Come Back To Me

by CMackenzie

Summary

The story picks up after the Veronica Mars movie. Logan is still on deployment and Veronica is working at Mars Investigations on a routine cheating spouse case, when Wallace walks into her office with terrible news. Now Veronica is drawn into a case that is very personal for her and the stakes to solve this one are extremely high. LoVe; Reviews contain spoilers.
“Piz.” Veronica’s fingers tightened around the edge of the partially opened door. “What are you doing here?”

“Do I have to hold a boom box over my head to get you to let me in?”

“Please don’t.” She tried to soften the words with a joke. “The neighbors hate me enough already.” Nothing- not even a grin. Well, it wasn’t her best work. Veronica stepped back and opened the door to him.

“I want you to come home Veronica.”

“We’re jumping right to it then, no how have you been? Great weather we’re having.” She closed the door and paused before turning to face him. “I am home Piz.”

It was almost three months that she’d been back in Neptune. Her Dad was finally out of the hospital and back to work part-time. Mac was consulting on an as-needed basis, which wasn’t as often as V wanted, but still regular enough that she had her own desk. Wallace routinely stopped by and they made it a point to get together for lunch or dinner at least once a week. The only thing missing was Logan. Veronica reeled her thoughts back in. It was not a good idea to think about Logan while talking to Piz.

“You don’t miss New York at all?” The words were ‘New York,’ but Veronica clearly heard the implied ‘me’ and the truth was, she didn’t. That life wasn’t her, Piz wasn’t her. Nine years she’d spent trying to be the Veronica Mars that everyone else wanted her to be. The “normal” Veronica with a great career and a great boyfriend- the perfect life, the fake life. It was the alternate universe Veronica Mars. The life that she might’ve had if Lilly wasn’t murdered, if she hadn’t been raped, if she hadn’t fallen in love with Logan. She didn’t only run away from Neptune, she ran away from herself, but now she was back. She’d embraced her future and learned to accept herself. She just wished everyone else could accept it too.

“Do you want coffee?”

“No. I want you to come home.”

“I’m working with my Dad again.” He might not want coffee, but she did and something to eat. Suddenly she was starving. “Let me buy you breakfast. There’s a little café not far from here that makes a mean breakfast burrito.”

“You haven’t unpacked your stuff.” Piz gestured toward the pile of packing boxes still stacked in the corner. His words were tinged with hope that immediately made Veronica feel guilty. Piz had shipped her things over a month ago and they’d stayed right where the delivery man put them. Not because the move to Neptune was temporary, but because staying with her Dad was temporary. Logan would only be gone another 112 days and then they would look for a place together.

“Come on Piznarski, breakfast waits for no man and I’m hungry.” Veronica grabbed her purse and keys from the table by the front door. “Where are you staying?”

She’d noticed his bag and her father would too so before Keith emerged from his room and offered up the couch, she needed to get him out of here. Veronica didn’t wait for him; she opened the front door and walked into the sunshine. Logan’s BMW M6 convertible was parked in the driveway. Before sliding behind the wheel she glanced over her shoulder to check on Piz. He was on the porch,
suitcase in hand and the front door was closed. Excellent. “Just toss that in the back seat.”

Piz complied with her instructions before sliding into the passenger seat. “Nice car.” Two words, but Veronica felt the jab right in her solar plexus.

“I’m happy here.” It was true and it was easier to say without having to look at him. “I missed my Dad and Mac and Wallace…”

“And Logan.”

“This isn’t about Logan, it’s about me. This is who I am. I don’t want to be a high-powered lawyer locked away in her corner office staring down at the world from the fiftieth floor. I want to be on the streets, helping people, finding justice.”

“Right and lawyers don’t help people or fight for justice.”

“You know what I mean. I can’t be the Veronica you want me to be. She doesn’t exist.”

“She existed just fine for almost a year.”

“No, that wasn’t me.”

“Really? Are you sure? Because she looked a lot like you, sounded like you too.”

Veronica supposed she owed him this conversation. Even if he was the one that did the breaking up, she was the one that didn’t show in New York. She was also the one that didn’t call him and had her father make the arrangements to get her things. She was also the one that spent two blissful weeks in Logan’s bed without thinking about Piz once. As promised, it was a short drive to the café and it was still early enough for there to be parking. She pulled to the curb, but before she could leave the car, Piz grabbed her hand. “What if I move here? For you.”

“What about your job?”

“I could find a new one here. If this is where you want to be Veronica then I want to be here too.” Piz cupped her chin and turned her face toward him. “I miss you.”

“It won’t work. You’d be giving up your dream job to move here and you’ll regret it. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon and for the rest of your life.” Piz let his hand drop from her face. “Nothing? That was my best Bogie and not even a smile? These are the jokes here, keep up.”

Without a word, Piz climbed out of the car and slammed the door.

“Wait.” Veronica locked up the car and caught up to him. “I’m sorry. I’ll dispense with the jokes and we can talk, really, I promise.”

Veronica led him to an outdoor table set back from the street and tucked into the corner of the patio. There were no other diners so they would have their privacy, at least for the next hour until the place got busy. “Do you still trust me to order for you?”

“Sure.” Dejection settled over him, weighing him down and making him look smaller. Veronica knew it was her fault, but it didn’t make her change her mind. It didn’t even make her want to change her mind. Life was really good and for the first time, in a long time, she felt hopeful.

“Good morning, Miss Veronica, the usual?”

“Make it two Gus.” It was probably a bad sign that she had a “usual,” but the breakfast burrito on her
way to work was fast becoming a highlight of her mornings. The perfect ratio of eggs, tomato, onion, avocado and cheddar cheese wrapped in a fresh, hot tortilla and topped with a salsa verde that had just enough of a kick was the closest thing to heaven Neptune had to offer. Especially with Logan out of town.

Veronica balanced the packed tray on one hand to open the door, *take that Java the Hut,* and slid it on the table in front of Piz. “You’re going to love these.”

“I love you.”

She swallowed her sigh with a bite of burrito. How could she respond to that? It wasn’t that she didn’t love him, but she definitely didn’t love him the way he deserved, or wanted. “I…” Veronica Mars *at a loss for words, there’s a first time for everything, folks.* She started again, “I love…these burritos.” *So much for dispensing with the jokes, “try it.”*

Humoring her, Piz took a small bite and returned it to the plate. “Where is Logan anyway?”

“Deployment.”

“Right, the Navy.”

The silence yawned between them creating a chasm that was hard to cross. “I’m sorry Piz, this is hard for me.”

“Hard for you Veronica? I’m the one you left standing on a sidewalk alone to face my parents. To explain why my girlfriend bailed on me.”

“Back up a minute, you broke up with me.”

