me to the side. No one respects me.” A new stream of blood trickled, this time from Chloe’s right wrist. The rope once rather firmly around her wrists was now around one wrist and the center of her left palm. Unfortunately, at that point Nathan realized she had not responded and looked back. Chloe grew still and spat the first thing she could think. The tears had stopped. The pity had not vanished, but anger was trying to drown it out. None of them were helping her focus on her escape attempt or what to do when her hands were free.

“Victoria didn’t use you. She was the one person who never even fought back when you used her. Then you tried to use her the same way you did Max, the same way you did Stella. None of them ever meant to harm you.” Nathan lowered his hands but only to jerk his right hand toward the left flap of his jacket, as if he was going to reach his kill moment and pull his gun free, shoot her right there. “You complain about being bullied, hated, used and abused and everyone who ever tries to help you ends up with you hurting them. Somehow they’re the monsters? Look, Nathan, if Jefferson is making you do this shit, he’s not your friend. He’s not trying to help you. Not like Samantha did, not like Max did, not like I did before.”

“Don’t any of you dyke whores know how to shut your filthy mouths?” Nathan asked, his voice again rising to a roar. He made as if to grab for his weapon and then his head jerked suddenly to the left. Whoever or whatever was speaking to him said something he liked even less than what she had just said because Nathan reached down, picked up what looked to be an old piece of coal and hurled it across the room where it struck the same wall not far from the last object he had kicked in that direction. He doesn’t like whatever he sees over there. Not at all. Chloe thought. What happened if she took advantage of his mental state? She would never do this under normal circumstances but this afternoon trip to the boiler room had all the makings of her final moments. If I push him to breaking he might kill me. He might let me go. He hasn’t killed me so far. With that, Chloe decided she could neither let him go off of the rails or get his feet back under him. She was going to have to keep him unbalanced if she wanted to get out of there, half in the real world and half in his own hell. No one should have live this way.

“Shut up,” Nathan screamed. She was not sure if that was directed at her or not, but the boy turned away, clutching his head again. She caught sight of his wide, questioning eyes. She thought it possible she had already pushed too far, that he was already coming completely unhinged. I could finish it off by trying to disprove all of the crazy shit he’s said today, but that might be the end of me. For once in her life, despite anger, spite, pity and more hatred than she wanted to admit to holding, Chloe bit her tongue, metaphorically. Nathan continued to call, sometimes at a scream, for
someone to shut up, but his eyes were turned not on her but into the nearest corner. If Chloe got her hands free maybe she could free her legs in time. She wasn't sure. Chloe dared to look down toward the ground.

The one thing she was sure of was that the knots had been tied behind the legs, making it hard for her to bend enough while still bound at the wrists to see them. It was possible that Nathan hadn't tied them very tightly at all, wanting to be able to easily get rid of her body that evening. That's right, he'd have to wait to get me out of here. Hell, if he fires his gun right now, he'll almost definitely be heard. Frustrated, Chloe disregarded both thoughts as unworthy of her time. First off, she had no more idea as to whether she could escape or not because she could not see the knots. Second, Nathan wasn't thinking straight. He might be willing to kill her and risk being caught. Her heartbeat had picked up and breathing followed suit. She was not sure when it started, but there was a sort of strange awareness in the back of her head that Nathan was ramping up to whatever decision he was going to make. This was almost over, but that wasn't necessarily a good thing. Chloe was alone down here.

She felt the bloody, ragged rope press into the fingers of her left hand as Nathan spun around. He was not clutching his head anymore but nor was he holding his gun. Instead, he had in his hands a cell phone and he was dialing. Distantly, a part of her brain cheered at the idea that he might have decided to release her, to dial 9-1-1 and turn himself in, beg for mental assistance. She knew as soon as the thought came that it was almost delusional in nature. If there were any guardian angels coming to her aide, their names were Rachel Amber and Max Caulfield and if she were worthy of being at their side, she would be the type to fight and fight to not even need that saving, to be free and in control of the situation when they threw open the door to the room and ran downstairs to save her. I'm not dying here, Chloe told herself, eyes stinging anew. I'm going with Rachel and Max. I'm going to graduate and leave this piece of shit town with its fascists and its cronies behind. Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, or Podunk, Indiana, it doesn't matter as long as they're with me and that can't happen if I let Nathan and Jefferson kill me.

Chloe knew if she gave one good jerk, she could free her left hand and bring her sore arms around in front of her. The question was whether she could get her legs free before Nathan dropped the phone he was now raising to his ear and drew his gun or not. Chloe Price was not stupid. She knew there came a point where one tried even when it looked like it would get her killed, but this wasn't it. If Nathan was truly calling Mark Jefferson, then she had a little longer to live. Max suggested Jefferson was saner, more put together. He would know that they could not shoot her in the middle of the afternoon when students and faculty might still be in the building or close enough to hear. I'm not at do or die yet, Chloe told herself and was surprised by the relief she felt at the revelation, or more by how small it was. It meant she could still escape, but it meant that the ordeal wasn't over yet. She fixed Max and Rachel's faces firmly in her mind and listened to Nathan, slowly easing the rope up her palm, bit by bit as the boy paced to and fro.

“You can do this,” someone said, quite suddenly, openly, voice not disguised or lowered at all. Chloe's head jerked around. Steph Gingrich wore a pair of long board shorts, which was uncharacteristic of her, and a dark tee that Chloe thought might have been hers. The majority of her recently longer than usual hair was trapped beneath the beanie atop her head. “You're not alone.
Well, you are, but you aren't.” Confused, Chloe blinked against a new wave of tears and then felt fresh panic settle over her. *He'll see her any minute now. How did she get down here?*

“I didn't, Chloe.” Steph did not kneel down to her level. Instead she stood side by side with Chloe as Nathan turned for another pass at his pacing, angrily muttering about 'why won't he pick up'. Nathan looked clean at Chloe for a split second and then continued pacing, as if Steph wasn't there. *She's not.* Chloe looked up at the girl but realized that those board shorts had been Chloe's as well, and the beanie too. Steph was dressed in *her* clothing, because it was not Steph. It was that familiar Steph shade she had summoned into any number of dreams either for someone to enjoy something she was experiencing with or someone to talk to, to help her parse through what was going through her mind. When the girl patted her on the shoulder as if to congratulate her for getting it, Chloe felt nothing, not weight nor warmth.

*Am I going fucking insane?*

“Maybe,” Steph told her as Nathan drew his breath in, cursed loudly, hung up and began to redial. “You've always been pretty close to three or four major mental breakdowns, yourself, Chloe Price. You've been pretty shitty about getting yourself help, too, even with Rachel trying her damndest to convince you.” *I swear to fuck if I can just not lose my goddamn mind down here, I'll go to a counselor, someday, somewhere.* “Of course, face it, I could just be your power acting in some new way. I mean, that shit today was *weird* in the void.” *Focus!*

“Right,” Steph said, not looking the least bit abashed. “Your brain is fucking weird, just like Rachel's body and Max's well, everything.” She couldn't remember for the life of her what was weird about Rachel's body. “You know, going warm or cold all at random, no outside stimuli? Little fucked up. Not what the human body is supposed to do. Anyway, I'm here – or, you're here, or we're here, whatever – to get you out of here alive. You've got your hands. One good pull. You already know what you might have to do.” In that moment, Chloe *did* know. There was no way that she could get her hands free, untie her legs and hurl herself over the uneven broken concrete floor *and then* overpower Nathan before he could free his gun. She had already tangled once with potentially getting shot and she did not welcome that idea again. *So I get him to bring his gun to me. Before he gets ahold of Jefferson.* As if the thought was the cue, Nathan began to speak.

“You need to come to the boiler room. I- I'm going to lose my shit here.” Chloe had to piss him off, she had to unhinge him, after all. That was her only chance. If Jefferson came maybe she'd live a little longer but he might also drug her and find a way to move her. There was no chance she would survive that.

“I bet Samantha wouldn't put out,” Chloe yelled, suddenly. Beside her, Not Steph drew a sharp intake of breath. “I bet she knew you were a cowardly little boy and she wanted a man.” Nathan screamed for her to shut up but did not move the phone away from his mouth as he did so. Chloe drew in a breath and at the top of her lungs belted out, “No wonder you have to drug and molest
girls. You couldn't even get a pity fuck, which is impressive because you're fucking pitiful!” It happened all at once. Nathan's free hand shot into his jacket like a viper striking its prey and came out with the same gun Chloe had stupidly left on the floor of the girl's restroom because she was an unending, unerring disappointment to herself and everyone around her. Chloe drew a deep, shaking breath as she looked at Not Steph. The girl looked less sure than she had been a moment before but she nodded for Chloe to go on as Nathan waved the gun visibly in the air.

“No, fuck your 'hold on,' man,” Nathan spat into the phone. “I've got one of those carpet munching sluts down here like you said to do.” After a moment Nathan spun toward her but did not yet lower the gun at her. Chloe decided to bide her time. Nathan was getting more and more worked up by his lonesome. “No, you told me I had to take care of it. Fuck you, don't lie to me. Don't try to make me sound crazy. I've got her here, now get over here before I shoot this bitch here and now.” Nathan's phone flew across the room and struck the same spot on the wall to Chloe's left, shattering violently as Nathan screamed. “I said shut the fuck up, Kristine!” This last syllable drew out far longer than natural, Nathan's bulging eye threatened to pop from his head as he exhausted every last bit of breath in his lungs and strength in his throat. *He's gone*, Chloe realized.

“He's absolutely off-the-deep-end gone,” Not Steph promised. “Just like in the bathroom. He's yours now.”

“Stop yelling at her you stupid little bitch,” Chloe spat, trying to appeal to Nathan in his own language: entitled sexist brat. “Get over here and look me in the eyes unless you're scared of a girl you've already tied up and bitched at for what, an hour? Half an hour? Fuck you.” Nathan did turn away from the hallucination that Chloe thought might be of his sister. If Jefferson's coming, he'll want to do something like drug me or something. I'll never wake back up again. She had to take his gun from him and hold him at gunpoint until help came and Jefferson was welcome to get fucking shot if he decided to be dumb enough to come to Nathan's side.

“That's it,” Not Steph told her. Now, as Nathan brought the gun down to aim at her, the shade of Steph knelt to the ground and began to all but yell into Chloe's ear. It was distracting, it kept her from calming down and thinking. Maybe, though Not Steph was thinking for her. “Piss him off, make him put that gun in your face, grab it and go. Then do it. Just fucking do it. Because if you don't one of them are going to do that needle trick Max talks about and there will be no Los Angeles, no San Francisco, no New York, no Podunk, Indiana. There will be no long quiet nights, there will be no long loud nights. There will be no chance to talk to your mother, no family dinners with Steph, with Rose, with Sera or the Caulfields. There will be nothing left of you!”

“Fuck you,” Chloe screamed at Nathan, Not Steph’s words driving her to a new degree of urgency and panic. She had to drive Nathan right over the edge. “Fuck you, you little bitch! Look me in the eyes when you do it, or are you really not a man at all, but a whiny fucking infant crying forever about how unfair your life is? Are you a fucking disappointment or are you a Prescott?” Whatever Nathan's verbal response was going to be, it got tripped up along seven or eight other concurrent ones, nonsense syllables spilled out of his mouth, gibberish. But it worked. He stumbled forward, gun outstretched. “Th-that's it you pissant little fuck,” she shouted, almost speaking as
incoherently. He had to get angry enough to put it right in her face. Yeah, there was the chance he would shoot her too soon, but at this point it was finally do or die. “Get off Jefferson's leash, you pathetic little lap dog.” Nathan's eye focused in on one of hers and Chloe twitched her left arm, hard once as she pretended to strain against her bonds. They fell to the floor, the sound masked by her screaming, “You'll never be half the man your father is.” Nathan pressed the cold metal of the barrel to her forehead and then went deadly silent.

“You are one dead dyke,” he finally muttered. The door opened at that moment. Not Steph's eyes jerked up to it right before Chloe's did and even Nathan followed suit, clearly jumpy and on edge. Instead of Rachel Amber or Max Caulfield, as Chloe would have needed, she saw the familiar blazer and douchey goatee of the photography teacher. With Nathan distracted, the impulse to grab his gun and shoot them both there and then rose in her.

“Wait!” Not Steph called. Chloe waited. Figment of her imagination or not, the non-person beside her had kept her alive thus far. She had a gun in reach and free hands. Her situation, despite the cold barrel of a killing machine pressed now against her cheek, was better than it had been thirty seconds ago. Jefferson was framed by the light of the spring day for half a second, the same half a second it took for Chloe to decide not to grab the gun and then the man shut the door behind himself and began to descend the stairs.

“Well, well,” Jefferson murmured. It was a tone she had never heard in his voice before, both sharp and dangerous but soft. “It looks like one of the flies buzzing about has landed itself in one hell of a spider web but god damn the lighting down here is shit.” Jefferson paused halfway down the stairs, straightened his jacket smoothed the sides of his hair and then smiled at her from behind those thick glasses. “That's alright. I'll make it work. A good photographer figures out how to work with the tools he has, remember that, Prescott and next time do better.” Nathan did not move the gun, he did not look away from Jefferson but his entire body shook, including the arm holding the weapon. Chloe hoped he did not accidentally pull the trigger. As far gone as Nathan was, his response was only gibberish about being disrespected, lied to, used. The same old refrain. Jefferson didn't seem to pay attention. “Nathan, Nathan, relax. Everything is under control, your control. My control. Our control. That is another thing one must do. Understand yourself, and how to use who and what you are to others to get the shot. Now tell me what's happening here?”

The boy tried to explain, he genuinely did. He was in the middle of such a psychotic episode that anyone listening would have thought the basement to be packed with people, not just his sister but Samantha and Max as well as people who had no name just vague descriptions like 'the tall man' or 'the round woman.' Chloe did not try to follow, she just held still and waited for the sound of Not Steph's voice or for her to see an opening and make her move.

“The jig is up,” Chloe finally told Jefferson as he stroked his goatee. This earned a frustrated growl or sigh from the man, she could not tell which.
“The ‘jig’ is far from up,” he said as he reached into his own jacket, “you pathetic, overcompensating little slut.” Nathan jabbed the gun harder into her cheek but could not seem to take his eyes from Jefferson as the man pulled something long and dark from his jacket. It was like Nathan was completely entranced to Jefferson's every word, even as his eyes twitched toward spots throughout the room he had been hurling insults and other nonsense at the entire time the two of them had been down in the boiler room. Jefferson didn't cut through the psychosis, he had instituted himself as part of it, the head of Nathan's psyche. He was, truly, in control here.

“He thinks he is,” Not Steph said, and Chloe did not dare look sideways for fear of jostling the gun and setting Nathan off. “He's so wrong.”

“We'll dispose of the corpse elsewhere after nightfall,” the man mused as he popped open the container.

“It's the right size for a needle,” Not Steph advised her. Nathan's neck moved unnaturally, his body continued to heave beneath his jacket, jaw working side to side, eyes shooting around the room. He was like a paranoid David Madsen on steroids. For a moment, the gun fell down her face just slightly. Chloe knew the command was coming before it came and so when Not Steph screamed for her to move, now, her hands were already on the gun and Nathan's limp wrist. Jefferson froze in place as Nathan stumbled a step or two back, thrown off guard by the sudden robbery of his firearm. Then, as if nothing had changed, Mark Jefferson laughed derisively.

Nathan no longer an immediate threat, she leveled the gun on the boy and turned her gaze toward Jefferson. Her wrists ached, screamed in protest as blood dripped down along either arm, onto her shirt, into her lap. Jefferson took a step forward, apparently deciding she would not do what she was clearly threatening to do. He was wrong. That step forward was the last one Chloe Price, in her sudden fiery panic, shaking arms and raw, screaming throat, would put up with.

“Shoot or die!” Not Steph's voice rang in her ears shortly before what sounded like a small explosion erased everything else from them. Jefferson did not take another step forward. Instead, suddenly grasping at his gut, he stumbled back. That was when Nathan moved. Chloe did not know whether he was trying to back away from her or charge her down but her left hand jerked the gun sideways and she pulled the trigger once, twice, three times. Nathan collapsed immediately, unlike Jefferson. He bled profusely from his chest. She knew why that chest was not rising and falling, why he was not cursing her.

**Tragedy.** The voice came from nowhere and everywhere at once but it sounded loud in her ears and when Chloe glanced to Not Steph, the girl was gone and a solemn looking Samuel hovered in her place for a second, before he too faded from vision.

Nathan Prescott was dead.
Nathan Prescott was dead and she could not even stop panicking to feel something about it, because Mark Jefferson was still on his feet. Chloe fired two rounds at the man without hesitating. One might have winged his arm or done nothing, but the other flew wide, because a small spray of stone shot out from the wall behind him. Her shaking, blood soaked hands had betrayed her aim. Jefferson looked wildly around the room, mouth open but gasping silently. The bullet was not in his stomach, as she had thought. It was higher up, almost in his chest. The man turned and fled. He stumbled and fell at least twice but Chloe kept her gun on him until the door flew open and the sunlight spilled in. From his spot kneeling on the stairs, Mark Jefferson lifted his head and might have spoken a word but it could not be heard over Chloe screaming and crying as she kept the gun trained on him.

Much as Jefferson had been framed by the sunny day behind him moments before, now too was someone else. Max Caulfield, her face twisted in absolute terror, looked around the room once before Jefferson leapt to his feet, bolted up the last three stairs and shoved her aside. Max did not chase the man, she merely stood rooted to the spot with eyes as wide as her face could possibly allow. Chloe screamed at her, the same scream of panic and anger and hate and rage. She did not know what these emotions were meant to convey or who they were for but screaming, drawing breath and screaming again seemed to be the only thing she could do beyond holding onto the gun, keeping it trained on what some part of her knew was a corpse. Max was bathed in the sun, in all that was safety, joy, freedom and the most exquisite pleasure and she could not move from the sight of her girlfriend drenched in blood and death.

The gun clattered to the ground as her lungs gave way once more and she stared at her bloody hands.

“I killed him, he's dead. Max, help. Max, help! Max get me out of here. Get me out of here right now!” The girl's face broke, as if it had been stone shattered by the sound of Chloe finally finding words again, despite the fact that Chloe had barely any understanding of what she was saying. She could see the tears in Max's eyes even from there, everything about her angel came through in sharp detail. The girl raised her right hand. Chloe froze in place and watched with dawning comprehension.

“I'll stop this,” Max promised her, voice hitching in the back of her throat but words resounding like the law of some old, long dead goddess. “It's going to be okay. I’ll stop this.” As the girl vanished into thin air, letting in the light of the day and the sound of the rest of the sunlit world Chloe realized that this was the Max she had seen running through the grey void earlier that day. Max was going back in time.
April 25th, 2012 3:17 PM

Rachel Amber was pacing the grass by their favored picnic table when Max came back to herself. She exhaled once, shook her head and raised a hand toward either eye. There were no tears in them, but some rested still on her cheeks, and though she felt ashamed as she wiped them away, Max could not stop to speak. She took one or two steps away from the picnic table, doubled over and lost what little of her lunch she had been able to eat. It took forever, it was stressful and the muscles in her neck, shoulder and chest ached when she was done, but eventually, stress had robbed her of another meal. Rachel's hands on her back, her shoulders, her neck, they attempted to soothe her, to calm her down but nothing could do that and they certainly did nothing for the pain. Gasping, she wiped at her lips and then spat to get the taste from her mouth.