“Let’s be honest with each other okay? I just let you off the hook. If you felt for me even half of what you feel for Logan you would’ve been on that plane to meet my parents.”

“If that’s what you think, then why did you come?”

“Because I needed to know. For sure. I needed you to look me in the face and tell me.”

She certainly wasn’t going to say the words to him before she said them to Logan. “Even if there was no Logan, there could be no us. I told you before this isn’t about him, it’s about me. I don’t want the life you want Piz. I am not coming back to New York and I am not coming back to you.”

“I guess that’s it then.” He stood up. “Have a nice life Veronica.”

“At least let me drive you to your hotel, or to Wallace’s.”

“I’m a big boy I can find my way home.” Veronica watched him leave. Regret mingled with relief. She was sorry to hurt him, but glad for the resolution. It finally felt like an end to that chapter of her life.
CHAPTER TWO

Veronica pulled into the parking spot marked “reserved.” It was the one and only perk to this new office location. She entered the building and climbed the shabby steps. If they were ever going to escalate beyond cheating lowlifes and bond jumpers they were going to need fancier digs. There was probably some crappy idiom about looking like a success to be a success. Unfortunately it was on the same list as ‘it takes money to make money,’ which of course was in short supply at Mars Investigations these days. These days, Veronica? How about always?

She put an overpriced latte on Mac’s desk. Since it was the only form of payment Mac was receiving these days, Veronica didn’t complain too much or too loudly about being her coffee benefactor. “Good morning, Future Optimization Specialist.”

“Just…no.”

“Grand Poobah it is then.”

Mac shook her head. “Where were you yesterday?”

“Riding along in my automobile.” Veronica crossed the room to her office and paused at the door. “Cruisin’ and playin’ the radio.” She opened the door and turned back to Mac. “With no particular place to go?”

Mac swiveled her chair away, but not before Veronica caught the wide grin on her face. If only yesterday was really a Chuck Berry song instead of Piz and panic.

The files littered across her desk were a clear indication that Dad spent some time at work yesterday. She put them all in a neat stack before pushing them to the side. Sharing a desk and an office with her Dad was okay for now since he was only in for a day a week, two at the most, but once he was back full-time it was going to be a challenge. There wasn’t enough room for two desks, there was barely enough room for this one and the visitor chairs. Of course there was always the very big check from Logan sitting in the bottom of her purse. An investment, or as he put it, ‘an advance against all my future murder charge investigations.’

If it was only up to her, the check would be spent already. Pay for Mac, a new office locale a little closer to the 09er zip code, her own desk, advertising. Hey, a girl can dream right? But it wasn’t up to her and there was no way Dad was going to accept that sum of money from Logan.

Thinking about Logan made her want to grab the calendar and count days, but doing the math again wasn’t going to make her feel any less uneasy. Instead she booted up her laptop and typed California Bar Exam into Google. She’d already missed the July exam and the next test was February. The information for the filing deadline wasn’t posted on the site yet, but judging by last year’s information, the application would be available the beginning of next month and timely filing would be before November.

She searched for California Bar prep courses and bookmarked a few that looked promising. Promising and expensive. Veronica sighed and closed the computer; the screen was making her dizzy. Resting her head on the desk, she closed her eyes and contemplated a nap. That’s the way to earn big bucks Veronica –napping.

With a groan she lifted her head and picked up the pile of file folders. The first three were closed, but she had to prepare final reports for the clients. Paperwork was not at the top of her ‘how I want to
spend my day’ list so she put them back in the inbox. The next was from a local estate attorney who needed help tracking down a missing heir. Veronica put that aside for Mac. The last file was yet another spouse suspected of cheating. Marjorie Kincaid was positive her beloved, one-true-love James, Jimmy was seeing the “trampy” new office assistant. Her tears didn’t seem very real, but her check was and it had cleared the Mars bank account this morning. Veronica entered Jimmy’s work address and his schedule in her phone before tossing it in her purse. The phone made a soft thunk as it hit the box she’d shoved into her purse this morning. She was staring at the box when her office door opened.

“Veronica.”

She looked up with a smile. “Hey Teach, playing hooky?” Best friend, basketball coach and health teacher, Wallace Fennel stood in her doorway. “Don’t look so glum, I swear I’m not the one who spray-painted the girl’s locker room…what’s wrong?”

“It’s Piz, Veronica.”

She stifled a sigh, “Wallace I know you’re his friend, but it’s over between us. I didn’t tell him about Logan, because well, I didn’t. Not that it mattered because I think he pretty much figured that part out by himself. I’m sorry he’s hurting, but if you’re here to plead his case…”

“Stop talking.” he barked the words at her with such force it shocked her.

Mac appeared at the open office door. “Everyone okay in here?”

Veronica shot a quick glance in Mac’s direction that silently asked, what gives? Mac responded with a shrug and a small head shake, no idea. They both turned to Wallace and waited.

“Piz is dead, Veronica.” He slumped into one of the visitor’s chairs, visibly shaken by his own news. She opened her mouth to argue with him and then clamped it shut. The words, but I just saw him yesterday, fading before she could utter them. Isn’t that what everyone said? No, I just saw him this morning, yesterday, last week, like the fact that they were alive and healthy then meant they couldn’t be dead now. Dead? Piz? Her stomach turned over and she threw up in the garbage can next to her desk.

When she was done retching, Mac was by her side with a cup of water. A slight tremor in Mac’s hand caused some of the water to slosh over the rim as she passed the cup to Veronica. She took small sips and waited for the nausea to pass. “Tell me what happened.”

“He showed up at my apartment late last night, he’d been drinking.” The last part of Wallace’s sentence sounded more like accusation than explanation. “We talked for a little while until he passed out on the sofa. He was still sleeping when I left for work this morning.”

She knew his day started early. Wallace was usually out of the house by six a.m. and at school no later than six-thirty. Veronica looked at the clock, twelve-thirty. A six hour window from Piz sleeping on the sofa to…she couldn’t complete the thought, it just seemed so impossible.

“After first period, I realized I left my lesson planner at home. I’m free third period so I went home to get it. Lamb and his deputies were already there. My neighbors heard the gunshots.”

It took a minute for her to process what he said. She’d thought it was an accident. “Gunshots?”

“Somebody killed him V.”

She was incredulous. “Piz? Are we talking about the same guy? Naive, innocent, no enemies in the
world, that Piz?” Wallace didn’t respond. “Lamb let you leave the scene?”

Now it was Wallace’s turn to be incredulous. “You certainly don’t think I did it, do you?”

“Of course not. I’m just surprised that Lamb didn’t arrest you on the spot and declare the case closed.”

“My alibi was easy enough to check out. I was in a classroom in front of thirty kids when my neighbors reported the shots.”

“Easy enough for someone with a brain, but we both know that doesn’t apply to our local, neighborhood sheriff.” They also both knew that if they wanted to find out what happened to Piz, they couldn’t count on any answers from Neptune law enforcement. “What time did you get home?”

“I let my second period class go early and I got home a little after ten.”

“And when did your neighbors hear the shots?”

“In the middle of my first period class, around eight thirty.”

The six hour window just closed to two hours. Two hours wasn’t a lot of time. It had to be someone who knew, not only where Piz was staying, but that Wallace would be gone that early. “Did you see anyone on the street when you left? Anything out of the ordinary?” It was easier to focus on the details and push thoughts of Piz out of her mind.

“I don’t know. It was still dark and I didn’t get much sleep. I think the street was empty, but I can’t be sure.”

Veronica grabbed a sheet of paper and started making notes. She’d have Mac pull his credit card information and try to put together a timeline of his movements over the past few days. In the meantime, she would canvas the neighborhood and see if anyone could remember anything out of the ordinary and talk to the neighbors who reported the shots.

Wallace’s neighborhood was a mix of residences, retail outlets, and office space. Eight thirty was late enough for the houses to be empty- people on their way to work, but still early enough that the offices would be empty too. Whoever did it picked an ideal time for leaving behind few witnesses.

She tapped her pencil against the desk, while she thought out her list. Of course she would have to interview friends and…her hands stilled. “Has anyone called his parents?”

From the silence, she gathered that the answer to her question was no. Of course, Lamb or someone from the Sheriff’s Department would make official notification, but it didn’t seem right to Veronica that they hear it from an official before hearing it from one of them, before hearing it from someone who loved Piz.

“I’ll do it, Veronica.”

She was shaking her head before Wallace even finished speaking. “You look beat. Why don’t you go”--she was about to say home when she remembered that his home was a crime scene--“to my house. Dad is there to let you in and I’m sure he’d appreciate the opportunity to mother someone and better you than me.” He hesitated. “Seriously Wallace, go, I’ll call the Piznarskis.”

It took a little more convincing, but between her and Mac, Wallace reluctantly left. Veronica waited until she heard the front door. “Mac, I’ll need their…”
“On it.” She was back in a flash with their number scrawled on a yellow Post-it. Veronica stared at the number. “I’ll be up front if you need me.” Mac left the office, shutting the door behind her.

One awkward phone conversation coming up.
“So, what are you wearing?”

A smile teased the corners of her mouth. Just having him on the phone and knowing he was safe, calmed her. She snuggled deeper under the covers. “Logan”—sleep made her voice husky—“‘I’m still in bed.” Veronica paused for a beat before adding, “Naked.”

His sharp intake of breath sent delightful shivers down her spine. “Veronica.” Her name was a protracted groan, equal parts of pleasure and pain.

It was enough to chase away the last vestiges of sleep and the events of yesterday rushed back to her. *Really, Veronica? Phone sex with Logan when Piz was just killed? “Oh my God, Logan.”*

“Already? That’s a record, even for me.”

“Piz came to see me.”

“Wait, what?” The playful, sexy banter was gone and the tone of his voice cooled by a few hundred degrees. “Piz is there?” It was a terse question spoken through a clenched jaw.

“No. Someone killed him Logan.”

“Really, a murder in Neptune? Has the sheriff been by to arrest me yet?”

Veronica frowned. It was their way, to deflect with humor, but she didn’t feel up to trading quips with him this morning. It was a rough night with very little sleep to be found. Her body felt bruised and tender and she couldn’t get comfortable. Then when she did fall asleep, something inevitably woke her— a bad dream, a trip to the bathroom, Wallace snoring on the sofa.

“Are you okay?” It was the quiet, serious Logan now, the man and not the boy. She used to catch glimpses of this Logan hiding behind the snide remarks and snarky comments; the soft, tender side that was reserved just for her. There was no real answer to his question. “I don’t have any more leave time, but I could talk to my XO…”

“No, I don’t need you to do that.”

“Veronica Mars never needs anybody.” It was said without rancor, but his words instantly brought the past to mind and she started to cry. Logan slammed his fist against the phone. “God, V, don’t cry. I’m sorry.”

“I do need you.” It was barely above a whisper, but she knew he heard her.

“And I’m thousands of miles away acting like a jerk. I want to be there with you, I love you Veronica.”

“I know you do.” The entire idea that she could keep their conversations light and breezy while he was gone was suddenly absurd. What exactly was she waiting for? What if something happened to him and she never got the chance? She was overwhelmed by the pressing need to tell him how she felt. “And I love you.”

Laughter rumbled across the line and it was beautiful. It wasn’t sardonic or mocking or forced. There was something so pure and innocent and joyful in the sound of his laughter she almost started to cry.
again. He was happy. This was Logan, happy. “As usual Mars, your timing is excellent.” She could hear the smile in his voice and she felt an answering one spread across her own face.

“We aim to please, Lieutenant.”

A siren started to wail behind him, electronic klaxon bells growing progressively louder and more insistent. “I’ve got to go Veronica, I love you.” And he was gone.

Please be safe, Logan.

She couldn’t erase the smile from her face. For a little while she just wanted to lie in bed and feel happy, but she knew that wasn’t possible. Face it Veronica, you’re living in a Dickens novel—best of times, worst of times, deal with it.

She climbed out of bed, grabbed her bag and padded down the hall to the bathroom. It was funny how one moment could change your life. Five words from Logan, I need your help Veronica, ended her future law career before it began and ended her relationship with Piz. It reconnected her to Logan; a man she thought lost to her forever. It brought her back to Neptune, allowing her to find the Veronica she missed. And now those five words brought her here, to this new life-changing moment.

Unlike the shower in their old apartment, the water was nice and hot and Veronica had to force herself not to linger. The smell of cooking bacon, helped hurry her along. She swept her things from the edge of the sink into her bag, quickly got dressed and vacated the bathroom. The closer she got to the kitchen, the worse the bacon smelled. She wrinkled her nose. “Are you sure that’s not rancid?”

“These here are perfectly cooked strips of pork heaven.”

“I’ll pass.”

“Good, more for the rest of us.” Keith put the platter of bacon on the table. “You got in very late last night?” Veronica could feel his gaze on her; intense and prodding, assessing her mood, and gauging her reactions. She kept her face averted and hoped his bullshit detector was still under-the-weather like the rest of him. “I’m sorry about Stosh, honey. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine Dad. Where’s Wallace? And what do you mean ‘us’?”

Keith pointed at her. “Ah, there are those sharp observational skills that earn you the small bucks and make me so proud.”