“I know you're worried,” Rachel told her, “but we have to keep it together until we find someone who can help us find her. We've got half of the Vortex club looking for Eliot and Nathan. Hayden will kick their doors in if he has to.” Max shook her head, drawing another great lungful of air in. Unfortunately with it came the memory of Chloe, broken with her arms and shirt covered in red. With it came the memory of Chloe screeching at the top of her lungs, of Mark Jefferson gasping unnaturally for breath and of the still, prone form on the floor of the old boiler room. Max lifted her phone and looked at it. The time read 3:18 which was only about eight minutes before the gunshots sounded audibly from the boiler room. Nathan Prescott had only eight minutes to live and that meant Max had only eight to save him, or more realistically to save Chloe from having to kill him.

“Back from a few minutes into the future,” Max told her in a short, stilted gasp. “We gotta go.”

“What?” Rachel suddenly came to life, standing straight but not releasing Max's shoulder. “What happened?”

“If I take time explain, it happens again,” Max told her, before turning toward the front doors of the school where she knew she could find Wells and David discussing installing cameras in the front
“What?” Rachel repeated herself, confused.

“Tragedy,” was all Max told this girl that she loved. It was all they had time for. “Chloe in trouble. We have to get her help.” She contemplated bypassing the two men entirely and bum rushing for the door to the boiler room but there were too many unknown variables. Max had not stuck around to find out the specifics of what had happened. She had not been able to sit there and ignore Chloe begging her to put an end to everything she was experiencing. Max needed to bring unknown variables of her own. She trusted inherently that Rachel was keeping pace with her but did not slow down even when her foot caught on a stair up to the front doors and she almost fell.

The cool glass door gave way under her weight, swinging open quite suddenly, quite loudly. The sound of the metal frame striking the doorway around it drew the attention of Raymond Wells and David Madsen, who were standing together as expected not far from the door to the front offices. Steph, at the end of the hall, spotted them. Max heard the girl scream to ask what was happening but she could not stop. Every single second mattered if they were going to get there in time to stop the girl from killing Nathan Prescott, to spare her whatever hell the Prescotts would bring down on her, to say nothing of her own mental health. Max was not going to lose Chloe, not for anything. Steph sprinted toward them as Max angled for Wells and David.

“David,” Max yelled, despite the fact that he was staring at her as if she were up to no good, as if she were about to shit on the floor or something. “David,” she pulled to a stop right in front of the two men and reached out to grab the brunet by the arm. “You have to come now. Someone's about to get shot.” The man's face turned to shock quickly. Max knew the fear she was feeling, that which caused her limbs to shake and made her gag at the end each sentence, was palpable. It was enough, it seemed, to rob him of his words. “You have to come now, do you understand me?” Confusion settled in over the shock and Max didn't like that. Beside David, Wells' brows were knit together in confusion. “Nathan Prescott has a gun and he is going to shoot someone.” The principal's dubious face become even more dismissive and as his low, patronizing tones began to sound, Max screamed over him at the top of her lungs.

“David, your options right now are to come save Chloe's life or I do the same thing to you and your secrets as I did to Nathan and Jefferson's. And I promise you, Wells, you're not in the fucking clear here either.” Wells' eyes widened, his voice cut off with a squelching noise as Rachel and Steph both called for her to calm down. Max did not care that her every word was breathy or that she had to release and draw in more oxygen as soon as she got hold of the last batch. She did not care how much everything hurt. Rachel said her name, but Max could not turn and give in. Eight minutes had turned into six already and Max was not okay with that.

David's wide eyes and pale face made it clear that her words had finally been heard. She released the man and bolted. Several sets of footsteps sounded alongside her own but she did not turn to
look back. David would either come or she would tell the world what he was, whether in this
timeline or another. Rachel continued to ask for her to tell them what was happening but it was all
Max could do to keep inhaling and exhaling, to keep pumping her arms and lifting her legs as she
shot down the hall and hooked a left into the back hall. Dana and Victoria were present in the hall
but she did not look either one in the eyes, not even when they asked if she had found Chloe. David
yelled questions, Rachel and Steph yelled questions. None of them understood what was
happening. None of them were thinking sanely. She pushed out of the doors and began to hook
around the corner to the back of the school, as she had shortly before hearing the sound of the
rounds which had taken Nathan Prescott's life.

“Jefferson and Nathan are in there and they're going to kill Chloe if we don't stop them right now.”
Max who had been the first of them to reach the boiler room door heaved it open without
hesitation. If the others heard her well enough, then they would know what they were walking
into, if not, at least she was not going down alone. Max took in the sight of Chloe, holding Nathan's
gun as Jefferson reeled back from her first shot. Apparently, Max's timing had been off. Nathan's
eyes turned toward the door where as of yet, she stood alone. Max pushed herself five or six steps
down the stairs even as Jefferson ran toward them for dear life. While Nathan's muscles tensed, so
did Max's failing ones. She threw herself off of the stairs and onto the boy. They collapsed together
in a flailing mess of arms and legs but there were no more bullets. Chloe did not shoot. As far as
Max could tell in that moment before leaping, Nathan was uninjured. Her timing had been off or
she had been slower than expected, but it was not in vain.

There was a sound of scuffling and Chloe began to scream, at first it was the familiar mindbroken
scream but soon words came into it, words that sounded like Chloe telling Nathan to leave Max
alone. A large hand settled on Max's shoulder as, beneath her, Nathan struck up and caught her in
the eye with his elbow. For her part, Max shrugged off the hand and pressed into Nathan's throat
with her forearm. An animal stared up at her from Nathan's body. She was just beginning to
consider how long she could safely hold her arm there without seriously injuring him when the
hand grabbed at her again and then the sounds of the rest of the room came into being. David's
voice, mid admonishment for her to release Nathan rang in her ears and the man hauled her to her
feet through brute force alone.

The fall from the stairs had not broken anything but it had not helped anything, either. Rachel had
just stopped yelling, but it was almost like the boiler was on, the room was sweltering around Max.
Chloe fell silent as the whiny little shit whose pathetic life Max had just saved was hauled from the
ground just as Max had been a moment ago and pinned to the old stone wall. Chloe had the gun
trained on Nathan and David and Max didn't blame her, she only hoped the girl was enough herself
to not pull the trigger, never mind the sheer joy Max would get in that moment from doing violence
to either of them, herself. Just not this kind of violence. Nathan's feet didn't touch the floor when
David finished pinning him to the wall. Max looked around. Jefferson was gone, David was yelling
for Nathan to stay still and Chloe to drop the gun. Neither of them were obeying him. She was not
sure either of them could. She was not sure they knew what he was saying.

Rachel leapt into action from where she paused on the bottom stair but that did not stop Max from
seeing that she looked like she had a horrible sunburn or seeing legitimate, very physical flames
manifesting in her eyes. When Chloe spoke of this sight, it was always in metaphor. Now, Max could swear it was literal, that fire burned behind Rachel’s gaze. The girl looked fiercely, proudly at Max and then spun away toward Chloe who dropped the gun to the floor with a clatter. Mercifully the weapon did not go off. On the ground Max spotted a dark case designed to hold needles. Mark Jefferson was already active and Chloe had almost become this world’s Rachel Amber. Or maybe not, she thought, reminding herself of the memory of Nathan, bleeding on the floor. Max and Rachel hurried together to Chloe's side as she began to pull, to tug at the ropes around her ankles.

Max had to grab Chloe's hands, slick with blood from wounds around her wrists to stop the girl from fumbling uselessly at her bonds and making it impossible for them to remove the rope. Chloe babbled at her about 'Steph but Not Steph' about seeing Max in a grey, foggy void that sounded to Max a lot like the Timescape and any number of things Max could not understand too well. Max just held tightly to Chloe's hands and let Rachel do her work. After a time, Chloe held tightly back. When Max looked up toward the doorway it was to see Wells standing in it, still outside the room, ultimately useless as usual. The most useless piece of shit in Arcadia Bay history. Go fuck yourself with a whiskey bottle. Contempt was good, contempt was bracing, contempt chased away memories of a fate now circumvented. Chloe squeezed tighter to get her attention, so Max turned back.

“Call 9-1-1,” David demanded, turning his head to yell up the stairs. Max had no clue if Wells listened, but as soon as Chloe's legs were free and she stood up, Rachel and Max wrapped her tight in a hug. The girl's babbling turned to sobs and then to breathing, to sniffling, to wailing. “You three, go sit down or get upstairs until the police come.” Max ignored the man, who was still fighting the flailing Nathan, screeching about how his father owned this town and would destroy them all without a thought, screeching about how a storm was coming. Both of them, petty little fucks always needing to control every little thing.

“Miss Amber, Miss Caulfield, please release Miss Price and bring her upstairs.” Angry, Max turned her head away from Chloe and Rachel.

“Anyone who isn't a lapdog for Sean Prescott may talk, the other two can go fuck themselves. You did this. You.” Max locked eyes with David Madsen. “You did everything to make sure that the Prescotts had free reign at Blackwell Academy, that Nathan never got in trouble for anything he did, that he never had to answer for himself and so that he could never be treated. You did all of this. You put Chloe down here.” Max was feeding Rachel's rage and Chloe's grief, too. The both of them shook in her arms and the heat in the room, even with the door wide open, was becoming unbearable. If Max did not stop talking, she knew the room would find out once and for all who gave David the horrible scars on his palm and who took Nathan's eye.

Rachel and Chloe's grips tightened on her. She continued to sweat as Chloe continued to sob. Her breathing had not entirely normalized but it did not come or go as quickly now. Wells at some point announced he was going to meet the police and almost a second later she felt David's free hand on her shoulder. Max lifted her head from Chloe's hair in time to feel that hand lift and David
scream out in agony. Nathan collapsed to the ground as David turned his full attention on Rachel, who had taken him by the wrist of the hand he had grabbed at Max with. The blonde broke free from Chloe and Max. David was clearly angry, agonized but also shocked as Rachel seared the flesh beneath her grasp.

“I warned you,” Nathan screamed, before curling up into a ball. “Freaky bitch took my eye!”

“After what you did to Max, you're lucky I had enough control to stop before I turned you to ash!” This girl did not sound in that moment, like her Rachel. She sounded like an angry mother nature. All sense of control over this situation was gone. Chloe grabbed desperately at Max's shoulders as the brunette watched David stare down Rachel, whose gaze swiveled from Nathan to the head of security. “You - you piece of shit. If you'd just listened to any of us a long time ago, none of this would have happened. People have gotten hurt, people have died, just because you couldn't do your job and keep your own house in order. You had to go off chasing your paranoid delusions.” David tried to jerk his arm free but Rachel's grasp was tight, vindictive. This room could burn and take the school with it at any moment. “And now, you are not to touch another one of us, ever again. Either of you. I don't care what happens next.” Max broke her right arm from Chloe's grasp as fire manifested in Rachel's left hand. This was supposed to be smooth, no problems. Why is it like this?

Nathan was a sobbing mess on the floor. Rachel didn't even notice Max's hand on her shoulder. David faltered for just a moment, head lifting, eyes widening with genuine mortal terror before Rachel gasped, closed her left hand around the flame and extinguished it and released David, pushing him at Nathan. For a moment, the room was in stasis. David managed to stay standing but he was clearly injured. Nathan no longer tried to move and Chloe's head was finally out of Max's shoulder but she did not look as if she understood what was happening to them all. Max wanted to mutter into either girl's ear, but she knew it would not work, not for both of them, so, taking a deep breath, she called out.

“Everyone calm down, it's over.” As Nathan started to uncurl on the floor, David lifted his boot and put it down into the boy's back. Rachel and David stared at one another from feet apart, so Max repeated herself. “It's over. It's all over,” this last she said as soothingly as possible as she turned her eyes on Chloe and reached up to stop her from smearing blood across her face as she tried to rub at her eyes. “It's going to be okay.” Max hoped what she said was true, but felt more relief than she cared to admit when Steph descended the stairs, no longer being blocked from doing so by Wells. Sirens sounded in the distance. Whatever came next was probably on David.

Max had nothing to say to either David or Nathan. Together she, Steph, Chloe and Rachel agreed upon a story in hushed tones. David did not try to speak again until the police arrived.

The emergency room of the Arcadia Bay Medical Center was a cool, rather dark, quiet and clean room so unlike the loud, filthy hell that Max's memories kept trying to drag her into. Having long
since been interviewed about what they had witnessed down in the boiler room, Max and Rachel were now among several other familiar faces waiting in the ER to hear about Chloe. Max, shameless, sat curled up in a couch leaning against Rachel as she held her from behind. The more natural body heat of the blonde she loved was soothing but not as much as the sound of her heartbeat whenever Max turned her head and pressed her ear to the girl's chest. Half heartedly they tried to speak to one another, but there was so much more to be gained by simple contact. She felt a little dead inside, honestly, but her eyes opened briefly to take in David, where he sat beside his ex-wife.

Chloe had not been allowed any visitors while the police interviewed her. Max wasn't sure about the legality of keeping people back while she was tested and scanned, but she was so tired of fighting. David, who was hiding an unwrapped wrist under the long sleeve of his coat, had just a moment or two finished recounting that Nathan had been in the middle of a psychotic episode when the incident took place, leading to him hallucinating people, creatures and even fire as Max led David and Wells to the boiler room. Jefferson, he had stressed, had disappeared without a trace. It also seemed that David had made it clear that any attempt to silence what had happened would result in him going on national radio or television 'faster than you can say corruption.' Ultimately, it was encouraging behavior from David Madsen but it was too little too late. The damage was already done and his piddly little burn was nothing compared to everything he had done to Chloe and Rachel. She felt neither pity nor approval when it came to the man. She only hoped he quit his job and fucked off somewhere.

“'It's bullshit he's pretending to care about Chloe after everything he's done,’” Max muttered as she shut her eyes and pressed into Rachel. Rachel made a familiar ‘hmm?” noise in her throat but Max did not repeat herself. Instead, she worked her left hand across herself to grasp at the back of Rachel's where it sat on Max's own knee. “Are you alright? Not cold or anything?”

“No,” Rachel told her in a similarly quiet tone. “I'm really not okay. But, I'm not cold.” They had gotten their stories straight. The police thought that Max had seen Nathan dragging Chloe to the room and then ran to find David but was unable to before tipping off most of her friends that something was wrong with Chloe. Their confusion about where she was, Max had insisted, was simple miscommunication in a moment of panic. Either way, she had found David and he was their big hero. The idea made her want to puke again, but she wasn't sure she had much in the way of even stomach fluids to leave on the shiny waiting room floor. “Are you okay?” When Max shook her head, Rachel grunted understanding and tightened her hold on the photographer.

Max eventually lifted her head again. The room was pretty populated by Blackwell students and staff. David, Joyce and Ms. Grant sat near to them, in a row of chairs along the back wall of the waiting room, the wall which held those doors Max was waiting to be told she and Rachel could go running through to get to their girl. Steph was in the chair just behind Rachel, her knuckles pale as she gripped her armrests. She was as worried about Chloe as any of them. There had been talk about a potential concussion and Steph seemed very concerned about that possibility. Hayden, Logan, Dana, Juliet, Kate and even Taylor and Victoria sat in clumps across the room. There had not been much talking but occasionally one of them would come over to Rachel and Max to talk, to offer a kind word. Victoria's presence had made Max realize that whether or not there was any kind
of potential for a relationship or not, Victoria was trying her damndest to be Max's friend and that had put a kind of bracing warmth in Max's gut.

As far as any of them could ascertain, Nathan was being held in jail, though Max and Hayden shared the belief he would be out in no time. Joyce had not really spoken to them, but the embrace she had wrapped each of them in when she first reached the emergency room made Max wish she could look at Joyce through the eyes of a child Max. Seeing her as a warm, kind figure that she loved like another mother would have been great comfort. Instead, this image of Joyce was tainted and that struck Max as profoundly gross. If her view of Joyce was so tarnished, what must Chloe's be like? The worst thing a parent can do to their child is to hurt them, because then this whole cornerstone of their life comes unraveled. *Poor Chloe.*

The light pouring in from the outside was low and golden when Chloe Price emerged from the back. She was not flanked on either side by police officers. Max nudged Rachel, who had fallen asleep and the girl sat immediately up. It took Max a second to get off of her, to let Rachel rise completely as Chloe scanned the room and her eyes landed on the two of them. Rachel was barely on her feet, grunting and swearing under her breath when Chloe lifted a sheet of paper over her head like it was an olympic medal or a first place trophy.

“I am free of concussion,” she declared to the room at large, though her eyes never left Max and Rachel. Her celebration was for them, not the rest of the room. Even still, Dana and the others called out a brief cheer. Max heard Hayden's voice loud among the others. The girl's wrists were freshly bandaged and Max figured that was something that would need to happen for a while but beyond a black eye which had not yet developed very well when Max last saw her and the look of exhaustion which stole over Chloe's face the moment her mother and ex-stepfather rose to their feet, it was *her* Chloe, whole and sane. Come to think of it, Max had a hell of a shiner of her own forming. Nathan was safe and nothing could come back on Chloe or any of them. More than that, this had been so severe that the chances that he would be allowed back in Blackwell struck her as too low to consider. In short, when Chloe healed up, there was a chance that all would be right with the world.

“Oh, Chloe,” Joyce sighed, breathing relief. “Come on, we'll get you home, I'll run to pick up the prescription the doctor handed me, and everything will be alright.” Max shot a sideways glance at Rachel to see her face harden. Of course, Joyce was going to use this as a chance to get control over Chloe yet again. The bluenette lowered the paper in her hand, looked at the ones Joyce was clutching as she approached and laughed in her face. The room went quiet. Even the few Vortex Club members who had cheered at Chloe's proclamation that she was well fell silent. Max did not look at Ms. Grant, at Steph or at anyone else. Chloe held her hand out for the papers.

“I'll take care of those before I get to *my* home,” Chloe told the woman, lifting her chin which still bore the remains of some scrape from a fall Chloe must have taken off of her board a day or two ago. Max held her breath but grabbed at one of Rachel's hands with one of her own. Joyce frowned but lifted her hand and placed the prescriptions written for Chloe and whatever other papers she had gotten her hands on into Chloe's grasp. “Thank you very much.” With that, Chloe turned and
pointed toward Max, Rachel and Steph. “Hey guys? I love you all for coming, and I really appreciate it, but I need to go somewhere very quiet, lock all the doors and be super alone with these three for, like, forty hours or something.” Max did not look at anyone else, though she heard Dana chuckle. When Chloe pointed, Max came to her side. It did not take Rachel or Steph any longer.

“You need to be with your family right now,” Joyce all but simpered.

“Oh I intend to be,” Chloe promised. Max understood precisely what the girl was saying. *Mom and Dad aren’t here and they’ll probably be texting me for the next five years to make up for it, but god it’s good to be with family.* Max turned her head to follow Chloe’s glare as David started to open his mouth to scold her. The man remained silent, which quite frankly was something he could do with learning to pull off now and again. Chloe did not seem to give a shit about crumpling up the papers in her hands but she still moved very gingerly as she hugged first Max, then Rachel and finally Steph, who, sighing exaggeratedly, told Chloe that she was a real pain in the ass, worrying them like that. “Yeah I am,” Chloe agreed. When they broke apart, Max had to tell herself that she was imagining that Chloe's smile looked broken. The crowd at large seemed to be gathering itself, preparing to leave considering that most of them were there for Chloe.

“Nathan's been suspended pending investigation,” David announced to the room, gruffly, before turning away from them. Max did not try to stifle her snort. No one answered the man as he shifted his shoulders beneath his coat and made for the doors. Joyce looked between Chloe and David and then, heartbreakingly, followed the man out. There might be hope for Joyce but it thinned every time Max saw her.

“With that, I'm going home to watch TV, eat a pint of ice cream, play with my dog, hang out with my family and cry for about a year while Blackwell investigates whether they should expel a sex offender or hire him like they did the other one.” Max could not help it. She looked first at David's retreating form and then at Ms. Grant, who looked incredibly upset as she and Chloe matched gazes. “Oh and David, tell Wells that Max and Rachel will be missing curfew tonight, 'kay big guy?” Max, who realized she had been nearly as silent as Rachel since Chloe emerged from the back, looked up at Chloe. She was not imagining it, the girl's boisterous front was, indeed, a front.

“It's gonna be okay, you know?” Rachel tried to reassure Chloe as the room began to empty around them. The blonde reached up to knock Chloe's bangs away from her forehead and Chloe did not even jokingly try to stop her. Max saw the concern this caused in Rachel's eyes. The Madsens were the first to go and Ms. Grant retreated afterward, apparently deciding nothing more than a goodbye was appropriate. The Blackwell students came next. Most of them stopped to make a goodbye of their own and for most people Chloe actually had something specific to say, some form of thanks. When it came to Taylor and Victoria at the tail end, the blunette and the blondes exchanged a smile that Max could not really translate and then as they walked away, Chloe called out at Victoria's retreating form.
And I expect you to have Max home by 10:30 on Saturday, young lady! I'm not afraid to go back to jail.” Victoria froze, turning back to look over her shoulder. Clearly a bit uncomfortable at Chloe hinting so loudly about their date, she gave a nervous chuckle, nodded and pushed out into the parking lot. Max felt bad but could not bring herself to scold Chloe, even if Rachel, too, visibly looked put off by the comment. It was possible Chloe was just trying to play up how okay she was a little too much. Still, Max kept her mouth shut and waited until Chloe was ready to go. “Let’s blow this popsicle stand.” Over Chloe's shoulder, Steph had fixed a smile on her face, but her eyes were uneasy. Clearly, Max, Steph and Rachel were all having the same thought.

Chloe was a little too cheery. When Max attempted to hold her papers for her, Chloe jerked them back and, tauntingly, shook a finger at her. Max tried to smile like she thought it was pure play, but she knew she had been caught. What Max wanted more than anything was to know exactly what prescriptions the doctor had written. If there were something there that suggested the doc had seen signs of PTSD or similar behavior, she, Rachel and Steph needed to know. Unfortunately, this line of thought became a very minor fear when the four of them stepped out into the parking lot.

Temperature-wise, it was still somewhere in the mid sixties. The low sunlight gave off the impression of a cooling day, though. It was not alone in that effort. To the several people stopping at or sitting in their cars in the small medical center's parking lot, perhaps the strangest thing about that early evening was not the level of the sunlight but the thick, large snowflakes falling from the sky in defiance of the temperature, of the season or of the weather. Ahead of her, Chloe and Rachel stared, marvelling at the snow around them. Max did not. Max slowed. Max stopped. The panic attack was immediate. She had not felt a genuine panic attack in over a year.

The dizziness came on quickly. In fact, the world might have been spinning even as one of those snowflakes spun down through the air to land on her nose. Her arms tingled even as they shook. Ahead of her Steph, Rachel and Chloe seemed to realize that Max was unable to move. What they might not have known was that she felt as if she was choking, as if she could not breathe, either. The absurd thought came that something invisible was holding that throat closed. Absolutely none of it compared to the understanding, the realization that Chloe had not been exaggerating when she told Max that she had killed Nathan. The snow was only the first sign. Oh, god, it was only the start.

She was not sure when she collapsed, but the cement felt unpleasant to strike against.

Blackwell Academy's parking lot did not look pleasant in the near dusk light of the gathering storm. Max blinked and gasped, looking down to find that her arms were wrapped firmly around Rachel's shoulders. She dug the tips of her fingers into Rachel's shoulders as she held tight to the girl. Rachel's hug was bracing, supportive but it was still tight enough to cause her to need to force breath into her lungs. Beside her, a devastated looking Chloe mused that she had been told by the cops not to leave town. Max did not think it was a joke. She swiveled her head around. Many of, no, most of the students from the dormitory were standing with or around them. Victoria, dressed in plain clothes that looked suspiciously like Kate's was among them. The blonde stepped toward Max, one hand outstretched as if to grab on to her.
“It was a lie right? Please, tell me it was a lie. Tell me you were wrong.” Max shook her head over Rachel’s shoulder. No amount of pleading on Victoria’s part was going to make what Max told the boys and girls assembled around them or the thick cloud cover forming over the far edge of the city a lie. Max could feel the storm forming, could feel it in the air. Not so much as a single funnel had been spotted but it was coming and at the rate the sky was darkening she was sure it would be there soon.

“It was true,” Max said and then she turned. Courtney and Taylor stood side by side with Brooke and Kate, staring at her as if she had the answers. Hayden and Zachary were watching the sky together, along with a roughed up Warren Graham and a stupefied looking Justin. “Get into your cars and run now. Fuck the speed limit. Run for Edgeton and do not look back. You can still make it, we can still make it if we run now.” As if the words were a starting gun, Chloe bolted from her side toward the truck.

“If you don’t have a ride, get into the bed of my truck right now.” Max released Rachel and began to lead her toward Rachel’s car. “I’m going to go with you or with Steph. I don’t care which, I just wish I didn’t have to leave you both alone.” Steph, it seemed, had joined Chloe and others in making a mad dash for their rides. The artist turned her green eyes on Max and Rachel as they approached and threw open her door to climb into her own ride. If they made for Edgeton, they would be able to escape the storm. Max was certain. No one else would, though. Arcadia Bay would die in this timeline and as in the other it would be her fault. Max wasn’t sure she could live with that.

Pompidou barked excitedly from the back seat as they passed Steph’s vehicle.

Blackwell will be destroyed. The town will be destroyed. Anyone still here will be destroyed.

“You did everything you could,” shouted Victoria over a sudden gust of wind. She watched Victoria settle into a car with Kate, Taylor and Hayden. Courtney was one of the students Max watched climb into the back of Chloe’s truck. It broke Max’s heart to think that Courtney and Victoria had not made up enough yet to escape together. They had to make it out, all of them. Max pushed Rachel toward her car. As soon as Rachel had her hands on the door two conflicting impulses struck. One was to run to the other side of Rachel’s car and jump in. The other? To turn her back on Rachel and bolt for Blackwell Academy, to die with it.

She did what Max always did when the Storm came to Blackwell. She chose to live.

Max inhaled, deep and felt the throbbing pain in her head. The pre-apocalyptic vision assaulted her in quick, merciless flashes like thrusts of a knife into a chest, into her chest. Then she opened her eyes. Settled in the back seat of Steph’s old red sedan, Max was instantly the target of all eyes but Steph’s since hers were on the road. Beside her, Rachel began to call for her softly, to draw her eyes
to Rachel, to make Max talk to her, explain what was going on, tell her if she was okay. It didn't work. Max stared straight out the windshield as the wipers knocked small snowflakes out of the way of Steph's vision. Her hands rose to stifle the cry in her throat, but they did a pisspoor job. Max leaned forward, straining against her seatbelt as the cry drew her every bit of breath. They were almost at Steph and Chloe's house.

“Max,” Chloe started, softly from the front seat. “Max what's going on? I'm getting scared for you.” This is so much bullshit, Max told herself as she looked up at Chloe. This is so fucked up! Why? Why do I have to make this decision? Why do I have to ask Chloe to make this decision. I can't do this. It's not fair. It's not right. Max realized that she was close to a panic attack all over again, and she turned to her left, looking away from Chloe's loving, concerned face to Rachel's. It didn't do much good, but at least Rachel was not someone she was about to force a world of hurt upon. She successfully stopped that same fucking wail from escaping her throat by clamping her mouth shut and heard Rachel's seat belt unbuckle. The blonde scooted close to her and grabbed at her shoulders.

“Not fair,” Max hissed, finally. “Not fair, not fair!” She wanted to hit something, but there was nothing around her that deserved it and when Rachel completely blocked her vision and restricted the motion of her clenched fists with a hug, she began to feel a little stupid about that passing impulse. No, no, no! Fuck! Max drew a breath in and confessed the truth in as close to a normal voice as she could. “We're fucked! The Storm is coming.” She did not see Steph look at her in the rear view mirror but could imagine it when the girl spoke. Max saw nothing but Rachel's shirt and the nape of her neck.

“Storm?”

“Max,” Chloe asked her, voice low and unsteady. “The Storm?”

“The Storm,” Max spat, more loudly than she intended. “The town is fucked. Completely fucked.” Max did not get another word out for the duration of their trip. She did not even try, despite questions being asked of her in increasingly panicked voices, until such time as they were at a stop in Steph and Chloe's driveway. Max pushed herself free of Rachel, fumbled stupidly, uncoordinatedly at her own belt and then finally unlatched and spilled out of the car onto the driveway where she landed on her knees. That, for the moment, was where she stayed. Max tried to tell herself to calm down in the quiet warmth of the early evening, that panicking and freaking out was not going to do any good, but the refrain of 'not fair' was the only answer her brain had to the order to just behave itself. The snow had stopped, but that meant very little. The darkening evening was going to give way to another day one with even with more weirdness and after a couple more there would be no more weirdness for this town. No more anything. Max looked up at Steph's house. It, too, would be gone with everything inside.

“If this plays out like the other timeline,” Max finally told them when the car died and the sounds
of three doors opening and closing had been counted, “we have four days counting today. Then the Storm will turn day into night and then it will kill everything in Arcadia Bay.” Over the next couple of minutes, Max was led into the house and into the kitchen where a beer was set on the table in front of her and probably everyone else, but at first she saw and heard very little of that. She was not even aware of Pompidou's head her lap except as more than a cursory burst of sensory information. Max's mind was somewhere else entirely. Somewhere else. What Max experienced was someone else's life in shattered, broken reflection.

Go fuck yourselfie. The Daguerrian Process. Stuck in Retrozone. Throwing Pompidou a bone. Warren, drunken and upset that another Max was not affectionate with him, not staying at the party. A photograph to another world. Another Nathan's screamed threats as he scurried away from a beating. Alyssa killed, Evan killed, Chloe killed again and again. The dumpsite of Rachel's body... all, over and over again. There, at the tail end of it all, the image of a doe poised at the edge of American Rust Junkyard.

It was that image which Max could not shake until Rachel's voice slowly brought her back to her senses. Rachel and the others were not talking at her or even two her, they were simply talking to one another, passing back and forth the limited knowledge that each had managed to scrape together about the day's events. Max tuned in to find her right hand wrapped around an untouched beer as Rachel told Chloe that rumor had it Nathan was still in jail at least as of when Hayden arrived at the hospital around 4:30. For a moment, Max froze on the spot when she realized that each of the girls' eyes had trailed over to her, asking questions she did not want to give answers to and then, slowly, Max exhaled and felt like, however regretfully, she was back together, in mostly one piece.

“Before I rewound,” Max started as she lifted the bottle and paused with it just short of her mouth. “You begged me to put an end to this but you also said that you killed him.” Max's eyes slid toward Chloe. “You got Nathan's gun from him and you had to shoot him. He died. I didn't think. I didn't think at all. I just rewound because why the fuck should you have to deal with killing someone, with the Prescotts breathing down your neck plotting vengeance or whatever else might be coming?” She lifted the bottle to her lips and took in the wide range of emotions, many of them some form of grief, that played across Chloe's defeated face. Max tipped the bottle back and took one long draw of the shitty, domestic brew.

“It's just like the other timeline, then?” Chloe asked her.

“What do you guys mean?” Steph queried, not giving Max a chance to answer Chloe. Instead of speaking, Max took another draw and then rolled her eyes around to look at Rachel. She wanted to share the memory of that doe with her for some reason, but by the time she had once more lowered the bottle from her lips it seemed unreasonable to not answer one of the other two girls. Rachel reached out, squeezed Max's left hand encouragingly and gestured for her to speak. That was all they had ever asked of her: honesty. It had taken her so long to reach this point where she felt she could give it. Going back now, of all times, was not an option.
“In the other timeline, Nathan shot and killed the other Chloe. That timeline’s Max rewound and everything was set in motion. The Storm took the town. If it’s happening here and now again, which that snow sure looked and felt the same, then that means it was because I saved Nathan.”

“Meaning what?” Chloe asked, only the question felt half hearted, like when one asked, 'who's there?' in response to a shitty knock knock joke. Only, in this case, instead of an orange which you were so glad wasn't a banana, it was apocalyptic prediction that everyone you knew and loved would be killed by a fucking tornado.

“Meaning Nathan dies or the town does.” Max exhaled. “In the back seat, I had a vision, just like that other Max did. Hers was of standing out at the lighthouse watching the town fall to shit. Mine was us running from the school with most of the students. Victoria said I tried to warn everyone but most didn’t listen.” Max laughed. “Why would they? Mad little girl runs around screaming about the sky falling. They’ll write fairy tales about that shit.” Max reached back out for the beer but Chloe’s hand caught hers. The bluenette tried to squeeze comfortingly as Rachel had but both of them just felt like grief, lamentation. “Nathan dies or the town does,” Max finally repeated.

Every bit of devastation on Chloe’s face made sense except that it seemed awfully light. She didn’t know whether to be proud or concerned about Chloe, about the fact that she was not reduced to a state much like Max’s own but decided that Chloe had been all emotioned out for the day, considering she had spent several minutes in a boiler room kidnapped by a psychopath. Max leaned across the table and threw one arm around Chloe’s shoulders, hugging her tightly once. She chose to be fiercely proud of the girl instead of concerned. There was plenty to be concerned about: a strong will was not one of those things.

“The choice is yours,” Rachel told Chloe. Max wasn’t sure what to make of what was going through either of their heads, exactly, so she looked past them to Steph. This girl looked lost, and she gestured to show as much when Max looked to her for answers. To Steph, Max realized, she had just told the girl that this house, her home, was going to be wiped away. In fact, everyone here had people in Arcadia Bay outside of Blackwell who were in danger. Max only had Blackwell, though she wouldn't want to see Joyce hurt or killed no matter how broken her childhood perceptions of the woman had become. God, damn it, Chloe. Chloe’s eyes blinked away tears as Max released her and then quickly downed the majority of the beer in front of her. As Max waited, she considered the idea that she had never really gotten close to Alyssa, Warren or Evan and yet in that other timeline, their deaths had meant something strong to that Max. Hell, she honestly barely knew any of them beyond the images they put up of themselves. For instance, was Warren really so shady? Was Evan really such a douchebag?

“The choice,” Chloe said, looking from Rachel to Steph desperately, “is that either Nathan does, or the entire town dies. Nathan, who attacked me, dies at my hands and maybe I go to jail for the rest of my life or whatever the Prescotts can pull off or everyone in Arcadia Bay dies. How is that even a choice? How is it hard to make?” Chloe looked down and Max released the bottle in her right
hand, setting it back down hard.

“It’s hard because it’s asking you to maybe sacrifice yourself or definitely sacrifice everyone you know.” Then, Max swallowed because an idea had begun to form. “It doesn’t – it doesn’t have to be all doom, though.” Fighting to pull herself together, Max breathed out. “This time I barely got to you in time but I know what to do to get David going when I want him to, now. I know what it would take to get to you right at the right moment. I could go back. I could make sure that witnesses, multiple witnesses, see Jefferson with his needles out and you tied to that chair when you pull the trigger. Nathan will get shot. He’ll die.”

The words felt heavy in her mouth. She was condemning a boy to death who she had spent so much time trying to convince to go get immediate mental health treatment. Reasonably, she knew that he did not deserve death. His life had value. The question was whether it held more value than the entirety of Arcadia Bay to Chloe. How did the other Max make that kind of choice? Max could not say. She did not remember. She also could not recall seeing Nathan in her vision at the school. There was no guarantee that he was going to live through the storm, himself. Max did not tell Chloe that. Somehow, that felt like breaking this choice down to numbers. Shouldn't it be broken down to numbers? Who are you to keep this from her? This is her choice. It's not right, but it's happening.

“Nathan wasn't in my vision,” Max told them all as Chloe looked contemplatively over each of her bandaged wrists. They had to hurt. “He might have been in jail or at home. If it's either of those... I don't think he would have survived the storm.” Chloe sighed with frustration. Now she was glaring at her wrists. It’s because it offers her incentive to pick what she's making sound selfish. I don't think there's an unselfish choice here. “I don't think there's actually a Lawful Good option here, Chloe. Or even a Neutral Good one.”

As if putting it in these simple terms had gotten through to her, Chloe dropped her right wrist into her lap and with her left hand grabbed at her own beer. Max sat looking into Rachel's eyes, looking at the exhaustion, the humanity, the care in them as Chloe turned the bottle upside down and it went from F to E. Rachel mouthed something to her, and Max was confused to interpret it as thank you. Max tried to ask her what for, but Rachel waved it off and only replied with a silent, warm smile. She didn't know what to make of that or Steph beaming at her from across the table.

“Then my options are to look at it like a True Neutral or a Chaotic Good. The way I reason it, the Chaotic Good sends you back and tells you to let her kill Nathan, not because she wants him dead, because chances are he will die anyway. True Neutral, to me, says fuck morality and go utilitarian. Either way it's the same choice but -” Chloe exhaled shakily, the ghost of a sob in her voice. She seemed to banish that ghost away. “I don't want to kill anyone. Not even Nathan. He needs to be allowed to get help.”

“You wouldn't be the kind of person we all care about if you did,” Steph told Chloe. “You wouldn't be Chloe.” For several seconds the two artists shared a look. It spoke of admiration, of a
different kind of love. It spoke of family. Then Steph, sighing, folded her arms up and got to her feet. “You guys do what you have to do. I'm packing a back for us both, in case.” Max nodded and watched Chloe's face as Steph disengaged from the table. Chloe sighed, herself.

“Do it,” Chloe said. “Rewind. Find me in time. Make sure I don't fry for this.”

“Okay,” Max said, but there came no immediate attempt to lift her hand and do was she was told. For the next minute or so, Max went over the plan with the other two in as much detail as a minute could provide them but when they had both echoed it back to her and it sounded technically fine, if unpleasant, Max still did not lift her hands. She stared down at the dog on the floor between her and Chloe. *Pompidou, you don't know how hot you've got it, buddy.* She felt first Rachel take her left hand and then Chloe take her right. The action was warm, it was *warmth.* Max smiled for the first time since they left the hospital.

“Will you guys keep hold for me? Until I'm gone?” Max didn't particularly wait for either girl to answer. She closed her eyes, lowered her head and rose to a standing position. She could feel the other two doing the same, by virtue of the level of their arms. “I love you, you know? You're both fucking amazing. I'm going to do everything I can to be worth you for the rest of my life.” No one spoke. That was good. Max reached out, not so much with her hand this time as with something invisible, something hard to name. That *something,* like a third hand, seized onto *nothing* and pulled her forward, forward into a dull, grey fog. Amazingly, she still felt her girls' hands on some level as Max opened her eyes to the void. Strange, afterimages of them, real but frozen in place, awaited her. Max felt a smile at those images and then she moved.