A huge platter of bacon, table set for five, Wallace missing—shit. “What time does their flight arrive?” An awkward phone conversation with the Piznarskis followed by an even more awkward breakfast? Not bloody likely. “Doesn’t matter.” There was no way she was sticking around for Meet the Parents.

He started shaking his head. “Veronica, you just can’t…”

“Tell them I’m sorry I missed them.” She grabbed a slice of toast, kissed Keith’s cheek and made a dash for the door.

Her plan was to be at Wallace’s apartment close to the time of the shooting so the scene would be the same. It was a good thing she’d escaped when she did, or those best laid plans would have gone awry. Avoiding the Pisnarksis was just an added bonus. Of course if yesterday’s phone conversation was any indication, she was sure they didn’t want to spend the morning with her either. Despite her warm and endearing personality, she was not their favorite person. Wallace should’ve made the call. Now not only was she the woman who broke their son’s heart, she was also the person who told
them he’d been murdered. Murdered while he was in Neptune to see her and win her back. *That, my friends, is the hate trifecta.*

Veronica made a right on Mission while thinking about Caltrans cameras. Most of the traffic cameras in California only offered still images, but there were a few with streaming video, *thanks Jake Kane.* It wasn’t really a question whether or not Mac could access the system, the question was would it be useful?

Mission Avenue was an interesting drive. It was symbolic of Neptune itself. If you traveled from one end to the other, you moved from the neighborhood of have-not to the land of have. There was no middle ground in between just a wide swath of undeveloped land acting as both a barrier and a reminder to stay on your side. It’s where the proverbial tracks would run and Wallace’s apartment complex was on the wrong side of them.

Once she passed the Jiffy Lube she entered the five block stretch that in recent years had become “trendy,” which really just meant that the wealthy kids deigned to hang out there. It was reminiscent of Melrose Avenue in West Hollywood with its vintage clothing stores, funky boutiques, foodie restaurants and tattoo parlors. The building was your typical California stucco with red barrel tile roof construction replete with palm trees in the front and a courtyard.

She maneuvered the BMW into the small tenant’s only parking lot behind the building and took Wallace’s spot. Eight apartments, eight parking spaces, each conveniently numbered to match its apartment. Veronica shook her head; let’s just announce to everyone, I’m not home. Unfortunately for her, most of the spots were already empty.

Now on foot, Veronica circled back to the front of the building and scanned the avenue. A dark and closed self-serve frozen yogurt shop was on the far-left corner. Next to that was the creatively named Ink tattoo parlor with a pulled down grate. The Chic Boutique, also closed, shared building space with a store called Boots. *Wonder what they sell here on state- the-obvious street?* A small restaurant took up the right corner, its sign faced down the street away from her so she couldn’t read it; *please let it be Food or Eats or Chow.* She jogged across the street to get a better look at the sign- The Cellar. The name was disappointing, but the sign under it “closed for renovations” gave her hope that maybe it would come back with a name banal enough to fit the rest of the street.

The only place left with a decent view was the bookstore-cum-café across from where she stood and diagonally across from Wallace’s building. Lights in the windows of Books & Beans were a good sign. A small bell announced her entry, but no one came running to offer assistance and the counter with the cash register was empty. Three relatively wide aisles of books led toward the back of the store. Veronica sidled up to the counter and looked out at the street.

If someone had been at the register yesterday morning they had a good, unobstructed view to Wallace’s front gate. “Can I help you?”

Veronica whirled around to face the new arrival. She pegged him in his mid to late fifties, a generous amount of grey mingled with his brown hair and his middle was turning to paunch. He was holding a stack of books, the top one open as if he’d been reading it and he was staring at her over the top rim of his glasses. “Are you not open yet?”

“We’re open. Every day at eight.” He set down the stack of books and waved his arm toward the back of the empty store. “For the breakfast rush.”

She rewarded his attempt at humor with, what she liked to call, her ‘girl giggle’ and in her best perky voice said, “Well if my husband and I decide to move here you’ll have two new regulars.”
“Great, I’ll start planning my retirement now.” A misanthropic book store owner? Maybe she WOULD become a regular.

“Have you been in this neighborhood a long time?”

“Were you actually planning on buying any books?”

She giggled again. “Of course I am. Do you have anything about babies? My husband, I just love saying that, my husband and I just got married- newlyweds and we’re getting ready to start a family.”

He literally rolled his eyes at her. Yes, this was definitely her new favorite spot. “Follow me.” He led her down the center aisle to the back of the store and pointed to rows and rows of books about making babies, having babies, and raising babies.

“Wow that’s a lot of books for such a tiny baby. Can you make any suggestions?” He handed her Getting Pregnant, then What to Expect When You’re Expecting, The Expectant Father, and The Everything Get Ready for Baby Book. “I’m not sure I need all these.”

His look clearly said that he disagreed with her assessment of her mothering potential. *I’ll have you know I did a fine job raising my plastic baby in health class. That is, when I remembered to take her out of the car and feed her.* He walked away, leaving Veronica to trail behind him. “So the neighborhood, is it a good one? My husband and I were looking at an apartment in that building over there.” She pointed through the window at the apartment complex.

“Someone was murdered in that building yesterday.”

She dropped the books on the floor, gasped and covered her mouth with her hands. “Murdered? How do you know? Did you see it? Were you here? When did it happen?”

He scooped up the fallen books and put them on the counter. “It was yesterday morning right after I opened up the store. I’d just finished reshelving some books when I heard gunshots.”

"Were you here at the counter?"

“Not at first, I was in the back of the store, but as soon as I realized what they were I rushed up here.”

“Wow that was really brave. I would’ve stayed in the back and waited for the police. Weren’t you scared?”

“I wanted to see where the shots were coming from and if anyone needed my help.” Veronica wasn’t sure if Mr. Misanthrope cared about helping or if he was more interested in having a good story to tell.

“And did you? See where the shots were coming from?”

He shook his head. “But it was definitely inside that building. The Sheriff’s Department was there all day.”

“Did you see anybody on the street or any cars that were unusual?”

His gaze narrowed at her and Veronica suspected her ditzy blond routine was coming to a close. The silence stretched on as he rang up her purchases. “That will be $59.87.”

She pulled the last three twenties out of her wallet and passed them to him. He made change and
handed it to her with the receipt. Veronica picked up the bag and started to turn away.

“There was one thing. A really expensive sports car. You don’t really see cars like that down here at that hour; the debutantes don’t make their way down here until well past noon.”

“Do you know what kind of car?”