She pulled resolutely along a long string of emotions, grief, rage, terror, wonder, relief, anger, so much anger and finally, concern and confusion dancing entwined in the form of a jagged gash in the fabric of reality.

Max pushed through that one particular tear and emerged on the Blackwell Academy grounds at roughly 3:17 PM. The feeling of being *loved* whole and completely, stuck with her no matter how hard it had to fight with apprehension and regret about what she was about to have to do. She only hoped Chloe could forgive her once she told the whole story. The smell of dirt and grass met her nostrils and Max opened her eyes. Warm sun, untainted by unnatural snow, warmed her skin and Max turned to Rachel. Max remembered the girl standing nervously a step or two away from her, but this was not the Rachel Amber she saw when she looked. Rachel was dressed as she should be and looked as she should, but the girl standing a few feet from her was looking about in wide-eyed panic, mouth gaping. Max would go far as to say she was freaking out. She did not remember Rachel being this distressed. *Okay, I think I have a minute before I have to run for David.*

“Max? Max- Max!” She lifted her head, frustrated to Rachel. The girl's wide eyes spoke of panic, but Max didn't have time. She had to count, she had to focus, for Chloe's sake. “Fuck's sake Max,” Rachel called when she turned away again toward the school and began to count. Rachel's nails
almost dug into the skin around her chin and cheeks as the blonde grabbed her chin and turned her head back around, a tiny bit harshly. “Did I just fucking time travel?” For several seconds Max blinked at Rachel, frustrated and then her words and the change in her demeanor from Max’s memories struck Max like a train.

“Oh,” Max started, “Oh- OH.” Oh shit. If this happened to Rachel, what happened to Chloe? Max nodded that she sure as fuck thought Rachel had. The memory of seeing the two girls, holding onto her hands inside of the timescape stuck out.

“The Storm is coming if we stop Chloe from shooting him,” Rachel said. “I’m not losing my mind?”

“You’re not,” Max said. “Now, run.” Even after saying this, in her mind she ticked down what she thought was another thirty seconds and then without warning, bolted for the doors. “Breathe,” she instructed either herself or Rachel. Possibly even both. This time, Rachel did not scream for information, because she knew it all already. She had already lived through these moments. I pulled someone back in time with me. Maybe two someones. Max had to hope that if Chloe had traveled back, she stuck to the plan, because Max intended to do so. She hoped the girl could pull it together enough to get Nathan’s gun again. It didn’t take Max as long this time to reach David and Wells. Steph still yelled at her from the end of the hall and Max called for her to come with her.

“David,” Max told the man lacing her voice with urgency as his mustache twitched with irritation. The man had been mid sentence to Principal Wells when Max burst in a little more calmly before. “Chloe's in trouble, Nathan took her down to the boiler room and he has a gun. It's time to move.” She could see the irritation fade to confusion and distrust immediately. Max did not look at Wells this time. He was a non-actor. He was a pair of eyes to see the results of this botched kidnapping. He had no more value to her or the school than that. At least David, Prescott puppet he was, might have enough human left in him to commit one act of decency as he had the last time. Maybe this time, that would be to stop Jefferson’s escape. Max approached David, drew very, very, uncomfortably close to the man and then leaned forward as if to hug him. Instead, she whispered in his ear.

“David, if you don't move, I will do the same thing to all of your secrets that I did to Nathan and Jefferson's. Do you want that?” Her combination threat and confession jarred the security head from his complacency. “I promise everyone will know everything I know about you if Chloe is hurt.” She felt preternaturally calm as she turned away from him, brought her voice back up to full volume and again, running as fast as she thought she could, blew by Steph first and then Victoria and Dana. She did not speak to them except to yell to follow her. She yelled that as loudly as she could. “Follow me!”

The hallway was almost a blur, Max had kept count the entire time in her head but still felt like she had only just entered the school building when she pushed out of it. Her inner clock suggested
Chloe was going to shoot the first shot in less than forty seconds, so Max only paused a second to turn and see who was following her. David and Rachel were at the forefront, side by side. She caught a flash of bright blonde hair, bright enough to be Victoria's and then she saw Dana and Wells at the back. Strangely enough, his face still somewhat a mess, Warren Graham seemed to have heard her from, what she suspected had been the doorway of the science lab because he and Brooke Scott had brought up the rear. *Witnesses.*

Max continued her race for the door at the back of the school which led in turn the door to a long abandoned boiler room. Only she slowed slightly along the path, listening to her inner clock continue its inevitable countdown. By the time she placed her hand on the door and turned to make sure that she was still being followed, the first pop of a gunshot rang out from behind the door. That, more than the run, finally got her adrenaline pumping. David's eyes bulged from their sockets in surprise but not even he could pick up the pace as much as Rachel did in that second. At the end of the pack, Brooke was pulling Warren along behind her as they rounded the corner. Max threw the door open just in time to expose the scene below to David and Rachel.

In the room, Jefferson had paused only a step or two away from Chloe in front of a dropped hypodermic needle case, clutching at his lower chest. He hesitated as he looked at the doorway and then made to run up the stairs toward the three of them. Nathan did not hesitate as he lunged forward for the gun in Chloe's hand. Chloe, who was screaming like a bat out of hell, only this time in a sort of rage and not the broken terror Max had heard during her first cycle, pulled the trigger. Two rounds pierced Nathan's chest this time and the boy dropped mid lunge at Chloe's feet. Max thought she had readied herself for the sight, not to mention the coming impact with Jefferson, hell she had even convinced herself a moment or two prior that it was going to be okay to push him down those stairs.

She still landed on her ass when Mark Jefferson lowered his shoulder and plowed into her, using her body to push David and Rachel aside. Max spun around and tried to grab at his foot but it was out of range before she came to her senses. Beside herself with the force of his assault, she watched Jefferson disappear toward the edge of campus. David paused, bug-eyed for a moment and then hurled himself down the stairs. It took Max a second to get to her feet even with Rachel, Steph and Victoria all three pulling her up. She never intended to stand in the way of a charging fully grown man again. Paranoid, she ran her hand over her chest to see if it hurt more intensely, if something had been broken or caved in. She felt nothing like that and followed David down without answering any of the girls behind her. She heard each of them as they descended the stairs, clear and loud over Wells’ impotent whining.

David tried to apply pressure to Nathan's wound over the next couple of minutes. He tried CPR. He tried everything he must've known to do, but nothing came from it. Max and Rachel took the ropes off of the wide-eyed Chloe Price's ankles, taking turns shushing any questions it seemed as if she was trying to form from behind her pale, confused, nay, dumbfounded face. Slowly but surely, Max's higher order thoughts came back, even as Chloe's did. Disoriented, the girl clutched at either of them with blood soaked hands and whispered the question she had been trying to get out into Max's ear.
“Did I just go back in time?” Chloe's hands pressed into the old flannel overshift Max had come to love so much. She knew it was probably time to retire that, too. Her favorite clothes seemed to keep dying in horrific events. *Then again, it's always to save Rachel or Chloe. I'd burn my entire wardrobe and the clothes on my back to do that, time and time again.* The worry was so silly and childish that Max couldn't help it, she laughed.

“Yeah,” Max told the girl as Rachel wrapped her arms around both of them, tightly. “Yeah you did.”

“It's really not all it's cracked up to be,” Chloe told her, before going quiet again. Quiet and numb, if the way she held her arms at her side and did not continue to hold tight to Max or Rachel was any indication.

Max and Rachel were treated to another round of being interviewed by the police, another round of sitting in the ER unable to see Chloe while Joyce tried her tricks. Outside of the windows of the waiting room, she watched the light darken and go golden again. They were the least surprised and, this time, the loudest when Chloe emerged from the back with her papers in her hand, declaring that she was free of signs of concussion but had been diagnosed as showing warning signs of PTSD. They did not cheer, precisely, but they rose with Steph and called Chloe over to them. Chloe did come, but only after stopping by where her mother sat with her prescriptions in hand and retrieving them without a word. Max told the crowd arranged before them that she would be sending texts out as soon as Chloe was safe and sound and led her girlfriends and Steph from the room without answering any questions or letting them do the same.

All three of them had been through this drama before and Max rather thought as they emerged into a warm spring evening free, completely devoid of unseasonal snow, that they deserved something new. Something absolutely horrible had happened that day and something else horrible had been forestalled. That was worth celebration as far as Max was concerned. They all, each one of them, deserved to come down from the mountain.

End Part Four

Spanish Sahara

Chapter End Notes

And with that... Part 4 of Kaukasos has come to an end - but wait, there's just... one last bit more.
Epilogue: Leave it All Down Here

October 11th, 2013 6:22 AM

The unfortunately still familiar sight of the boiler room almost spinning unnaturally around her was the first sign that she was dreaming. It had been more than a year and a half since she was actually tied up down here, but still she returned time and time again. Chloe groaned and shifted her arms and legs. They were bound tightly this time, insistently, as if the boy in front of her remembered his death and had declared, never again. Nathan Prescott stood out in sharp detail, while the rest of the room swayed. He was not alone. Dark, humanoid shapes, smoke and shadow were spread throughout the room. She could not make them come into focus. Chloe blinked her eyes trying, but she could not tell who they were supposed to be. She never could. Panic threatened to set in, even knowing she was in a nightmare. The urge to break it, shatter this dream into a million pieces took hold.

The moment this decision was made, Nathan looked up at her. His false eye was gone, and what remained was a dark, misshapen gap, shaped unlike an eye socket. He was pale and it made the red stain spreading across his red-brown jacket from the gaping chest wound stand out in contrast all the more. No, no, no, Chloe thought, grasping, reaching for the edges of the dream, of her dream. She could not take her eyes off of Nathan's face. When he turned more directly toward her, he opened his mouth to speak. There were no teeth, it was simple, black void, the black of death. His words did not reach her ears, but in their place she heard wind, thunder and rain. Then, the rain manifested in the boiler room and began to soak her, began to obscure her vision of this Prescott wraith. The mental effort, that energy expended as she tried to take hold of and tear the edges of her dream faltered. Chloe screamed for Nathan to back away from her, but the void of his mouth emitted the sounds of storm and swallowed her words whole.

Chloe struggled against her binds, both around her ankles and her wrists, but they were vice like, this time. This time Nathan had made sure she was his, she was trapped. This time, she was going to die. The rain soaking her to the bone, the wind battering her eardrums and the thunder which made her chest shake more than even the violent protestation of her heartbeat could do, she knew what it was. It did not come from a storm, it came from The Storm. Chloe looked for Nathan's gun, but it was nowhere to be found, not in his hands, not on the floor and his jacket would not fall open for her to look. He leaned forward, several steps from her still. Nathan Prescott was bringing The
That was when Nathan moved. He lumbered forward, still hunched over. The arms which had been hanging unnaturally at his side rose, reaching out for her, hands grasping. It was not the pose of a shitty B-movie zombie, but of someone ready to grab a throat and wring every last drop of life from it. Her hands were still stuck, still held tightly together by thick, monstrous, snakelike rope. Chloe looked past his grasping hands, his slow approach, the otherworldly voids that were his mouth and right eye socket, she looked up toward the staircase that ascended toward freedom. She begged and pleaded at the top of her lungs, through sobs and screeches for Max and Rachel to rend the door from its hinges and come, fire and sunlight, to her rescue. What was worse, what was more terrifying by far than the door not opening, was the fact that The Storm grew louder in her ears as Nathan closed the gap between them and perhaps what was the scariest was that the shadow forms along the edges of the room faded from being. Nathan screamed at her when the last one was gone in a voice of lightning strikes and falling trees. The scars along the right side of his face lit up, no longer dark against the pale of his skin but the hue and lux of lightning frozen and bottled. Chloe screamed into The Storm, screamed into his face, screamed into the void. The chair jostled as she tried to leap up and down but the ropes only squeezed tighter to her ankles and wrists. Her left hand would not budge this time.

That was when Chloe sensed a new emotion. She sensed it, meaning she felt it, she knew it but it was not her own. There was distress, illness, fear but the fear was of a different flavor from her own. These were not mortal terror, they were being chased and not wanting to be caught, and, too, a fear she used to know like an old friend: a fear of loss. Someone near her was terrified, terrified they would lose their home, they would lose their dog and that they would lose Chloe. Bit by bit, as Nathan's hands closed around her throat, Chloe's brain seized on this. While she looked into the void of his eye socket, of his mouth, she focused on that other person's fear. I am dreaming. It was a horrible nightmare, but it was a nightmare and it was her own and, oh god, why had she dragged Steph into her nightmares again? Why? Guilt flooded over Chloe, somehow wiping out her own terror at the scene before her. Nathan's hands shivered, faltered, released her.

Still with that same guilt in her heart she tried to tune out the sounds of a brutal Storm which she had never experienced. The moment she took hold of the dream and sent Nathan away, she too was sent away. No longer in the boiler room beneath Arcadia Bay, Chloe stood on a hill, near the lighthouse, one which overlooked a version of October 11th, 2013 that was not the same as her own, as the one she went to sleep just after midnight of. A young woman who looked a lot like her, except that Chloe thought she looked a lot more angular, a lot sharper, stood beside another Max Caulfield. She had seen them once, long ago and since then her brain had tried to recreate them a time or two, but never like this. Chloe tried to ignore the two of them as they ignored her but she couldn't help but approach them, join them in looking down on the town below for just a second.

She reached the edge of the cliff, walking clean through her counterpart. Somewhere behind her, the emotions, the feelings and ideas that Chloe thought must be Steph's intensified, darkened. Parts
of Arcadia Bay danced and shifted in the wind as the tornado reached into the heard of it and tore it from the earth below. Steph's discomfort had reached highs Chloe had not been able to predict. She allowed the sight of Arcadia Bay rising into the air bit by bit to stick in her mind, unsure if she was replaying a slice of the nightmare she had stumbled upon Max having or just imagining it all the same. Still, that image was there to remind her of why she had chosen to accept Nathan on her conscience and as bad as Chloe felt for it, she thought she needed to see it. She ripped the dream apart a moment later, with that image shining in her subconscious. She caught sight of what she called the dream void, what Max called the Timescape, a place they could exist simultaneously and Max would never see her and then, before the view of The Storm tearing her hometown apart could escape, Chloe woke up with a gasp.

Chloe opened her eyes to the pale stucco of the bedroom ceiling. Her walls, once the beige of a guest room were now dark blue, a shade which in the sunlight reminded her of Max's eyes. Unfortunately, as Chloe calmed her nerves and steadied her breathing, the light was low enough that it seemed a bit off-shade for that. She glanced at the alarm clock on her bedside table. In red blocky numbers, it declared that it was 6:27 in the morning. Slowly, she rolled to her left and then to her right. Her hands were not bound, her legs were free save for the restriction provided by the quilt overtop her which last night had seemed like a reasonable precaution as it was rather cool, but now seemed stifling. Slowly, she sat up in bed. At the foot of that bed, Pompidou stirred, eyes opening as she jostled him awake like the careless monster she was. Chloe looked apologetically down at the dog, but his head rose and his tail thumped against her bed as he stared up at her. He really had not mellowed out much in the time since he had come to live with them, but he was surprisingly well behaved at night when people needed sleep.

“Pompidou,” Chloe called, just above a whisper as she righted herself so that her back was pressed against the headboard. That was all the beckoning he needed to fight to his feet, yawn once and then bound toward her edge of the bed. “Good boy,” she muttered. Her attempts to stay quiet seemed to be for naught, as moments later the sound of Steph's bedroom door opening reached her ears. Pompidou dropped onto the left side of the bed, the one she was not in, buried his face against her stomach and waited for ear scritches or pets. Chloe obeyed, because what kind of jerk did not? Not even she was so monstrous as to deny Pompidou attention.

“Chloe,” the girl's voice came through soft, but she was clearly trying to be heard just in case Chloe was awake. She sighed as the knock sounded at her door. To think that, after all of that time, she was back to dragging Steph into her bullshit. Chloe hated it. For all the shit that Steph did or had ever done for her, one would think Chloe could keep her nightmares to herself. She had even managed it for a while but this one, well, it was a hell of a nightmare for Steph to be pulled into. Was she pulled into it or did my nightmare just spread into her? Chloe did not know much about how her abilities worked. She knew that stress could cause her to project her dreams onto others or to be swallowed up by theirs and she knew that on occasion, times of extreme exertion, she could bring these parts of her brain out in her waking life, parts which could take on the form of a person she knew and help her parse through what was happening to her. The first time had been unpleasant and she was not eager to ever experience it again.

“I'm sorry,” Chloe answered, settling her right hand in her lap as the fingers of her left hand dug
through Pompidou's fur. The dog tilted his head back and yawned again. Not even petting Pompidou quelled her guilt, so she was unsurprised when the apology did not. Pompidou, who was unaware of this fact, continued to lounge under the attention. Steph did not reply immediately, but Chloe heard the knob start to turn and then stop, as if Steph had suddenly pulled her hand back. Whether this was out of being unsure whether she wanted to talk to Chloe or out of respect for her privacy, Chloe did not know.

“It's okay, Chloe,” Steph said, more firmly, loudly now. “Can I come in, please? That one was – that one was kind of bad.” Chloe knew that Steph had never been exposed to images of The Storm from the other timeline before. No matter how bad Chloe's nightmares had gotten over the past year and a half, they had not been that bad. *There's so much bullshit going on, no wonder I'm fucked up right now,* she told herself. The images Steph was probably still dealing with, the ones Chloe held onto as a reminder as to why she had allowed herself to pull the trigger, to take a life, they had come to her not even second hand, more like third hand. They still hurt to see, to consider, to think of. Chloe took a breath.

“Come in.” Steph, Chloe thought as the girl eased the door open, took one look at Pompidou on the bed beside Chloe and shook her head ruefully, had changed very little over the time since that shitty day. She wore her hair longer and dressed a little more seriously, but that was not such a huge change. (At the moment, that hair was rather wild and messy from sleep.) Chloe did not foresee joining Steph in letting her hair grow and she certainly intended to relinquish neither her grungy clothes nor the joy of bright colors in her hair any time soon, but she had been considering a change from her signature blue to the neon green she had loved so much for a short time.

The other artist looked her over quickly, nervously with eyes which were normally cool and relaxed but now looked wider than they had any right to at around 6:30 in the morning. Then, seeming to sigh a bit as if whatever she was afraid she would see was not there, she settled on the left side of the bed forcing Pompidou to scoot, roll and flail until he was more or less in Chloe's lap as she took the spot he had abandoned. Chloe laughed and did her best to accommodate the dog who did not seem to understand that he was a bit bigger than a lapdog. Steph leaned her back against the headboard beside Chloe, reached over and pet the mix breed's exposed belly.

“I'm really, really sorry,” Chloe said, with all honesty. Exposing Steph to the hell she had just sat through was high on the list of things she would have never wanted to do, though Steph had been forced to witness nightmares about the boiler room before. *Not that they have ever been like that. Jesus Christ, never like that.* If there was any right in the world, it would never be like that again. Pompidou was clueless, happy as his tail struck Chloe in the stomach over and over. After a second or two of silence, Steph's right arm rose and settled across Chloe's shoulders. Chloe sighed against the lack of condemnation. “I've been trying,” she promised. "I've been trying to control it, to keep it from happening again.”

“It's been like, four months since the last time,” Steph told her. “I know you've been trying. You've been doing your best. It's not all sunshine and rainbows.”
“I thought we were all rainbows, here?” Steph tried to chuckle, but her sense of humor was never particularly well revved up before breakfast. Chloe did not hold that against her. Steph was tired, Chloe got that. Chloe was still tired, too. She did not know if she would sleep again before it was time to shower and drive to Blackwell. She only had half an hour before they had to get up and hit the shower. That was not much time and all she could think about when she closed her eyes, even to blink, was the sound of The Storm emitting from Nathan's open, gaping mouth. Chloe leaned her head against the other girl's shoulder. Pompidou, seeming to sense finally that the air was not ideal for fun, rolled over on her lap, pushed to his feet (stepping on her legs in the progress) and settled at the end of the bed as if he were to go back to sleep. He did, however, turn his dark eyes upon them in the pale golden light of the morning. Steph rubbed her shoulder.

“I'm proud of you, you know?”

“Why?” Chloe asked. She could not for the life of her think of a reason for Steph to be proud of her. It was not summer anymore so she was working a single day every week and she still wanted desperately to quit her job. It seemed pointless and stressful. She had never followed through on a promise to try and learn to cook anything more basic than say, pasta or hamburgers, so she was not especially helpful around the kitchen and she barely functioned beyond her roles as student, as player in a tabletop campaign and sometimes, as a part time Vortex Club member. Chloe had done nothing to be proud of and plenty to be frustrated about.

“For lots of reasons,” Steph told her and Chloe was about to write it off before she continued. “For agreeing to see a therapist tonight when you were so sure it wouldn't do anything even a couple weeks ago, and of all the places, that place. You're so much fucking stronger than you think you are.” Chloe exhaled. It was true that she had been resistant to the idea of seeing a therapist for almost a year, but things were escalating and no, it hadn't helped that Sean Prescott was the man responsible for the opening of the only mental health clinic in Arcadia Bay. The little fuck.

“That place being my best option was probably the biggest reason I held off as long as I had.” Steph shrugged as if to say that she got it, but she did so softly enough it didn't jostle Chloe's head where it laid. Chloe closed her eyes, but not to sleep. No, she did so to make it easier to focus on, just one more time, the mental image of the destruction of Arcadia Bay that she, Max and Rachel had averted. This had to be worth it, in some horrible, twisted, asinine manner. It had to make sense, because if it did not then nothing was right in the world. “I think, if it starts to help, I'm going to start backing Rachel when she tries to get Max to go.”

“Max will never give that place any business, not a second of her time or a dime of her money, Chloe.” Chloe knew Steph was right. She understood where Max was coming from.

“Maybe not, but Max has gotten worse in some ways when it comes to her own shit and I'm
starting to get worried that it's going to go really, really bad after graduation, especially if she goes off to Seattle by herself.” The brunette would not technically be by herself. She would have her mother and father and, of course, the other Seattle resident in her life: Victoria. That being said, Chloe did not like the idea of Max, as bad as she had gotten this last month or so, outside of Chloe’s proverbial arm's reach. Steph did not speak again about Max. There was nothing to be said on that front.

“Either way, I'm proud of you for doing what you need to do.”

“Thank you.”

“I'm going to try to steal a few more minutes of sleep before my alarm goes off.” Chloe smiled apologetically as Steph moved her arm. Pompidou, who had lain his head down to stare up at them, not comprehending a word they said, perked up a little bit, looking at the door as Steph stood up as if he was considering whether to follow her out or stay in his spot on the bed, covering the old yellowed quilt with further dog hair. He plopped his head back down and stayed at her feet.

“Try to get some rest, sis,” Chloe told the girl as she watched the bedroom door shut behind Steph. “And how's the good dog?” she asked Pompidou in a voice both quieter but a little more rowdy when she heard Steph's footsteps recede down the hallway. Chloe paid the dog attention for the next few minutes, not laying back down and not quite ready to rise out of bed even to relieve her protesting bladder or unnecessarily indulge her increased appetite. Shortly before seven arrived, though, Chloe stretched her arms above her head, pushed the quilt down toward her ankles and slowly but surely extricated herself from the bed which had, so far, not been able to lure her back to sleep but which she thought would do so the moment she needed to get up.

Chloe grabbed underwear and socks from her drawer, a pair of jeans from the one below that which looked like they flew well in the face of the image of an uptight pristine stick-up-the-ass school, a tee chosen at random from her closet, her beanie and a long sleeved shirt to wear over the lot of it then popped her bedroom door open. She made a quick clicking sound with her mouth and Pompidou bounded from the foot of the bed to the floor without hesitation. The only real struggle when it came to the dog in the mornings was getting downstairs to let him out and use the downstairs shower without tripping over him and breaking her neck before she got down there at all.

The hall lead back into the still dark kitchen. In the living room, Steph had either left the television on last night or gone down to it at some point when Chloe was not paying attention this morning. Chloe took the bundle of clothes she had been grasping in both hands and placed it down on the kitchen counter as Pompidou circled her twice and made for the door. Smart dog. He had predicted correctly that she was going to let him out. While Pompidou did his business, she tried to ignore her body calling for her to go do her own and filled both his food and water bowls. It was cool enough outside that he could probably get away with having some time out back while they were at school.
The poor dog deserved to blow off some energy. Once the bowls were in place and the dog satisfied for the morning, Chloe shut the door, padded back inside and took her clothing into the downstairs bathroom. Upstairs, she could hear Steph already in the shower. Chloe was not one to be outdone, normally, but it was alright that Steph had a head start. Chloe had the advantage of fairly short hair that would not take so long to dry or brush out.

She still felt a little silly taking as long as she did in the shower but when she stepped out her body and mind were both somewhat more relaxed. It was not as if the shower washed away all memory of the horrible things she had seen and exposed Steph to or the concerns she felt about Max's deteriorating mental health state of even her worries about Rachel's big day. There was just something about warm water rolling down stiff muscles that tended to loosen them up and feel positive enough to neutralize her mood. She dressed quietly, waiting until she was relatively put together to look in the mirror for the first time that day. Mercifully, the circles under her eyes were not as bad as she expected and the careful application of a little bit of makeup mitigated the damage they did to her attempt to appear 'put together.'

Chloe finished drying her hair, tossed the towel to the side to rest over the edge of the sink and leaned toward the mirror, wiping freshly coalesced fog from the mirror. After too short a time the fog fought its way back, but that was fine. It did not take Chloe more than a second or two to confirm that her roots were beginning to show. That's alright. She had saved up plenty of money from the summer before, at least in comparison to what her bank account usually looked like. She had enough to take care of her hair and work on the truck, besides. The honest truth was that its brakes could use some TLC before they got much worse. Chloe would hate to find out how bad they could get in a tight situation. Then again, there hadn't been too much in the way of breaking speed limits, lately. No need had arisen to rush much of anywhere. The world, it seemed, was calmer. Come to think of it the last time I rushed anywhere was last Spring Break. Chloe had been forced to hurry herself, Rachel and Max to the bus station for their trip to Seattle.

Seattle. Chloe sighed and ran her fingers through her hair. Max was going to be going back to Seattle alone this Thanksgiving and probably winter break, as well. It didn't have to be the end of the world, she knew, it just felt a little like it. Chloe had not been as focused as she should have been on school work or the play, yet it didn't seem to be showing. Her grades were fine, even a little better than last year's. She might have been no Rachel or Dana when it came to memorizing her lines but she had been no slouch. Chloe slipped from the room when her hair had been pushed back enough to settle naturally into its usual position. She wandered around the kitchen while she waited for Steph to descend the stairs.

Frankly, I'm surprised it's taken Keaton this long to shove me and Rachel into Romeo and Juliet. 'For never was a story of more woe than this of Juliet and her Romeo.' Chloe rubbed at her eyes as she settled down at the kitchen table. Her bookbag sat against the far wall of the room and for a moment she was confused when it did not have her board sticking out of it. Eventually she remembered that the board was where it had been for almost half a week; untouched in the middle seat of her truck. Footsteps drew her attention. Chloe looked up from the spot on the floor where she had been staring at her bag absentmindedly for what might have been a minute or ten. Her hair felt dry when she looked up. Chloe reached over to the table and pulled her beanie off it as Steph
rounded the corner.

“I want to make it to school before most of the eggs are gone,” Steph declared. Chloe nodded her agreement and didn't try to read Steph's expression. She merely pulled her hat down over her head, heaved her bag from the floor and grabbed her keys from the hook by the front door. Steph did the same, but then aimed toward the adjoining garage. *I'm not feeling eggs, really. Maybe like, a huge bacon sandwich? That sounds like a plan.* She could also probably get away with a bit of extra orange juice. That sounded good too. Then again, there were usually biscuits and gravy and hash browns and a small supply of pancakes. Her stomach roared in protest and in threat. Chloe pushed out through the front door. Her stomach had been making too many fucking decisions for her lately. She had never signed up for that.

Chloe pulled the door to her truck open, settled into the driver's seat and eased the door shut, petting the wheel even as she might have Pompidou. Normally, she rode with Steph to the school unless she intended to stay extra late on campus and didn't want to bother Max or Rachel to drive her home. Tonight, though, was special, right? Because she was going to go to the big mental health clinic, the only one in her little town. She was going to walk into a building bearing *that* name and spill as many details she safely could about what she was experiencing: nightmares, memories of being abducted, depression, her out of control appetite and the times when she thought of quitting her job and shutting herself up in her room. She got to talk to a stranger in a building built by Sean Prescott about her guilt over her stupid brain and the stupid shit it was doing to her. She just hoped that the people inside weren't Prescott lapdogs. Victoria claimed they weren't and Victoria certainly had plenty of reason to talk to her therapist about Nathan Prescott, so Chloe had hope.

Still, this all felt stupid. This day was special for them all and the only one for whom it could possibly be seen as positive was Rachel and even *she* was a little terrified about her meeting that afternoon. Chloe grumbled as the garage door began to rise. She had spent all morning focusing on shitty things. *It's okay to focus on good things,* she reminded herself as she turned the key in the ignition and her truck roared to life. Chloe dug into her pocket and freed her phone, unlocking it while Steph backed her car out of the garage. There, the background of her lock screen, was a photo of Max and Rachel in Seattle. Looking at the two of them, it seemed like they had not changed a bit in the last couple of years, at least to Chloe. That made her smile a little bit. In the photo, Rachel held onto Max from behind, her chin buried in the girl's hair as they posed in front of the large, bright ornate archway which marked the entrance to Seattle's Chinatown. Chloe remembered that Max seemed more excited than Chloe had expected that day. Then again, they ended up meeting up with two of her friends from Seattle for noodles. *That* certainly explained Max's mood. She was weak for her favorite type of food.

Chloe slid the phone beneath her skateboard beside her as Steph caught her eye, waving. The garage door began to slide closed and, encouraged by Steph's apparent wakefulness, Chloe waved for her to go first. She followed Steph back down the driveway and waited her turn to pull out into the road, holding in her mind a different image this time. Instead of the sight of Arcadia Bay being torn to pieces, she was holding onto the mental image of a hastily put together toast and bacon sandwich. Her stomach growled loudly enough that, to silence it, Chloe turned on her radio.
It was breakfast time. What that meant above all else was her first chance of the day to see her girls. She needed to see them, and maybe do a bit more than see.

*October 11th, 2013 7:00 AM*

Klaxons, as it happened, were really effective sounds for alarm clocks to blare in one's ear if one was to wake immediately. At 7:00 on the dot, Rachel Amber's eyes opened. Despite that sudden, abrupt start, she slowed as she reached for her alarm clock, slammed the snooze button and let her mind come to true wakefulness. It was the morning of October 11th. She could guess from the slow, unmolested way that she woke, yawning, that she had been the lucky recipient a good night's sleep. That was impressive. A good night's sleep was not always a guaranteed thing on big days. Today, Rachel recognized as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes and rolled her head back to the side to look up at the ceiling, was a very, very big day. Rachel inhaled deeply. She could swear her pillow still smelled faintly of Max's shampoo from the girl laying beside her until she fell asleep the night before. Rachel had not noticed Max leave.

In another timeline, in another world, this was the day in which her corpse was lost, her mom killed and in which most of the people she knew died. Because of that, it was a very big day for Max. In this world, today was the day that Chloe, driven by her worsening depression and the nightmares which had begun over the last half year to actually affect those who slept under the same rough as her, was going to Sean Prescott's new mental health clinic in town, the one which Rachel refused to transfer to despite it being in Arcadia Bay and the one which Max refused to use for fear of 'legitimizing even Sean Prescott's fucking existence in any manner whatsoever.' (The photographer had taken issue with the way Sean Prescott had painted her and the rest of Nathan's victims in the months after Nathan's death and Rachel had been dumbfounded to find out how many girls from Arcadia Bay and the surrounding cities Nathan had attacked, all together coming to about twenty. Max thought there were more still scared to come forward.)

Then there was Rachel herself. For her, this was going to be one hell of a day. Not just because it was important to her girls but because of the fact that the culmination of her mother Sera's 'Secret Project' almost two years in the works, came today, forty-five minutes after school let out. This meant, as it went, that Rachel only had a short time, maybe twenty minutes to screw around with her girls and Steph after class let out. Today, Rachel was going to get into her car, drive south to Edgeton and meet her maternal grandmother. The woman had been resistant to coming back into her daughter's life even after learning that Sera and Rachel were close. Apparently, Sera losing Rachel originally and then going on to remain on drugs had been a major bone of contention between the women though the final straw had been Sera stealing money from her, or perhaps the robbery she had committed.

Rachel still remembered Sera confessing all of this, one ugly day four months ago when she had first revealed the nature of this secret project. On that day, Sera's aging mother had agreed to speak to her finally for the first time in a decade. Rachel had not been entirely capable of comprehending
the emotions pouring out of Sera. After some time, though, she came to. Sera had been so relieved, relieved that her mother had agreed to meet Rachel, that she had been unable to stop crying and nothing Rachel could think to do had helped. Now, as Rachel rolled over in her bed and thought of that night, she felt a knot form in her stomach. Of course, that only made sense: it had been unpleasant. Now, though, she was trying to figure out precisely why she felt nervous.

She rubbed at her eyes a second time. Part of her was eager to learn about the last remaining member of that side of her blood lineage. She was not sure the word 'family' would really extend any further than Sera, as far as that went. It's funny, Rachel thought, sitting up slowly and cracking her neck. I don't really have any warm memories of trips to a grandma's house. I think I met James' mom once by accident. Never did meet mom's. Really, in retrospect, the whole idea of family and blood and the difference between them was kind of a clusterfuck. Steph and Sera both might be more family than her mom, the woman who had raised her. Her mother and the girl who had taken Chloe first under her wing and then into her home were definitely more family than the man who had fathered her.

At 7:03, she received a text. Not only had she been expecting it, but as she reached for the phone with the bright green case sitting beside her bed, she knew precisely who it was who was trying to reach her this early in the morning and almost exactly what it would say. She popped it open anyway, ran her eyes over it and grimaced. It used to be rare that Max beat her to the shower. It was not anymore. It was a sign of poor sleep on Max's part. While that hadn't been rare in forever, one of her particularly bad times, had never lasted this long before. Rachel marked it down to this day coming, to how Max had been counting down to it since around a week before her birthday. It was an odd thing to count down to, considering that it had not happened to Max, but in a way she carried the echoes of memories of the Max it had happened to.

Max

Just got out of the shower. I'll be chilling in my room when you're all finished. ^_^

If someone were to put a gun to Rachel's head and ask her how many full nights of seven to eight hours of sleep Max had gotten since her birthday, she would have to guess no more than seven or eight and she was fairly certain the effects of marijuana on the girl's anxiety played a role in helping her on those days. All in all, Rachel thought as she pushed her legs off to hang over the side of the bed and scooted sleepily toward the edge, Max was trying to play this off but the closer they had gotten to this day, the worse Max had gotten. There was what, three days where she ate basically nothing a couple weeks back? Rachel, Chloe and even Victoria's best efforts to convince her to eat had been met with failure and in one case Max becoming ill. Hell, that evening the brunette had even taken herself out for some chinese takeout and still barely managed to get down half of her order of Moo Goo Gai Pan.

Max was not spilling the beans on whether the fact that she was found asleep in her car in the school parking lot with a nosebleed suggested she had used her powers and rewound to get safely to the school after that failed trip to the Dawn Dragon or not. Victoria theorized that Max had been
involved in some sort of accident on her way home, probably the result of a combination of malnutrition and sleep deprivation and had been forced to rewind to safely make it back to the school. Chloe was still a big supporter of this potential explanation and Rachel figured it to be the case because ever since then, Max had forced herself to eat at least twice every other day. That being said, Rachel considered the current state of Max's mental health officially a crisis situation. Unfortunately neither she and Chloe nor Victoria could do a thing about it until Max truly hit rock bottom, which Rachel was grateful to note she had not. The girl had not touched a drop of alcohol since that day, had started to run in the afternoons (David had hassled her the first couple of times, assuming she was up to something,) and generally tried to keep functional. Rachel had not yet made the choice to steal Max's car keys and hide them from her.

As for Rachel, she had been focused on school, bringing her grades back to the top of the class and practicing for Romeo and Juliet alongside Chloe and Steph. Max, she was happy to hear, had decided to partake in the spring play. Rachel was happy for that. She always enjoyed acting alongside both of her girls and Max had enjoyed watching the spring play the year before. As for elephant in the room, the three of them had been working together with Rachel's mom to find an apartment just outside of Los Angeles to move into after graduation. Her mom, however, had pushed them toward finding a place in the city, saying that it would be cheaper on transportation costs. The cheapest place they had been able to find had rent around a reasonable sounding $950. It was impressively cheap even for a small, one bedroom studio apartment.

Rachel gathered her clothing and, thinking of that dream scenario where the three of them shared that studio apartment together, made toward the showers. Victoria was in the room when Rachel entered, staring blearily into the mirror as she applied makeup, apparently having finished her shower, too. Rachel could not quite muster the energy to make a joke about asking if Victoria had just missed Max or whether they had shared a stall. When she tried to greet the blonde photographer, it came out like a grunt. Victoria tried to smile at her. That came out like a grimace. Apparently, neither of them were entirely awake yet. Silently, she took a shower stall, pulled the curtain across herself and discarded her fresh clothes, other than her shower sandals, alongside her dirty clothes.

While she went through the motions of the morning, she pondered that potential future. The future is cloudy, indeed. Even with the minimum wage increase set to go into effect in Los Angeles next July, the three of them working even full time jobs wouldn't keep even that cheap studio apartment. She knew her mom was all too willing to pay a third of that cost: the woman was always angling for some way to have some more control over Rachel's life. Or maybe she really was trying to help. Rachel could never be sure. The honest fact, though, was that with Chloe unsure of what to do professionally, the nebulous nature of both girls being accepted at UCLA and Max floating the idea of spending a semester in Seattle because she was not going to be capable of contributing her fair share off the bat, Rachel did not know what to do. We can keep talking. We don't have to worry so hard about that right now. Not when we're all still fighting uglier battles. Rachel was pulled from the reverie of warm water soothing her body and mind by Victoria's voice. She jumped.