“It was a convertible. A Mercedes, maybe a BMW, and it was dark blue.”
CHAPTER FOUR

Note to self, when there are lots of things on your mind that you would rather not think about do not spend the afternoon alone in a car surveilling someone. A call to the office to put in a request for Caltrans footage from Mac netted her a message from Marjorie Kincaid. Mac said there were a lot of descriptive phrases including words like *slut*, *prick*, and *castration*, but the main point- Jimmy was leaving work early for a conference and would be home late.

Since Piz’s murder investigation was not going to pay the bills, here she was waiting outside Jimmy Kincaid’s office thinking about the dark blue Mercedes or BMW witnessed by the owner of Books & Beans. It was obvious to her that he was talking about Logan’s car since as she'd pointed out before, it didn’t exactly blend.

There were three possible scenarios. First, Mr. Misanthrope saw the car last Wednesday morning when she picked up Wallace for work and he confused the days. Second, he actually did see a blue BMW convertible the morning of the shooting, just not this one. Third, he was lying. *When in doubt, pick C.* Veronica dialed her cell.

“Mars Investigations.”

“Wow, très bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, I’m impressed.”

“I’ll have you know I take my job as First Impressions Officer very seriously.”

Veronica grinned. “I need you to pull everything you can find for this bookstore on Mission Avenue, Books & Beans- incorporation, property tax records, owners and employees. Also background checks on all said owners and employees.”

“Got it.” A long pause. “You know, you still haven’t told me how breakfast went this morning.”

“Et tu, Brute? I thought our working relationship was perfect. I put crazy, impulsive, get-me-in-trouble things on the calendar and you try to stop me from doing them. It won’t work if we are both scheduling the dangerous activities.”

“Not me, blame Wallace.”

“Oh I plan to, if I ever speak to him again.” People were starting to pour out of the squat, tan, industrial building. “I have to go. I’ll come by your place later with fish tacos and you can give me the stuff on Piz.”

“About that…”

Veronica started the car and held down the answer button to transfer the call to Bluetooth. Several short beeps and a few “hellos?” later, the call to Mac was gone. Why, when you needed it most, did technology not work the way it was designed to work?

Her quarry exited the building with an elfin redhead dressed in tan slacks and a matching tan polo shirt. Against the backdrop of the office building, she was like a desert chameleon. Veronica kept them in sight as they separated from the herd, crossed the lot and climbed into a truck. The company’s name, Smart Start, was emblazoned across the side with an 800-number and the words “computer and audio visual rentals: trade shows and corporate events” in bold-face right beneath it.

Great, here she thought “conference” and “home late” were going to be code for banging the office
assistant at a cheap motel, only to find attending conferences was his actual job—*thanks for the tip Marjorie*. Abandoning the tail and leaving Jimmy to his own devices was a tempting idea, but if she was going to bill for the day she needed something for the report.

She followed Jimmy and the redhead down Ruffner to Balboa Avenue then over to the San Diego Freeway South. Their likely destination was the San Diego Convention Center, which meant her likely destination was a long boring afternoon. Dad was starting to make grumbling noises about being ready to work and do more than sit behind a desk. This time the Bluetooth worked without a hitch. “Feel like meeting me in San Diego?”

“Are we going to the zoo?”

“No, way too much excitement for you in your weakened condition. I thought you might want to tail someone around the convention center for a few hours.”

“That sounds like a lovely afternoon of daddy-daughter bonding.”

“It would be, but I’m not staying. Mac has information on Piz, but I need some incriminating photos if I plan on paying rent this month. Rock, hard place- you see the dilemma.”

“I would love to, but you know I’m still not allowed to drive.”

“Yes, old wise one, but that is why you will make Wallace drive you. He owes me for this morning.”

“But you didn’t even stay for breakfast.”

“Details, details. I’ll see you in say, an hour?”

“It’s a date, now what should I wear?”

“Tan.” They made arrangements for him to call once he arrived so she could tell him how to find her in the 2.6 million square foot building. Veronica followed Jimmy and the redhead from the freeway and down to Harbor Drive. She resisted the temptation to stare across the bay toward the Naval Air Station, but she couldn’t resist the temptation of thinking about Logan. Thinking about him and worrying about him.

It was truly wonderful how much information could be found on the Internet to assist with her worry, so far her favorites were the article entitled, “Several Reasons Why Aircraft Carriers are Super Dangerous” and the statistic where Lloyd’s of London said working on the flight deck was one of the most dangerous jobs in the world. On the plus side, Logan couldn’t really give her any grief about being a private investigator. On the downside, every minute she wasn’t talking to him, she lived with a heavy weight of dread. It was a special kind of hell.

There were several other Smart Start tan minions already setting up strange equipment in one of the ground-floor exhibit halls by the time Jimmy and the redhead arrived to help. Veronica surreptitiously took a photo of Jimmy, which she texted to both Keith and Wallace along with the information for the exhibit hall. If Jimmy really wanted some alone time with the redhead there were any number of exits for him to choose from and way too many for Keith to cover. It was probably going to be a complete waste of his day, but it might help rehabilitate his spirits. If worrying about Logan ever got tiresome, there was always worrying about Keith to occupy her thoughts.

An interminable amount of time later, a delighted Keith and a disgruntled Wallace showed up to relieve her. Veronica passed off her bag with the camera equipment and Jimmy’s file before waving goodbye. She stopped at the Blue Water Seafood Market to pick up lunch—mahi-mahi tacos for Mac, salmon tacos for her plus a salad and lemon bars for dessert.
The second she walked in the door, Mac gestured toward the computer. “Where do you want to
start?”

Veronica held up the bags. “Lunch?”

“I ate already. You eat, I’ll talk.”

She pulled a chair over to Mac’s desk and spread her lunch on the corner. Despite her protests to the
counter, Mac picked up one of the tacos and talked in between mouthfuls. “I started with the credit
cards only to find that Piz hasn’t made a single charge on them for almost two months. Next I turned
to his bank records, which I might add were more difficult to obtain, and again nothing.”

“What do you mean by nothing? No paycheck deposits, bill payments, ATM withdrawals?”

Mac shook her head. “No deposits at all and the only withdrawal in the same two month period was
an automatic payment to an insurance company last week.” She passed a painfully thin folder to
Veronica with printed copies of Piz’s bank statements for the past two months. It was just as she said
no transactions except the one to a company called Primerican Life. “Now here is where it gets
interesting.”

Veronica wiggled the file. “This wasn’t interesting?”

Mac chose to ignore her. “The last bank transaction before the two month dry spell was a withdrawal
for $9,999.00 dollars in cash.”

“He was trying to avoid the Currency Transaction Report you have to fill out for cash transactions
over ten thousand dollars.”

“Taking out that sum was probably more conspicuous than just taking the ten. A smart teller, or in
some banks the computer, would have recorded the transaction on a suspicious activity log.”