“It's today,” Victoria said matter of factly from what sounded like the center of the room instead of peering into one of the mirrors over the sinks on the opposite wall. “Isn't it?” Rachel paused
halfway through soaping up her hair. That was a pretty vague statement, honestly. There were a lot of things that 'it' could be. Victoria had at one point or another been made aware of every single it in question. It was just interesting to wonder precisely what was on her mind. Probably, considering how poorly she had at first taken the three of them letting her in on their powers and how impressively her mind had blown at Max demonstrating her own, she was thinking about the alternate Arcadia Bay's demise, since that was what had been weighing on Max so heavily.

“Which 'it' do you mean?” Rachel asked nonetheless, raising her voice a bit to calling over the shower. It sounded a little hoarse to her ears, so she immediately cleared her throat. Frankly, Rachel had been surprised at how well Victoria had taken not just the exposure of their abilities, not just the story of most of the shit Max had been through but also the fact that Max had not filled her in for almost four months after they began their – well, whatever it was. Rachel considered it a relationship. Max and Victoria had just been insistent on not labeling anything. That didn't stop Max from giving Victoria an embarrassing pet name, Rachel reminded herself. Even still, she derived a little more amusement than necessary from memories of Victoria's reaction to Max demonstrating her ability to time travel by correctly predicting where, when and how hard Justin Williams and Chloe were going to fall off of their boards. She was also a little unsure of how willing Max had been to let Chloe eat it really had on a kickflip gone horribly, horribly wrong, but when Max had told Chloe later, the girl had laughed at her, called her a prick and then kissed her rather... animatedly. Chloe, it seemed, had not minded.

“All of them,” Victoria replied, in a voice that sounded slightly weary at the idea. Rachel could understand. This had all the makings of a wearying fucking day.

“Yeah,” Rachel agreed. She chuckled a bit and stuck her soapy head under the stream of water pouring down on her. “It's today.”

“Good luck,” Victoria told her. Rachel, running her hand down her face to clear suds away from her lips, was about to reply, but Victoria had not yet finished. “I'll take of Max til you get back tonight. I promise.” I knew you would. Rachel grinned to herself. Victoria had become quite adept at 'taking care of' Max, and Rachel meant that entirely without innuendo. Originally, Victoria Chase had sort of crumbled in the face of one of Max's really bad breakdowns and it had been up to Chloe and Rachel to help her understand what to do. That had been in the early days of their new friendships and so Rachel recalled being concerned about how Victoria would take instruction from them. Speaking of friends... you do still have one option when it comes to that apartment.

“Thanks, Victoria.” The girl made her escape from the room without responding. Rachel sighed, finished rinsing her hair and the rest of her, then shut the water off. The three of them had come up with an idea that might guarantee that they could get that little, one bedroom apartment in northern Los Angeles, an area called Studio City. Rachel had been rather uncomfortable about it, but now as she considered the alternative, she decided it was best to act on the idea. At the very least she could ask. It would require certain sacrifices... and a fold out couch. Those sacrifices weren't going to be hers or Chloe's or even Max's to make though, so as she grabbed hold of her towel and began to dry off, she mentally plotted out exactly how to float the idea. They had mutually agreed on it as an
option, but none had come up with a way to start the conversation yet.

Rachel dressed in silence before emerging from her stall as Kate and Stella entered. Save for the flip flops on her feet that she wore only in the shower, Rachel was dressed for the start of the day, already. Kate and Stella were both still dressed for bed. So wrapped up in her thoughts of the future she was that Rachel almost walked right past the two of them attempting to greet her. Rachel shook her head hard (wishing she had brought her brush with her to the showers) and paused halfway to the door, standing roughly where Victoria must have been standing only a few moments ago.

“Hey,” Rachel called back. Stella fixed extremely dark blue eyes on her, those darker than Max's and, with a small half-smile, spoke.

“Someone's still a little asleep?”

“Maybe I wish I was,” Rachel told her. The truth was that Rachel knew exactly what was wrong with her. She was anxious as all hell about today and transferring that anxiety to the far off future, to potential college living situations. It was not healthy, it was not rational but it had been effective in distracting her from thinking about her meeting tonight with her mother's mother for several minutes. Guiltily, Rachel planned to continue to indulge that horrible coping mechanism. “How’d you two sleep?” She had a few seconds to stop and talk, not that they would not see each other in a short time for breakfast, anyway.

“I slept pretty good,” Stella told her, sounding as if that was the best gift in the world a person could receive. Rachel, who had done fairly well on that front herself, empathized. Kate, on the other hand, announced she had had some whacky dreams and absentmindedly straightened her early morning ponytail. Rachel thought about pursuing that line of questioning, but she had a thick head of hair to tame and a short brunette to check up on. “Hey, I'm sorry I gotta run off, but I'll see you both for breakfast.” She tossed her damp towel over one shoulder, waited for their responses and then hurried from the showers to her room. She saw no sign of Juliet or Dana, nor Alyssa at all. It seemed everyone else was getting a hell of an early start on the day. Today, Rachel looked like the slacker.

She did not take a lot of time once back in her room. She made sure she had her keys, phone and wallet in her pockets, attacked her hair with a brush she intended to still have in her hands when Max opened her room up to Rachel and then set aside her shower sandals. Slowing in the process of taming her thick locks, Rachel pulled her socks and then first one boot and then the other on. They were not visually dissimilar to Chloe's (which, the girl had not worn as often since she returned to skating) but happened to weigh a pound or so less, as far as Rachel was concerned. After making sure her towel was draped across her computer chair to dry, she paused in front of the mirror hanging from the back of her closet door.
“You,” Rachel told herself in the mirror, “look like you're freaking out.” It was true, but she nonetheless decided to give in and apply a little bit of eyeliner, flash a thumbs up to what she considered an otherwise pleasant appearance and left the room. It's definitely me just transferring bullshit from what's going on with Sera to all of that L.A. shit, Rachel thought as she considered precisely how best to lead in with her pitch over breakfast. Sure, she was anxious about the future but when she questioned herself about it as she knocked once or twice on Max's door, there was no way that it took any precedent over the three ways her focus was split today.

First, Chloe's afternoon trip to a counselor needed to go well enough to convince her to go back. Second, her biological maternal grandmother might only be coming to Arcadia Bay to see her and she knew damn well that part of Sera wanted a connection with her mother. Finally, the brunette behind the door she was paused outside of, and said girl's potential mental state on this of all days, scared her. In short, she had her plate full of now problems. Adding on anxieties about futures which were nebulous at best was stupid. Still, as Rachel heard Max call for her to wait a second, she was imagining when the best time to pitch the idea of sharing an apartment with that fourth person would be. Should she wait for the girl to get done with her food or catch her early on? Certainly it would be rude to interrupt her meal with some sort of serious discussion like that, right?

She was nearly done brushing out her hair when the door opened and, stretching, Max gestured for her to come inside. Certainly, Rachel did enter without a word, but slowly and emphatically she pulled the door from Max's grasp and shut it behind her, turning her eyes on the brunette after. Max had not backed away from her or gone to any other part of the room, but she was smiling for some reason where she stood a step or two away dressed for a rather cool day already. Usually, Rachel knew why Max smiled. Today, in this moment, she did not. She also didn't bother to try to analyze it, if she was going to focus on anything it would be any signs of extreme emotional fatigue in the girl's face or voice. Certainly, the rings forming beneath her eyes had not gone away. Rachel took Max's right hand in her left.

The photographer was certainly ready to go, her chucks were on and she even had her bag around her shoulders already. As for Rachel, she placed her own bag down on the ground by Max's bed, laid her hairbrush down on the table nearest the door and made for Max's bed. With neither of them having yet said a word, Rachel pulled at her connection with Max, and the brunette, her smile widening slightly, landed, unresistant, in her lap. This earned Rachel a laugh, however tired and half-hearted it might sound. It was still a pleasant noise and was she pressed her lips into Max's cheek, she relished it.

“Good morning to you, too,” Max told her. Rachel released Max's hand and wrapped her arms around the girl's midriff from behind. She held Max, though not too tightly. She did not want to cause her discomfort, she just wanted the brunette to know that she was adored, that Rachel being able to press her chin to Max's shoulder, and feel the photographer's fingers tracing shapes across Rachel's back was a blessing. Then, the brat had the audacity to ask if she was alright. “Are you okay?” Rachel did not control her snort.
“I'm okay,” Rachel replied. Then, instead of saying anything about the lack of an apocalyptic storm, Chloe's coming therapy or Rachel's own meeting with her grandmother, she breathed out all at once. “I'm going to ask Steph today at breakfast, or at least float the idea by her.” Max turned her head and regarded Rachel with some curiosity and a little bit of concern written into her freckled features. That was all the confirmation Rachel needed to know that she was worrying about the absolute wrong thing at the absolute wrong moment but when she reached for Max's left hand where it sat atop the girl's knee, Max simply intertwined their fingers and held her rather tightly. Rachel's right arm tightened just slightly around Max's midriff in response.

“Ask her what?” Max queried, and then her tired face transformed slightly. “Oh.” She sounded a bit, not disturbed exactly but certainly like someone jolted from a great reverie. In this case, Rachel was certain that Max not thinking about the same thing she was happened to be a sign that at least the photographer was processing things better than Rachel was. “Oh, alright.”

“Does that upset you?” Max shook her head rapidly as if to reassure her. If Steph agreed, theoretically she would be locked into a small apartment with them as long as the lease ran but they were generally close enough friends that it would be doable.

“This might actually be a good time,” Max told her, sounding a tiny bit dreamy as if they were talking about something that belonged to another life, another world, one of the tabletop campaigns they played under Steph or Chloe alongside Brooke and, occasionally when he could get to town, Mikey. “Steph seems like she's been having a good time of things lately. If there's a time to ask, this is it.” Rachel rather agreed and told Max so. The artist had received an award in a statewide contest for a small comic she had drawn and was bigger on the idea of animating than ever before. “Hell, if we go with that place in Studio City, we can even keep Pompidou, though walking him is going to be a fucking trip.” Rachel laughed legitimately this time at the idea of Chloe, Steph or Max or herself being pulled along by the dog around street corners with little baggies in hand. It wasn't necessarily a pleasant thought but it was funny.

Unable to resist one or two more stolen moments, Rachel pecked Max on the cheek twice in rapid succession, earning a tightening of the girl's grip on her hand in response. Max shifted imperceptibly in her lap, as if to get comfortable or angle toward her a little more, and then craned her neck to return the kiss. Wherever that might have gone, whatever it might have led to, Max held up one finger and put an end to it all by putting that finger to Rachel's lips. She did not look particularly serious faced while she did so, rather regretful in fact. Then, the brunette said something that Rachel rather thought in the moment was a little unforgivable.

“You know we'll have to leave eventually,” Max teased her. In response, Rachel tightened her hold on the girl one more time and buried her face in the nape of Max's neck.

“Nuh-uh,” Rachel told her. “You're all mine today. Everyone else can go fuck themselves.” For a few minutes, they sat like that. Max tried to be playful and fully aware, but Rachel had long since
ascertained that she was tired. Max's grades were bound to take a hit if something didn't change soon on the grand scale. Rachel was aware she had been an enabler on that front, though. Max became apologetic if it ever came up, but last week the photographer had turned in a paper on a book they had read for English which Max herself had outlined but Rachel had more or less written for her. Max typically wouldn't have allowed anyone to do that sort of thing for her, but this was one of the class's bigger papers and Rachel had refused to let Max's relatively good grades take a massive hit in her final year. She just hoped that Max never found out that she and Chloe had both spoken to a couple of teachers and received assurances of some understanding on the front of Max's spacy behavior in class.

Rachel sighed as Max finally got up from her lap and, securing Rachel's brush, did her best to restyle her hair. *Not that she has anywhere near as much as me,* Rachel thought. She had now done everything that morning but think in any detail about her meeting with her maternal grandmother. All she really knew about the woman is that things were tense between her and Sera and she had once been a piano teacher for some music school in southern California, that she had once spent a lot of time and money trying to support Sera before the incident or incidents which ultimately had caused their estrangement.

“Look,” Max started as they reached the end of the hall and began to descend the stairs. “It's going to be okay. If the two of them really have so much shit between them, then your grandmother coming to see you right now must mean she really wants to meet you. It can't be *that* bad.” There was some pretty sound logic to that statement. After all, who traveled across a couple of states to visit their estranged daughter and a teenage girl they had never met unless one or both of them were somehow important to her? Rachel was fairly certain she would never undertake such a trip lightly. There was still bound to be tension.

“I'm actually not sure how much I really want to know her.” Rachel confessed, the words new to her own ears and mind. Someone had left the television running in the TV lounge or was having a morning 'veg sess'. Rachel turned her attention back to the photographer. The morning was fucking *cold* around them as Max pushed the door open and let cool air rush into the dormitories. With Eliot and Nathan gone, there was no major threat to hurry them in and out of the dormitory building. They lingered on the doorstep for a second while Max adjusted herself against the cold.

“That's fair,” the photographer told her, now shifting the weight of her messenger bag from one shoulder to another. Rachel wondered if the cheap digital camera which Max kept for 'special use' was in that bag or still in the girl's drawer. Max still preferred her polaroids. “You guys are total
strangers, after all.” Sometimes, Max understood Rachel better than she understood herself, she thought. Rachel pulled that dark leather raven themed jacket tighter across her shoulders and then followed Max out onto the grounds. Max had just unintentionally given voice to a neglected thought in the back of Rachel's mind. This woman, Mrs. Gearhardt, was a total stranger who might have expectations about some kind of inherent familial bond between them.

Okay, that's actually fucking terrifying.

The pair emerged onto the grounds and Max pressed tight against Rachel's side, giving Rachel an opening to rest her right arm over Max's shoulders as they walked. Blackwell Academy was not without its tensions, its romance attempts and failures, its aggravations between staff and student body and certainly not without problems between students and Wells, who, it had come out, continued to play an active hand in 'mitigating' the 'damage' to Nathan's reputation over a year after his death. The fact was, though, Rachel thought as she looked around for any sign of anyone else out on the grounds at the moment, that there was only one adversary left for them on campus. Since the day that Max had threatened him with exposure of all of his secrets and made it clear that she was just fine exposing people for what they were, to boot, David had remained mostly inactive. The one time David had really gotten on to any of them had been the time when Chloe caused a bit of a disaster on campus by knocking someone over on her skateboard.

That someone, Rachel recalled with a rueful smile, had been Wells himself, so Chloe had taken her lumps, received two after school detentions and been informed that any further incidents would result in a suspension. To top it all off, her skateboard was 'unwelcome' within the walls of the school. Nonetheless, it usually sat in Chloe's truck and could often be seen around campus when she, Trevor and Justin decided to 'shred' or whatever the skate lingo was. Rachel was woefully undereducated on the vocabulary, which even Max occasionally teased her for. That was fine, Rachel could be dumb about slang and Max could remain the one of them with the inability to so much as snap her fingers on beat with a song. One day, Chloe would educate them both.

Rachel considered, as Max leaned against her side, providing a little more warmth for the both of them on the cool fall morning, that Max had not spoken about how bad last night had been for her. The girl was walking and talking fairly coherently, though her eyes looked heavy. It was possible that this had been a good night, but Rachel did not push. Max would have to tell her, tell them all before the day was up or Rachel would get impatient though. She was not the only one. Max didn't like it but there were a lot of eyes on her and had been since she fell asleep in three classes in a row the week after her birthday. That was part of the Really Bad Week, but people still worried about it some time down the line.

Rachel and Max were, unsurprisingly, the first from their table to reach the cafeteria. What was surprising was when Max took the opportunity to veer straight for the breakfast bar. Rachel slowed, releasing the girl, and watched her go. Max was wearing normal fall fare, including a replacement for the old flannel shirt she had stolen from Rachel long ago. Max had told her once that the old one was still around but that there was a blood stain on it so she kept it mostly packed away somewhere because she couldn't bare to throw it out. Max was, sometimes, overwhelmingly
sentimental. Slowly, Rachel followed her, but not before turning back at the sound of one of the cafeteria doors being bumped as someone entered.

David made his way in, clad in his security cap and jacket as if no one on campus knew who the unnecessarily bulked up man was. Despite the cessations of hostilities as a result of Max making it clear that she was indeed capable of and willing to blackmail him to make him act like a human being, Rachel couldn't help but wonder if the man had been following them. Still, she returned his stare with a polite nod and joined Max. Rachel took her tray and progressed slowly down the line. She couldn't help it: she watched Max stack her tray with biscuits and gravy. The gravy had gotten much better that year. I'll be doing the same, methinks. Rachel followed in Max's footsteps, ultimately tossing a few hash browns into the mix to give it all the makings of an unhealthy, fattening breakfast. Oh god, it looks amazing. The hashbrowns looked and smelled freshly made, not frozen, which probably led to Rachel loading her tray with twice as much as she had planned and then, after grabbing her drink and reaching their usual table, scraping about a quarter of that onto Max's tray.

The brunette all but pouted for half a second and then covered it up. She did not say anything to suggest she was genuinely upset. Come to think of it, she hasn't said anything since we left the dorms. Rachel thought this might be a bad sign, considering they were coming down to a meal, but she did not comment. She only bumped Max's left shoulder with her right, picked up her fork and shamelessly mixed her own hash browns into the gravy. Bless whatever crazy fucker who convinced Blackwell to have a fucking buffet for breakfast. I swear if I ever find religion, I'll say prayers for your entire family until the day I die. Rachel took one bite, savoring the hot, chewy heaven that was biscuits and gravy and looked around the room.

Dana and Logan were already at their usual table in the back, though there looked be very little talking going on. In fact, neither of them were particularly even turned toward one another. Rachel did not know why, but when Max saw her looking at them, the girl frowned in their direction with big, doe-like eyes. She redirected the brunette's attention from whatever had her sad by offering a bite of hashbrowns from her own fork. Max rolled her eyes and took that bite, earning a chuckle and a small smile from Rachel. It even looked mechanical in nature, but Max ate and did not even give Rachel a 'damn you for making me do it' look. To others, this sight might have been sad. To Rachel it just meant that her girl was trying to do her damndest to start an ugly day off right. The small carton of orange juice Max took a sip from was at least healthier than the rest of either girl's meal. Rachel popped her own open as the brunette took her fork and set to work about her own tray.

Daniel DaCosta sat in the other back corner of the room at a table that used to belong to Nathan and Eliot. They, thankfully, were gone now. She suspected Warren Graham would join him, soon and Luke was already there. He looked somewhat angrier than usual this morning and judging by the way Daniel side eyed him over his own juice, Rachel wasn't the only one who had noticed. Luke had been pretty pissed off a couple of days ago, too, come to think of it. She suspected that Logan or Zachary might have been bullying him or Daniel. There seemed to be no convincing them to change their stripes though Dana claimed to be making progress with Logan. The other option is Luke got into a shouting match with Evan. That happened far more often than probably healthy for
their weird, sometimes confrontational friendship.

Rachel understood why, though. Evan Harris was not a monster, but he was, without a doubt, exactly what Chloe called him: a pompous ass. Max thought he was funny more often than not and Rachel thought he was a seriously underappreciated photographer. Of course, she might have been a little biased as, other than Max, he was the only one of them who had ever really asked her to be a subject for his photos. Rachel didn't think she was too vain, but he had stroked her ego just enough to get her to agree on more than one occasion. He took wildly different pictures from Max's and Rachel rather liked the powerful, mature version of herself that his camera seemed to find. Still, he was more than capable of pissing her off.

Speaking of Evan, Rachel thought as she glanced at their still relatively empty table, he's been poaching from us. On occasion, Brooke would spend either breakfast or lunch at Daniel, Evan and Luke's table. Rachel wasn't sure whether this was better or worse than the option of her bringing Evan to the table or not. She was glad that Brooke was over Warren and on to Evan, she just missed her on days when she spent both of the early meal times with him. Dinner wasn't a problem as, half of the time, Evan liked to photograph through dinner. Sometimes, Brooke told them that she thought his pompous attitude was a front. Other times she declared him beyond helping. Rachel hoped she decided soon.

As if summoned by Rachel appraising the table as rather empty, Kate and Stella made their way into the cafeteria, calling a greeting to the two of them just in time to catch Rachel with a full mouth so that all she could do was wave back. Alyssa usually joined them for lunch, nowadays, but was 'not a breakfast person' so her not being with them was not especially noteworthy. Their little table had a couple too many chairs at it nowadays for school policy but no one gave them shit. Max had apparently had to convince Alyssa that it was alright to join them as she had been originally dubious. Apparently the Vortex Club used to give her the 'heebie jeebies'. Rachel had understood that.

Now there was always a wide variety of conversations going on at the table. Things got lively. Victoria, Courtney and Taylor would have been welcomed, too, but they seemed to be fitting together pretty well with Dana, Logan and Juliet's table. That didn't mean that occasionally they didn't steal Max over to theirs or Max didn't do the same to Victoria, but Rachel had long ago decided that she was ultimately supportive of whatever the two photographers had going on. If that meant sacrificing a meal with her once every other day or even more often than that, that struck Rachel as right.

Rachel realized as the two new arrivals reached the table with her food that she had split most of her concentration between looking at Max and looking around the room. She realized this, in part, because when her eyes shot back at Max after they sat down, Max responded by sticking her tongue out at Rachel, food and all. She was either in fairly good spirits, judging by the cheeky grin she levied on Rachel as the thespian turned back and took her first bite of food in a minute or two, or she was overcompensating. Well, Rachel thought, if I can worry about everything but meeting my grandmother, Max can overcompensate. More people began to trickle into the room as Rachel
ate, no longer checking to make sure that Max was trekking forward through a meal that probably seemed entirely unappetizing to her. In retrospect, watching Max so closely had been a bit insulting. The girl was trying her ass off to be alright and had been for a while. Still, they were treading the line between 'crisis state' and 'emergency state' pretty finely, as far as Rachel was concerned.

Evan and Brooke walked in together next. Evan was talking, Brooke was not listening. It seemed to be working for the two of them as they angled past the table, greeting Rachel with a wave and made for Evan's usual seat. Luke did not glare their direction as they approached, so Rachel upped her suspicion that Zachary and Logan were being extra douchey at the moment. The next to enter was Victoria, who came in alone, making for their table and, before saying anything to anyone else, setting her oh-so-expensive purse down on the table beside Max and wrapping her arms around the girl's shoulders. Rachel remembered her promise to take care of Max that afternoon as the two of them matched eyes over Max's shoulder. She was no longer sure it was an entirely innocent one, because after greeting the table at large, Victoria whispered something into Max's ear which left her cheeks flaming bright red. Without responding to Rachel's amused, questioning glance, Victoria sauntered off for her morning eggs.

Rachel did not ask. She did, however, consider making a new guess at the pet name she and Chloe had overheard Victoria teasing Max about using for her, but Max looked tired and embarrassed enough as she cleared her throat, took a long drink of OJ and returned to her dinner. In addition to being kind of cute, it was a little pitiful for this early in the morning. Rachel decided not to push. Looking down she saw that most of her hashbrowns were gone and she was left to turn to what remained of the biscuits as conversation started to pick up at the table, Stella and Kate firmly into their own, slightly healthier meals.

Chloe and Steph arrived shortly later. Chloe was not dressed for her first therapy session. If anything, she looked a little grungier than usual and Rachel was fairly certain that those hole-y jeans were torn along the right knee from Chloe's last fall from her skateboard. The immediate thing that she could ascertain about the pair was that there was a certain amount of guilt in Chloe's face. Judging by her side eying and smiling at Steph whenever possible as they gathered their breakfast, Rachel thought Chloe might have had another nightmare and dragged Steph, metaphorically kicking and screaming, into it. It's been a while since that happened, right? Poor Chloe. Poor Steph.

Max noticed this too, because her mechanical eating and occasional pause to check if her stomach was going to keep the food down, came to a complete standstill, as did her part in whatever conversation about photography the three of them had been having. Kate and Stella tried to keep it up and even Rachel turned her attention back to the table, mostly for Stella's sake. Stella was much improved in how relaxed she could be but when awkward silences arose, she seemed to get upset, if not a little scared easily. Max watching Chloe, frowning profoundly, was certainly a little awkward. The table still greeted the pair as they finally sat down, Chloe on Max's right and Steph on Rachel's left, closest to Kate. The bluenette waved across the room at Brooke, who, unbeknownst to Evan but much to Luke's apparent amusement, jerked her head toward the bespectacled photographer to her right and mimed blowing her own brains out as Evan continued to
Rachel paused in eating even as Max resumed to watch Chloe load up two pieces of toast with what looked like six or seven pieces of bacon. There was a very small mound of scrambled eggs next to the thick impromptu sandwich and a banana at the edge of the tray beside a carton of milk. Rachel was fairly certain that that meal was at least slightly more balanced than hers or Max’s. Chloe had been prone to a much larger appetite than that, lately, though. Is this a good sign? Am I overanalyzing fucking everything? Isn’t that supposed to be Chloe’s sh*t? Steph looked to be enjoying her own eggs, it was just that she had this horrible habit of getting a bit of the gravy she liked to ladle over her toast on them. Rachel wasn’t a picky eater but to her that just seemed like it would taste weird.

If there had been a nightmare, Steph did not look as bothered about it as Chloe did, considering the way the girl tried not to look directly at her. In fact, other than her brief exchange with Max a moment ago, Chloe looked to be trying to avoid everyone’s eyes. Maybe she thought she was fooling someone with her quick makeup job to cover up the slight bags under her own eyes. Sure, they were not as bad as Max’s, but they were still notable. I wish everyone could just get good sleep. Steph was talkative at least, though, engaged with Max and Stella about mostly their recent history lesson on World War II era US.

For the next five or six minutes or so, Rachel went over the plan for the day in her head: keep it together during school, try to convince Max to have something small during lunch, get Chloe to talk about what was going on in her head, see Chloe off to therapy, go meet her grandmother, come back, cuddle Max all afternoon. Bonus points if Chloe comes back to campus. That meant bonus cuddling, after all. Rachel exhaled when she heard the conversation slow, a pause between topics arising. Her own tray was more or less empty though she wished she had a piece of toast to sop up the rest of the gravy. She would probably go grab one shortly. Rachel glanced sideways. Max was genuinely chuckling at something Chloe had just whispered to her. Stella and Kate were relaxed and Steph had just slammed down her empty carton of milk. This is as good a time as I’m gonna get. Rachel shifted her chair so that it was turned more toward the girl to her left and grinned.

“Steph,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest, “We’ve got a proposal for you.” When Steph released her drink carton and turned to Rachel expectantly, she glanced back at Chloe and Max. This had not been lost on either of them, she thought. Chloe was rigid, as if concerned. The auburn haired girl reached for her fork and then laid it back down on her tray and waited. “It involves, cohabitation, a foldout couch and about 950 bucks a month split four ways. Maybe a little less.” What Rachel had not expected was for Steph to gesture vaguely with her hands and in a low voice and forced accent, parody The Godfather at her.

“You don’t even think to call me Godfather. You come into my house, on the day my daughter is to be married, and you ask me to cohabitate.” Rachel felt a bit of tension she had not noticed sneak into the back of her neck loosen up. Her bright eyes shining slightly at the victory of making Rachel smile through a tense moment, Steph circled one hand in the air as if demanding she go on. “I am interested in hearing your proposal.” Instead, Rachel decided to play along with the teasing
atmosphere. She turned back to Chloe and gestured for Chloe to take over. For a moment, the bluenette opened her mouth, dumbfounded and audibly scrambled to find words, looking a little like there would be revenge in Rachel's future. Rachel all but beamed at her and then waved dismissively to suggest she was kidding. Chloe, red faced, glared back in response and flipped her off across the table.

“Chloe,” Steph told the girl, her voice low and scolding. “You two can make plans for that after this.” At finding no help from her best friend, Chloe turned back to Max and immediately, loudly talked about where they could catch dinner that evening after Chloe's therapy session. Rachel just returned her attention to Steph as Max indulged the skater and smiled her appreciation for Steph joining in on the teasing. Still, she was forced to exhale a moment later and make her pitch.

“How would you like to move in with us in L.A. after school and make our apartment officially the coolest place in California? Honestly, Steph, we'd be lost without you. You are the guiding force of cool in all our lives.” Besides, with Rachel, Chloe, Max and Steph under one roof, how could there be anywhere cooler?

October 11th, 2013 2:58 PM

As far as Max was concerned, Louise Burke was a better teacher than Mark Jefferson could have dreamed of being even if he hadn't been a predator. Her comparatively little first hand experience was more than made up for by the wholehearted engagement she took both in her relationship with her topic and that with her students. *Neither of them even touches Drewer, though, rest her soul.* Max tried and failed to stifle a yawn as she glanced around the photography classroom. It hadn't been changed a ton since its days as a platform for the wanted Jefferson's personal ego stroking. Photos and posters mostly chosen by him still lined the wall, among them a class photo taken the year before. It had the whole crew, as far as the photography classes were concerned. Max sometimes thought that if she tried very hard to ignore the boy standing over Victoria's left shoulder in the picture, she could still look at that photo where it sat in a case along the back wall.

Sometimes.

Max managed to cover her mouth before maybe her hundredth yawn of the lesson escaped and, eyes watering, she looked across her table to Victoria. Victoria was a studious enough individual but as Max looked at her, the blonde's eyes wandered from Burke, the thirty-something with a degree from NYU and caught Max watching her. The girl wiggled her eyebrows quickly and a little suggestively across the table, forcing Max to look away immediately and pretend she didn't hear Taylor laugh. Nothing Burke was saying about the Daguerreian Process was particularly humorous in the least. If that chuckle had had anything to do with the warmth in Max's cheeks, she was going to get Taylor back, one way or another.
Burke's voice, notably poised to go into a lecture on the origin of the Daguerreian Process, was cut across by the shrill ring of the bell denoting that school was finally, mercifully over and Max could be as sleepy and out of it as she so desired. It wasn't that Max didn't enjoy the class, or any of her classes, exactly it was just that anything beyond the most basic of note taking was questionable in her current state. She could count the number of hours she had slept in the last couple of days on one hand. That was not, strictly speaking, good. Max took a moment to pop her knuckles and then stand as Victoria, Taylor and Courtney gathered their gear. She had gotten into such a habit of only setting out the basics in Jefferson's class that it had stuck with her. Her notebook and pen went into her bag in a fraction of the time it took the others to gather themselves up. Only a table or two over, Kate, Stella and Hayden were in conversation about something but Max wasn't sure what. All she knew was that it involved Hayden pretending to frame something or someone and Stella chuckling.

Max glanced back at Victoria as the girl shouldered her purse, smoothed wrinkles that did not exist in the front of her top and generally tried to make herself look presentable for – well, Max wasn't sure what. Then, and only then, was Victoria good to go. It only took Taylor a moment or two more to pack her stuff up and then Max led them out of the room. When she stopped to raise her eyes to Burke, who sat relatively at peace behind her desk sorting through the photos they had turned in at the start of that class period, Max felt a tiny bit guilty. She really didn't want to give the woman the idea that she did not care for her class. She just yawned at everything and not even the light spilling in from the three huge windows taking up the majority of one wall of the room was quite enough to wake her.

Max moved forward when she felt Victoria's hand on her shoulder. She wasn't sure whether the girl was trying to nudge her onward, be reassuring or just seeking contact. Max was okay with any of those options because she didn't mind the contact. She did however, turn back to look at the girl over her shoulder. Victoria was the no nonsense type. She did not cloak how she felt unless there was damned good reason to and hurting your feelings was good enough reason most of the time, but other times she seemed to see it as a necessary side effect of progress. It was refreshing and it meant they talked very openly, very bluntly and very often. Communication with Victoria was a lot simpler than she had expected. Today, Victoria's face had said multiple times that she wanted Max. They hadn't exactly in a location where showing that in the way of physical affection would have been considered acceptable. Now, though, she looked like she was in a different kind of hurry. Max didn't question it, she just led the way from the room and posted up on the opposite side of the hall as the three followed her out.

Courtney was the first of them to spot the science lab's door opening just down the hall or the flash of bright blue hair which stuck out. She nudged Max and nodded toward Chloe as she emerged from the door first, her face a little pale. Steph followed her out a step or two behind. Chloe, it seemed, noticed she was being watched because she and Steph had joined them before anyone who Max had just come out of her classroom with had a chance to really say anything. Steph looked a little frustrated, as if maybe Chloe was being a little hard to deal with at the moment. Behind Max, Kate called out a greeting and passed with Stella in tow. Evan and Hayden followed shortly after.

“Hey,” Steph waved to Kate on the girl's way past them. Then she turned back to the group at large about the same time that both Taylor and Victoria stopped flicking through their phones, likely just
checking for messages. “How was class?” she asked, making it clear with the way she glanced from face to face that it was rather an open ended question.

“Not bad,” Victoria answered, sounding a little unimpressed. “Someone kept being distracting.” Max frowned at Victoria. She was not at fault for any of the no doubt uncouth thoughts that might or might not have been going through Victoria's head throughout the day. That was on her. “I meant the yawning, you perv,” Victoria informed her when she guessed rather successfully at the general trend Max's thoughts were taking. Even in her state, Max had to admit that Victoria was cute when she glared at Max as if she wasn't the more aggressive of the two of them, as if neither of them knew better. Pot, the kettle called.

“So,” Max said without answering to show how dubious she was of this, and turned toward Chloe. Victoria sighed and threw her hands up as if she just couldn't with Max. “Are you gonna be ready for today?”

“Do you mean the tabletop tonight?” Chloe asked, innocently, her face earnest and confused. Max decided to stare at her, unimpressed. They held this staredown for a beat before Chloe sighed and deflated slightly. “Yeah, I'll be good to go in about five minutes. I just wanna stretch first.” Max nodded.

“I'm still coming,” Max insisted as Taylor and Courtney announced they were off to the dorms. Max expected Victoria to turn and follow them, so she leaned in quickly and placed her lips to Victoria's cheek. The blonde turned her head to accept the kiss but then, looking past Max to Courtney and Taylor, called out that she would talk to them later. Leave it to Victoria to sneak even a goodbye kiss under false pretenses. While Max considered what to do about that, Victoria stepped away from her to where Chloe leaned against one of the old blue lockers lining the hall and joined her against it.

“Mind if I come with you?” Victoria asked Chloe. Max didn't particularly mind the idea but she was a little bit surprised by it. Chloe, it seemed, was too, but the bluenette was far quicker on her feet and tried to cover it up much quicker than Max could. Every time Max blinked her eyes stung and eyelids felt heavy. There was no point in any pretense about any of the emotions that came to her face and she knew it. Since Rachel was going to see her mother and grandmother his evening, Max was slated to be waiting alone outside of the disgusting, shitty place while Chloe was inside. She wasn't going to be against company while she waited. Besides, Victoria might be able to keep her mind off how satisfying she would find it to punch Sean Prescott right in his smug prick face.

“Works for me,” Chloe told Victoria, who responded with a genuine smile and then turned to rest her back against the cool locker. Max followed the girl's line of sight down the hallway and smiled herself. In the middle of a group of students pouring from the opposite hall and mostly heading toward lockers or the exit nearest the dormitories, Rachel looked a little more harried than she had at lunch, but she walked with a purpose as she parted from the dispersing crowd, shared a high five
with Hayden as he passed by her going the opposite direction and then walked right up to Chloe without letting her get up off of the lockers, wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pecked her on the cheek once.

“You gonna be ready?” Chloe's response to being asked the same thing Max had just asked was to roll her eyes at Steph, who rolled them back as if Chloe was the one being difficult. Max high fived the girl. Steph had not committed hard and fast one way or another to the proposal Rachel had made to her over breakfast but Max was kind of hopeful. It would be beneficial for their plans if they had a fourth roomie and that being a friend they valued and trusted would be for the best. It would be especially important considering Max was not currently in a state to contribute more than about a grand and did not know how well her funds would hold out until that time and as such was looking at the possibility of spending the better part of a school semester in Seattle before moving in with the others.

“Of course I'm ready,” Chloe grumped. “It's just therapy.”

“It's your first session,” Victoria told her, turning back to face Chloe a little more directly. Slowly, Max stepped up alongside Steph, who was making a face as if she suspected that things were about to get a little bit tense. Max blinked at her, but Steph merely shook her head as if in warning. “It'd be kind of normal to be nervous.”

“Well, I'm not,” Chloe shot back, her tone low and a little bit aggravated. Victoria held up her hands as if to say she meant nothing by the comment but rather than look too terribly irritated herself, she simply stared at Chloe as if she did not believe the girl was quite handling the idea of therapy as well as she was letting on. Max couldn't say she had noticed much animosity between the two of them in a while. If Chloe was snapping for no reason it did not speak very well as to how well she was with handling the idea of talking to a stranger about her problems. When she glanced about and realized that everyone except Victoria herself was looking at her in concern, Chloe shrugged. “Sorry. That wasn't okay. I'm just- I'm tired of all of this shit. I want it to be over with.”

“Yea-ah,” Rachel started, as if about to deliver bad news as she tightened the arm she had around Chloe's shoulders and ruffled the girl's hair a bit. “Bad news. That's really not how it works.”

“That's alright,” Chloe exhaled, “I'll figure it out.” At that, Rachel disengaged from Chloe and took a step or two across the little group to peck Max on the cheek.

“What?” Victoria joked, “nothing for me?” Rachel pulled back from Max, frowned first at Victoria and then, turning to Max with a stern look on her face, Rachel raised one finger damingly.
“Max,” she started, “you're not neglecting Tori are you?” It took Max, tired as she was, a second to understand exactly what Rachel was saying, or rather, playfully accusing her of. When she did, Max glared and Victoria sighed, simultaneously. Chloe perked up behind Rachel, as if waiting to see if there was some small sign that Rachel's guess had been correct. Max didn't have the heart to tell them they'd already guessed that name twice and she had neither confirmed nor denied it either time.

“Stop trying to guess the name,” Max groaned, feeling more tired than she had a moment or two before and embarrassed all over again. Would they just get over it? Of course she knew the answer to that. Rachel and Chloe were not the type to let either Max or Victoria live that down.

“Hell no,” Rachel said, shaking her head slowly and sadly as if disappointed in Max. “You have a sappy pet name for Victoria and I wanna know it.”