“Suspicious activity is right. My question is what he needed the money for and what was he doing in
New York…”

did, that he arrived the day he came to talk to you, which is why he went to stay with Wallace, but
we were both wrong.”

The first sheet in the file was a flight manifest; Veronica arched her brow at Mac. “How much
trouble could this get you in?”

“If they caught me? Plenty.”

Delta flight 1586 had one Stosh Piznarski landing in San Diego at ten p.m. on the 28th of July,
almost a full six weeks before he came to see her. “Where was he staying and what was he doing?”

“In case you’re a little sketchy on this arrangement- that’s your job to, you know, detect stuff.”

“Just because he landed in San Diego doesn’t mean he came to Neptune.”

Mac turned the page in the file, a car rental agreement showing that Piz rented a car from Hertz at the
San Diego airport, but three days later returned said car to a Hertz here in Neptune. Mac shrugged.
“There’s no computer trail of him at all after that car is returned.”

“What about his cell phone records?”
“Conveniently enough, his cell phone contract was canceled. When you ask? Ding, ding, ding- two months ago.”

“Anymore good news?”

“I’m still putting together all the stuff you wanted on Books & Beans.”

“I’ll leave you to it then.” Veronica cleaned up the mess from their late lunch and took the Piz files into her office. Her first phone call was to Wallace. “Hey buddy. Why didn’t you tell me Piz was staying with you for the past two months?”

“Because he wasn’t. He got to my house Wednesday night after you blew him off.”

“I love you Wallace, but we’re really going to need to talk about that attitude of yours. Piz arrived in Neptune six weeks ago and I thought he was staying with you.”

“Next time, just try asking.”

She knew he’d hung up on her because she knew Wallace, but sometimes she missed the good old days of an angry click, deafening silence, and then the wail of a dial tone. Veronica scrolled through her cell phone contacts and found the one for Piz. It was a little after one in New York, actual lunch time, but someone in the office might be around to answer a few questions. She used the office phone to place the call. “Can I speak with Walt Matthews please?”

“Hold on please.”

Their “hold music” was a live broadcast of the show. Sometimes when she would call Piz she would do it when he was on the air and she’d listen to his show while waiting for a transfer to voicemail. He accused her of doing that on purpose. He said it was easier for her to make excuses for cancelled plans into his voicemail rather than telling him in person. That’s when he usually won the argument. It was hard to disagree with the facts.

“Walt Matthews.”

“Walt, I don’t know if you remember me, but this is Veronica Mars, I used to date Stosh Piznarski.”

There was a pause. “Yes, the very busy law student who we all believed to be imaginary?”

“One and the same.” She took a deep breath. “You probably haven’t heard, but Piz was…Piz…died. Actually he was killed and I’m looking into his death.”

He hesitated. “Are you representing the person who killed him?”

“No, no I’m not a lawyer; I’m a private investigator in Neptune, California.” This was not going well. “The reason I’m calling is to see if you knew why Piz was in Neptune. Was he working on something for the station?”

“Piz quit working here, what maybe six, seven weeks ago? He applied for a job with the new radio program Reveal and it was my understanding he got it. I personally wrote him a recommendation for the job.”

“Reveal?”

“The CIR and PRX put it together.”

“I’m sorry; I don’t know what any of that means.”
“No, I’m sorry. Sometimes I forget to stop speaking radio. The Center for Investigative Reporting and the Public Radio Exchange put the program together. It examines things, that well, government and big business would like to keep private. They only have three or four pilot episodes so far. Things like teens in solitary confinement, the drug trade.”

“Piz wasn’t an investigative reporter; he put together nice, human interest stories.”

“I don’t know what to tell you. He said he was ready for a change and he wanted to report on the big issues. Truth be known I think he was looking to crack the next Watergate scandal.”

No, no, no Piz, what did you do? Veronica thanked Walt for his help and ended the call with a promise to contact him soon with funeral information. She wrote the words CIR, PRX and Reveal on a Post-it note and left her office in search of Mac. Maybe if she could track down contact information for the show, Veronica could talk to someone before the end of the day. Instead of finding Mac at her desk, Keith was waiting for her. “You’re not Mac?”

“I sent her home for the night.”

“Why did you do that? She was getting me information I needed and I have something else I want her to look into.”

“Veronica, it’s still my name on the door and I thought it best for Mac not to be here while we talked.”

“You’re starting to scare me. Are you okay? Did something happen? Do you need to go to the doctor?”

“I’m fine Veronica.”

“Oh my God, it’s not Logan is it? Please tell me it’s not Logan.” She gripped the end of the desk to keep her self upright. Her mind immediately jumped to the sound of the alarm that ended their phone call this morning. Was it really only this morning? No. Logan had to be okay. He promised. Always, he said always. The tears were unstoppable. Veronica felt herself begin to sway.

Keith jumped up and folded her into his arms. “No, Veronica, no. Logan is fine. Do you hear me? Logan is fine. I didn’t mean to scare you. I’m so sorry honey.”

His words weren’t working. The panic she kept at bay was unleashed and she couldn’t tamp it down. What she needed was to hear Logan, but it could be days or weeks before that happened. Keith coaxed her to the sofa and sat with her. It was a long while before her breathing returned to normal and she trusted herself to speak. “If you are okay and Logan”—her voice cracked—“is okay. Then what is this all about?”

“Maybe we should go home and have dinner first. I’ll make my super special secret lasagna. You know- double the cheese. This can wait.”

“It didn’t look like it could wait when you sent Mac home. Let’s just do this okay?”

He got up and retrieved her camera case from Mac’s desk. “First, can you tell me why you had me following a married, no correction, a happily married couple all afternoon?”

Veronica scanned her memory for the faces of the tan minions, none of which was her client. “When did Marjorie get there? Did she make a scene?”

“Who’s Marjorie?”
“Our client, Marjorie Kincaid. She hired us to follow her husband James, the guy in the picture, she thought he was cheating with his office assistant, which I thought might be the redhead he was with today.”

“Veronica, the redhead he was with today was Susan…Susan Kincaid, his wife.”

“I don’t understand.”

“There were too many exits to cover them all and there are only so many times you can walk back and forth in front of an open door to see if the guy you want is still inside. So Wallace and I went into the exhibit hall and pretended we were inspecting their work, like we were interested in hiring them for a private investigator’s symposium we’re hosting later this year. It was convenient since I have the credentials to back up my story.”

Veronica smiled. Obviously her dad was more than ready to return to work.

“I talked to a very helpful guy, who gave me an overview of their services, the soft sell if you will before passing me off to his boss, the owner of the company, James Kincaid. Natural born salesman, I almost booked his services, before I remembered the symposium was a fake. In the interest of closing the deal, James invited me and Wallace to dinner with him and his wife Susan.”