“If you tell her,” Victoria threatened suddenly, turning away from Chloe to look toward Max and Steph, “I swear I'll buy that Camera Porn site you love so much and close it down. You'll have nowhere to go to look at all your pictures of vintage cameras.” Max pouted at Victoria this time, but she knew everyone was being mostly playful here. Mostly. Rachel and Chloe were curious as to what the pet name was that she used for Victoria ever since they caught the girl teasing Max about it. Originally Max thought that that was because she and the girls didn't have pet names. How many times, though, had Chloe called her by some silly childhood nickname with an adoring look in her eyes? How many times had Max called Rachel 'Rach' in a heated moment? They had their pet names. Rachel and Chloe just loved to tease and push at Max's buttons and if they made Victoria give Max a hard time in the process, that probably sounded like a bonus.

Max crossed her arms over her chest, turned to the side and tiredly engaged Steph in conversation. Steph, who began to fill her in on an idea for another comic, was no longer on edge and Max had a feeling that that had to do with other people talking to Chloe, who seemed testier than normal. Occasionally, one of the other members of the Vortex Club would pass by, on their way to do some early prep for tomorrow night's party. Max felt bad that not only were she, Rachel and Chloe taking the day off, but now they were bringing Victoria with them to boot. That was alright, though. The parties were still rather nice but they were no longer what they had once been. They required a lot less preparation and a lot less money. Not to mention a lot less beer. Things were strictly Bring your own Buzz, now. A couple of people in the school still had connections for recreational drugs but with David now watching every party like a hawk, no one drank or took anything publicly. If you wanted a buzz, you did it in private, pregaming.

On the plus side the Vortex Club had gone back to the purposes for which it originally had been founded, providing a haven for people who felt isolated by their peers and surroundings to come together, even if it was in a party situation and doing more community outreach projects. More than half of its members helped with the Meals on Wheels program Kate Marsh ran on Thursdays. Max was usually among that number but she had been feeling pretty low energy yesterday. Running meals around Arcadia Bay had been pretty questionable. Besides, Max had not driven in about three weeks, having hung up her keys after nearly crashing the old car her mother and father
had gotten her into a light post in the school parking lot. (*I mean, to be technical it's more like after I crashed the car and then rewound, but if I ever admit that to Chloe or Rachel they'll hide my keys from me.*) Eventually the crowd began to disperse so that the five of them were relatively alone in the hall and when that happened the questioning which Max had been dodging *all* day, finally hit full force.

“Are *you* okay?” Chloe asked her, pointedly during a lull in conversation. Four sets of eyes came to a rest on Max.

“I mean, it *is* today,” Victoria said, as if Max needed reminding.

“Yeah, it's today,” Max confirmed. Unfortunately, at this exact moment a yawn hit her. The hallway of Blackwell Academy became hazy behind heavy, sore watering eyes.

“I think someone was up all night,” Steph muttered as Max rubbed her eyes. Max laughed a little harshly at getting the third degree from just about everyone at the same time, except Rachel who was standing quietly, with her hands in her jacket pockets.

“Were you?” Victoria pushed her on that last point and Max held up her hands, shaking her head.

“Yes, I had trouble sleeping,” she told them and then lowered her voice a bit as she glanced up and down the hall. The nearest person, Daniel, was far enough down the hallway opening his locker that he could not possibly hear them. “and yes, today's the day The Storm happened in the other timeline.” Victoria opened her mouth to say something and judging by the look on her face it was going to either be pushing her to tell them more or maybe just some snarky comment, so Max spoke over her. “And yes, ” she added, drawing this last word out longer than any monosyllabic word had a right to stretch, “I'm fine.” Victoria again raised her hands defensively and closed her mouth before letting them drop.

This last point was something of a fib. She was not fine. She wasn't even okay. She would ideally like to be cuddled up with one or two of the people in front of her somewhere quiet and away from everyone and everything. Ideally, somewhere where she could still see the fairly sunny looking fall day for herself. Eventually, the group began to meander toward the nearest exit. Max knew they were moving as a whole toward the parking lot considering neither Chloe nor Rachel had a lot of time before they had to leave if they wanted to make it to their individual destinations on time and Steph needed to get home to feed Pompidou. Max watched the one person who had not partaken in the game of 20 questions as they walked.

Rachel's attempts to rebuild her relationship with her mom Rose and expand one with her mother,
Sera, had been mostly successful. Rose was just a really complicated area and Rachel had only really recently explained why. Rose, Rachel had confessed, was probably a bit of a sociopath. As a result she had learned a lot of unhealthy emotional habits from her mom, who still practiced most of them to top it all off had trouble hiding the fact that she harbored less than fond feelings toward Rachel's relationship with Max and Chloe. It was Rachel's fear that her mom would one day decide that she needed to drive them apart, but Rachel also told them she could not be sure that she was not just being paranoid and a little distrustful. Max had noticed her mom's bizarre behavior and inconsistent personality traits during their trip to San Francisco a year prior. Either way, Rachel's relationship with Rose had been pretty significantly strained and to Max, that was sad.

Considering that Chloe and Joyce communicated mostly in periodic text messages, Max felt blessed that her mother and father were so supportive and ultimately accepting of her girls. They had even come to understand that Max had a connection with Victoria that was really important. Max had never come out and said anything to either of them about the fact that Victoria was more than a friend but then, she had never done so about Rachel or Chloe, either and it was evident in how her father playfully referred to them as the 'future Mrs. Caulfields' (mercifully for Max, never in earshot of either one of them or Victoria) that they understood the nature of that relationship. In the end, Max hoped Rachel could find and keep strong ties with the parents she had left, considering that James was out of the picture, presumably for good. And that's one choice I can't blame Rachel for in the least.

Eventually, the party reached the parking lot and Max was forced to exchange a goodbye hug with Rachel shortly before she and Chloe did and then clear way for Steph to do the same for Chloe. Max hung back beside Victoria by the nose of Chloe's truck while the others said their goodbyes and was amused to find the blonde looking nervously at the vehicle beside them. She took Victoria's hand. Victoria was different about holding hands than Rachel or Chloe. To either of them, you might as well be half cuddling one another if you were holding hands. To Victoria, that simple connection seemed to be special in and of itself. Max intertwined her fingers with Victoria's and leaned back against the nose of the truck.

“Just chill out and be yourself,” Rachel told Chloe, then she looked past her to Max. “I'll be home around six or seven.”

“This is a big day for you too,” Max told Rachel. “Take as much time as you can. Like, make it count.” If there was any hope for any kind of connection to this woman coming from southern California to meet her then Max thought that Rachel might as well take the time to make it work. Victoria stayed mostly quiet, which Max understood. Friendship had built up between the lot of them, but it had taken a fair amount of time to reach this point. There was just a bit of a past between Chloe and Victoria, one whose depth Max had never really guessed at until the two girls began to work it out. It was not especially positive either, Max thought as Rachel and Steph departed for their cars. By now the two could even be seen talking together in the halls, though what mutual interests they discussed was a concept that still eluded Max. After all, their styles were pretty different, they did not seem to have a ton of interests in common and, to Max's knowledge, no one had managed to sway Victoria toward anything sci-fi or fantasy genre in any medium. And you know first hand that they don't have shit in common for music tastes.
Chloe climbed into the driver's seat of the truck like a condemned man walking to the gallows, so Max led Chloe around to the passenger side and got in herself. Watching Victoria try not to judge the machine as she settled into it would have been comical if Max didn't have so much affection for the Frankentruck. Max had told Victoria most of the honest truth about the things she had gone through since coming to Arcadia Bay, but she did not know if Victoria understood that Max had learned to drive in this thing, even if that had been under unusual circumstances – that being a time loop in which Max tried and failed (for what might have been the about a month of waking time to her) to save Rachel from either harm, the hospital or being arrested. The Frankentruck was kind of her baby in a way as much as it was Chloe's vehicle. When the truck grumbled and started forward as soon as Chloe shifted it into gear, Victoria jumped. Max was far too tired to pretend not to chuckle so she accepted the blonde's glare graciously.

“Chill, Victoria, it's a truck. It won't eat you.”

“If you say so.” Max turned to Chloe to say something to her, but she found the bluenette looking at them with a shit eating grin on her face. She allowed Chloe one chance to turn back to the road and when she instead opened her mouth to say whatever it was that Max was going to pretend she did not see coming, Max let her have it.

“Shutty,” Max told her, narrowing her eyes at the girl. Shrugging a little bit as if to say it didn't bother her, Chloe turned back to the road and continued the trek to the center of Arcadia Bay. When Max looked back at Victoria, she was red in the face. “You know it's going to be okay right?” Max asked Chloe after she had had time to get over the urge to flick the girl on the tip of the nose while she drove.

“I hope so. I just really hate the idea of using this place,” Chloe said. Max was going to agree but Victoria spoke first.

“I did too,” Victoria admitted, looking past Max as Chloe glanced sideways at her. “Like, a lot.”

“A lot, a lot,” Chloe echoed. Max sighed when Victoria took the moment to reply.

“A lot, a lot, a lot.” Mutually enjoying annoying Max might be the biggest thing they had in common second to being cute as hell doing it. To put an end to the gimmick before it genuinely got on her nerves, Max reached out and turned on the old radio. The station playing the closest thing to Chloe's music began to blast through the cab, volume having been left way up. Max did not turn it down, not even when Victoria rolled her eyes or Chloe began air drumming at a stop light. As exhausted as she was, she welcomed silencing the shitty thoughts in her head and the music made thinking quite difficult. Max reached out with either hand, squeezed either girl on the knee
supportively and then settled back into her seat.

Maybe ten minutes later, Max stood just inside of the now familiar waiting room for the Nathan Prescott Memorial Mental Health Clinic, colloquially called the Prescott Clinic. No matter which name you chose, the place made her feel like she was going to break out into hives every time she stepped foot in it. Until now that had only been to run Victoria to her appointments on days when the girl thought she might need someone there with her afterward. She rarely waited in the building after Victoria went back to her own therapist and as soon as Chloe disappeared behind the small wooden door in the back of the room, Max intended to be out of the shitty, beige and sea green mess of a room. Every time she sat down in this room, Sean Prescott's speech at the building's dedication came to mind. Sometimes, that was enough to make her gag.

“Are you sure you wanna wait with me?” Chloe asked her as they sat down. Max did her best to cloak her disdain for every detail of the place. She also knew that that was useless and pointless as she had voiced it any number of times to the girls on either side of her.

“You might be waiting five or ten minutes,” Max insisted. “I don't want you stuck in here alone while you wait.” Try as Chloe might to say everything was fine over and over, Max knew better. The girl was nervous about coming, dubious about this being able to work and stressed about the fact that she could only let on about bits and pieces of the things she had experienced. Max placed her hand over Chloe's on their shared arm rest and this earned, at least, a smile from Chloe. Victoria, who had just finished walking the artist through checking in, settled her expensive purse on her lap and sat quietly on Max's other side. She wished she could get into either girl's head the way that Chloe could get into theirs. Sometimes, Chloe did more than slip between dreams or project images of people in her waking life which only she could see. The mechanic claimed that she sometimes sensed peoples' presences in the waking world much as she did in dreams.

Max wasn't sure what to make of that, but right then she would have given anything to be able to go into Chloe's or Victoria's dreams and see if either or both of them were alright. Victoria had not exactly scaled back her own visits to the clinic and Max knew she had stopped letting Max in on the wide range of her own difficulties when Max had gotten really bad, emotionally, around her birthday. Actually, the near month since her party had been kind of hellish in its own way. Max pushed all of that out of her mind and watched Chloe shift uncomfortably in her seat as she eyed the strangers working behind the counter as receptionists or assistants.

“Think about it like this,” Victoria told Chloe, leaning forward to look past Max. “They're getting paid for this, so they're probably pretty smart about this kind of thing. This is the Prescott Family ass covering. It better be Grade A.” Chloe's chuckle was polite but hollow. She was beyond humor at the moment and they all knew it. “It's alright. This is the first time. It'll suck but next time will suck a little less. You'll get used to it after a couple more.” This seemed to be the most comforting thing Victoria could think to say and it was, Max was given to understand true. She had, herself, vehemently refused to partake in the place despite pressure from everyone from Chloe, Rachel, Victoria or Kate all the way up to her own parents. There was no way in hell that any of them were going to get her to validate Sean Prescott's bullshit by giving the clinic her business, regardless of
the discount in place for Blackwell students. If they chose to, that was their choice and she respected it, but Max could not forget the language laced within the speech Sean Prescott made at the building's dedication.

The man had practically accused her and everyone who had ever spoken out against Nathan of bullying him to the point of committing a violent act. At one point, he had even implied that Nathan would be alive today if it weren't for the 'intolerant, socialist left' as if his wealth and not his propensity to drug, molest and photograph teenage girls had something to do with the situation that resulted in Chloe having to shoot him. (Frankly, how Chloe or Victoria swallowed that shit well enough to agree to come to the clinic was beyond Max.) There were now bets being made as to whether or not he was going to attempt to make their class's graduation about Nathan. For her part, she very much hoped so. She would be glad to engage Sean Prescott in front of a crowd of people live and let them hear how absurd he sounded. That was her own pettiness coming through, she knew but she was just a bit bitter that a sexual predator – whatever else could be said about the rest of his mental health – was the victim and that the people who spoke out about his assaulting him were the monsters in Sean Prescott's twisted little narrative.

Max must have become visibly irritated during this line of thought because Chloe had just asked her if she was sure she was going to be okay when a woman called Chloe's name. Max exhaled, leaned sideways and patted Chloe on the hand as the girl got up.

“Everything's gonna be okay,” Max assured Chloe, though her hands wanted to curl into fists and she wanted to vomit. Chloe pulled her hat down over her hair, sighed and made for the back where a woman who looked entirely unlike Victoria's therapist waited. Max stayed turned as Chloe gave her one last look, pausing by the door and then followed the doctor through to the back. Almost as soon as the door shut behind her, Max stood up. “I need out of here, right now,” Max told Victoria, who rose to her feet without complaint but not without giving Max a look as if she questioned whether the girl was really alright or not.

Max made for the front doors of the building and did not slow down as she crossed the seagreen disaster of a carpet and passed through the doors. She did not slow, frankly until such time as she was settled into the middle seat of the truck and had thrown Chloe's skateboard into the driver's seat. Victoria climbed in through the still open door a few seconds later and Max did not look. She knew Victoria was trying to keep her expensive outfit from getting dirty and it normally looked endearing and all, but Max was just feeling a little frustrated with everything. Hell, even the seat beneath her felt lumpy. Neither of them buckled in but after Victoria shut the door Max could feel the blonde watching her and even, she suspected, raising an eyebrow her way. After a second, Max exhaled loudly, raised a middle finger to the grey lettering across the orange brick building, the lettering that bore Nathan's name and then lowered it when she thought she had gotten her point across to the completely innocent letters who had never done a damned thing to her in their life.

“Did that help?” Victoria asked as Max calmed slightly. Max shrugged.
“I’m bitter,” she said, “as usual. Also, fucking tired and I’m always shit about hiding how I feel when I’m tired.” There was some quiet before Victoria spoke again, blunt and matter-of-factly.

“I know you don't like this place. It's pretty fucking cool for you to come here anyway, for me and now Chloe, too.” Max shrugged.

“\textit{That} doesn't bother me. I care about you two. I just think this place is part of a shitty plot to make Sean Prescott look like some tragic hero so that he can jerk off to the press about how does everything for this town, or some shit.” Victoria pulled a face, probably at the image left behind by Max's colorful language and then, without missing a beat or changing her tone shrugged as if she didn't even care.

“Probably is,” Victoria agreed, “but the good news is that that's not our problem. I get it Max, and we all know today's really fucking with you even if you say otherwise, but you can relax.” The girl's voice dropped in both tone and volume as Victoria reached out and ran one hand down the length of Max's neck, to rest on her shoulder. “It's just you and me now.” Max swallowed, involuntarily. \textit{Leave it to her, Max thought, to try shit like this now.}

“You're right,” Max told her, suddenly looking up at Victoria cheekily. \textit{“I will chill.”} Without warning she shifted her butt over toward the driver's seat spun to her left and then leaned backward so that her head was resting on Victoria's thigh. She smiled up at the blonde as she sighed and threw her hands up momentarily.

“You take everything to extremes, don't you?”

“You should know this by now,” Max shot back. She still smiled as she felt one of Victoria's perfectly manicured hands begin to work through her hair, softly across her scalp. Max wondered how Victoria would feel if she fell asleep like that. If the girl kept that up it might even be possible. Sadly, it was not to be. Max did not fall asleep, but Victoria spoke to her and Max listened, rarely replying. Victoria talked about music, about Seattle, about photography and about the way Max's eyes glinted when she plotted, which they were doing now. Max didn't have the heart to tell her that the only thing she was plotting was what to do the next time they had a little privacy to themselves. She spoke of Max's birthday party, about how happy she was that they got to spend time in Seattle over the summer, including at Victoria's place. She spoke in a sort of quiet, gilded voice and tried to make Max fall asleep.

It did not work, but it was no less appreciated. What it did do was fill Max's mind with good memories, good (and, occasionally, devious) thoughts. It reminded Max of days when she had simply wanted Victoria to \textit{talk} to her, without any snark or jokes or a sense of superiority. In the end what it had taken to make Victoria \textit{think} about who she was and how she was acting hadn't been some great life-changing moment or horrible disaster, though those came later. It had been an
act of kindness and, maybe, for all that Max had talked about wishing Victoria would just calm down and be her friend, there hadn't been much kindness between them until then. She didn't think that was all on her, at all, but it did make her wonder how much actual kindness the girl had experienced in her life beforehand. Max was not a fan of Victoria's parents and, certainly it seemed like Nathan more or less simply used her.

They did not talk about Nathan much.

“‘Ria,” Max half whined, half muttered in protest when Victoria momentarily stopped petting her hair, no doubt guessing incorrectly that Max had fallen asleep.

“Shut up, she could come back any time now,” Victoria scolded, suddenly sounding serious even though she kept her voice low to match Max's. Max did not have to open her eyes to know Victoria was flustered. She smiled widely.

“Thanks for coming,” Max told her, not reacting to Victoria's admonishment.

“Yeah, whatever,” Victoria replied. Max had learned a long time ago that that was not at all an uncommon way for Victoria to say, 'you're welcome.'

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to thank you all for taking time to come with me on this long and, for me at least, emotional ride. The support for this story has been mindblowing. I understand that my current work, Aphelion might not be everyone's bag, but if you can give it a try, I'd appreciate it. If not, stay tuned, because not too long from now, barring any major problems (I've been having some scary hardware issues) I'll be starting a story shortly after Aphelion ends in roughly seven weeks. It's a story concept that I've been told has promise, so hopefully it will earn some enjoyment. We're not done in the Kaukasos timeline, either, I promise. You people have been so supportive, so engaged that it's honestly done wonders for me as a writer and as a person.

Kaukasos started as a way to exorcise some of my inner demons, through Chloe, through Max, through Rachel. It quickly took on a life of its own and became something huge, unruly, and obviously unoptimized. We all know it was a total fucking mess, but it was my total fucking mess and the fact that some people enjoyed at all is genuinely moving. Thank you all. Before I go I want to repeat, from my note at the end of P3... to those who are out there struggling with mental and emotional
difficulties, with any kind of long term illness or any condition which robs them of their spoons unduly, you are not alone.

Thanks, folks, and goodnight.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!