“A Marjorie Kincaid was in this office on Monday morning to hire us to tail her husband. I gave her the daily rate of $300.00 plus expenses and she wrote me a personal check for $1,500.00 that cleared our account yesterday.”

Keith shook his head. “I don’t know what to tell you honey, but that woman is not married to the man I followed today.”

Her head hurt. Did she need to start investigating her clients now? New Mars Investigations policy—background checks on everyone who walks in the door. “Was that it?”

Keith rolled Mac’s chair from behind her desk until it was in front of Veronica. He sat down and placed the camera bag at his feet between them. “Do you want to tell me about this?”

Veronica looked at the bag, then at Keith, then back at the bag. Realization dawned in her aching head. “That was not how I wanted you to find out.”

The pregnancy test had been in her bag for the past week. She took the box out and stared at it every morning before putting it back thinking, I’ll do it tomorrow. She stared at it every night thinking tomorrow is the day. After her horrible morning with Piz on Wednesday, she even drove around with it on the seat next to her all afternoon. That box had not been out of her mind for a second until this morning. Once she took the test, the box lost all its importance. She’d put it in her bag so she could throw it out some place far away from the Mars residence, not so she could hand it to her father in a convention center.

“I guess it’s time for you to start practicing, who’s your granddaddy?”

“Is the baby Logan’s?”

“Of course it’s his; I haven’t been with anybody else.”

“How can you be sure it’s not Stosh’s baby?”

“God, Dad. Don’t you think I know? It’s not like I rolled out of bed with Piz and hopped in the sack with Logan.”
He frowned at her. That’s exactly what he thought. Well she was not going to sit here and explain how long it had actually been since she had sex with Piz. For it to be his baby she’d be two weeks overdue, not still in her first trimester.

“Are you going to keep it?”

And the hits just keep on coming. “How can you even ask me that?”

“I know you love Logan, but have you thought about what kind of father he’ll be? He didn’t have a very good example. And you? Being a private investigator is not exactly a safe job. There are no regular hours and it’s not very stable. Babies need schedules and stability.”

Veronica scooped up the bag and stood. “I should drive you home.”

Keith sighed. “You’re right. Let’s go home, have dinner and we can talk about it more later.”

“No. I’m going to drive you home and you can have dinner with Wallace. Because you see this conversation, it’s the last one we are going to have on the subject. This is my baby, mine and Logan’s and there will be no more talk about getting rid of it, ever again.”
“Ronnie? You do remember that Logan is off playing G.I. Joe on a boat, right?”

“Dick.” Two nights sleeping on the sofa at the office was not going to turn into a permanent thing. She took a deep breath and tried to find her snark-free zone. “Can I stay here for a few days?”

He shrugged and took a step back. “Me queso is sue queso.”

“Queso?”

“God, and you’re supposed to be the smart one; it means my house is yours.”

Veronica bit the inside of her mouth to keep from smiling. Simple, uncomplicated Dick was exactly what she needed. He wouldn’t care what she was doing, or how she was feeling. He wouldn’t question her every move and push her to make choices he felt were best for her. “It will only be a couple of days, I promise.”

“What evs. You look like shit Ronnie, rough weekend?”

“Something like that.”

“Are you missing the Logan-loving?” His patented lascivious smirk appeared. “Do I need to lock my bedroom door at night?”

“That might be a good idea just to stop me from killing you in your sleep.”

“There’s the Ronnie we know and sometimes like.” He grabbed his surfboard and sailed out the back door. “Later.”

The bed, Logan’s bed, was in an alcove on the sun porch that offered panoramic views of the Pacific. Two white Casablanca ceiling fans turned in the lazy breeze coming through the windows. Each window was custom-fitted with rollup bamboo shades and Veronica started lowering the ones surrounding the bed. A wicker trunk in the corner of the room held some of Logan’s things. Veronica resisted the urge to bury her face in his clothes, but just barely. She grabbed a t-shirt off the top and made her way to the bathroom. Shower, food, and sleep were her only three priorities for today. In the words of the immortal Aerosmith, her get up and go, musta got up and went.

Friday night, after dropping off her dad and refusing to go inside, she’d contemplated sleeping at Mac’s house, but that choice meant questions and conversation. Of course the sofa at the office meant tossing and turning and very little of the thing people called sleep. It made her so irritable and cranky on Saturday that the only things she accomplished were depositing Logan’s check into her personal account and arranging a meeting at the local office of Reveal for Monday morning.

The shower was just as phenomenal as she remembered; a walk-in steam shower with an overhead rainfall fixture and acupuncture hydro-massage jets. The teak bench along the back wall conjured up a very vivid Logan memory and Veronica felt the slow rush of heat course through her body. Her skin tingled with the remembered sensation of his hands sliding their way slowly up her thighs and pulling her down to him. She shook her head to dislodge the thoughts and rushed through the rest of her shower.

One plate of scrambled eggs, a glass of milk and banana later she was snuggled deep in Logan’s bed still thinking about him. If her math and endless calendar counting were correct, this is where they’d
conceived their baby. They should probably never mention that anywhere near Dick or it would become some inappropriate joke he pulled out at every birthday party until this kid was an adult and maybe even beyond that.

Veronica frowned. Now that her father knew she wondered how long she could keep it a secret. It didn’t seem fair for everyone else to know before Logan; he was the first person she wanted to tell and now he might end up being the last. She was afraid to tell him while he was away. She didn’t want to leave him worried and distracted while he needed to be on full-alert and concentrating. And she had no doubt that he would be worried and distracted by the news. Keith worried if Logan would be a good father and Logan would worry the same thing. In the past he joked about it, ‘Good thing these shitty Echolls’ genes get to die with me.’

Not for the first time Veronica wondered if he would be happy. It was ironic. For all the ways she doubted him in the past and the countless times her trust in him slipped, there was no question in her mind about Logan being a good dad. She had more doubts about her own parenting skills. Lianne certainly wasn’t the poster child for great moms. Keith’s words Friday night had hurt. He’d cut right down to the core of her worries, that she would feed her addiction at the expense of her child- Lianne Mars 2.0.

She wanted this baby. It surprised her exactly how much she wanted this baby. Maybe it was a reaction to her longing for Logan; the idea that she was carrying a piece of him inside her and that for the rest of their lives, no matter what, they would be tied together. But she didn’t think so. It went deeper than that and in the end it didn’t matter what Keith or Logan or anyone else thought about it because she was going to have this baby. Her breathing evened and baby names tumbled through her brain as she drifted off to sleep.

Phone. Ringing. Veronica patted the bed then reached for a non-existent nightstand. The phone fell silent only to start its incessant ringing again. The haze in her brain cleared and she remembered she was at Dick’s house. She reached over the side of the bed and grabbed her purse. Her fingers folded over the phone just in time for it to stop. Veronica fell back against the pillows, hand still wrapped around the phone and her eyes still closed. Again the phone started to ring. She pulled it out and blindly hit accept. “What?”

“Are you okay Veronica?”

She smiled and felt that last knot of tension in her body uncoil. “As a rule, I’d like to start each morning with a hot sailor calling me on the phone.”

“Too bad you’re stuck with me then.”

“Well, at least you’re a sailor.”

“Why are you at Dick’s house?”

She forced herself to remain upbeat. “Are you having me followed?”

“No, but maybe I should start.” When she didn’t respond he teased, “Hmm, how much would a detective charge to get me hot, naked photos of my girlfriend?”

“Way out of your price range.”

“I could take a loan. It would be totally worth it.”

Movie critics would give them an A for the snappy dialogue and witty banter, but what they really needed were high marks for meaningful conversation and honest communication. Veronica decided
to give it a try. “My dad and I had a fight. Wallace’s apartment is still a crime scene and I didn’t feel like talking about it with Mac so I came here.”

“Do you want to tell me about it?”

“Not yet, but I will. Let’s just say he’s not happy with the choices I’m making and I think he wants to be able to still tell me what to do.”

“Still? I don’t think anyone, anywhere has ever been able to tell you what to do. He’s just concerned, you know that right?”

“I do, but maybe he could show it with fewer words and buy me a pony instead.”

“I love you Veronica Mars.”

“I love you too.”

“There it is. I was afraid I dreamed our last phone conversation.”

“You don’t get off that easy. So” --she dragged the word out-- “how did you know I was here?”

“Dick sent me an email. And for Dick to notice anything, but himself, I figured it must be important.”

“That’s really prompt service. How come when I send you an email, I don’t get a call within a few hours? Is there something going on between you and Dick? Do I need to be jealous?”

“Prompt? I suppose for the Navy you might call twelve hours prompt.”

“Twelve hours?” A quick glance at her phone said eight a.m. “What day is it?”

“Monday.”

Veronica scrambled out of bed. “I can’t believe I slept so long, I’m going to be late. I’m sorry Logan, I have to go.”

“Listen V, it may be awhile before I can call you again. I’m flying tomorrow; I don’t know how long I will be gone.”

The coiled tension was back in her stomach. “Fly straight.”

“Always.”

Her body must have needed the sleep, but she felt disoriented. The intent was a nap, not to sleep away a day. Now she was going to be late to meet the people at Reveal and she didn’t have any clean clothes. Plus she was starving and she’d already eaten the last of what was edible in Dick’s refrigerator. “Dick! Where are my clothes?”

He strolled down the hall. “That’s not exactly how I pictured hearing those words from you, but what can you do?” He pointed to the table. “Cleaning lady washed them.”

Veronica scooped them up and rushed for the bathroom. She dabbed some toothpaste on her finger and followed the makeshift “brushing” with a healthy swig of mouthwash. Then washed her face, pulled her fingers through her hair and donned her clothes in record time.

“Where’s the fire Ronnie?”
“I have to be somewhere in forty…no, thirty minutes.”

“So no quickie then?”

Veronica rolled her eyes at him before leaving. Today’s meeting was with one of the content coordinators for the public radio station that was working to produce the Reveal program. The woman Veronica spoke with on Saturday morning was full of assurances that if Veronica wanted to know what Piz was working on this would be the person to speak to. She certainly hoped so. The Center for Investigative Reporting had their offices in the San Francisco Bay area and Sacramento. If this woman she was meeting with today wasn’t able to help, Veronica might have to take a long drive up the coast.

She was only fifteen minutes late for her appointment and when she arrived she was escorted right to Cara Murphy’s office. “Can I get you anything?”

“Decaf coffee would be great, thanks.”

“No problem, Cara will be right in.”

There were no photos or degrees on the walls. The desk was a shining, spotless glass affair with no drawers and nothing on its surface. There weren’t any filing cabinets, or even a briefcase. Nothing for a natural born snoop to snoop through. The secretary returned with a tray bearing coffee and its accoutrements along with a stunning, willowy brunette who Veronica assumed was Cara Murphy. “Veronica Mars, it’s a pleasure to meet you finally.”

That made things awkward. Cara Murphy obviously knew who she was and yet Veronica had only just heard her name for the first time on Saturday morning. “It’s nice to meet you too.” The secretary backed out of the room to leave them alone. Veronica used the next few minutes to fix her coffee and assess the brunette.

“I apologize for the Spartan offices; we are borrowing some temporary space from Kinney Broadcasting.”

Veronica’s gaze narrowed. How much did Cara Murphy know about me? Was the reference to the empty space a polite way of saying she knew I would have peeked through the contents of her office if given the opportunity? “Can you tell me a little about Reveal?”

Cara leaned back in her chair. “Newspapers are dying. More and more people are getting their news from television and the Internet. Unfortunately, it seems like both of those mediums are more about entertainment than real news. Reveal is Woodward and Bernstein in the heyday of the Washington Post only on the radio instead of in print.”

“And you hired Stosh Piznarski with no experience in investigative journalism?”

Cara smiled and shook her head. “We didn’t hire Piz. He got an interview with us because a mutual friend asked me for a favor.”

“A mutual friend?”

“Parker Lee. We went to Hearst together.”

Veronica almost dropped her coffee in her lap. When was Piz in touch with Parker? Had they been in contact all these years and Veronica just didn’t know it? How out of touch with Piz was she? To cover her surprise, Veronica moved on with the interview. “Walt Matthews from the station where Piz used to work was under the impression he’d gotten the job with you.”
“I shouldn’t say we didn’t hire Piz, that’s a little disingenuous. He had a solid resume with lots of radio experience, but like you, we worried about the lack of investigative skills. Fortunately for Piz he had a great pitch. We liked it so much we gave him a chance to put together the story for us. A stringer if you will. If he could nail down the story with facts that could be checked and some reliable sources, he would get the job and it would be our next pilot episode.”

“What was this great pitch?”

“Neptune, California. Piz called it a kleptocracy, literally a government that is ruled by thieves.” Cara picked up an empty cup from the tray and poured herself some coffee. She waved the carafe at Veronica. “More?”

Veronica nodded just to have something to do. She was stunned. Piz was planning to take down the corruption in Neptune by himself. For what reason? To get a new job near you Veronica. To help clean up the town you couldn’t bring yourself to leave. She felt responsible for bringing him here, responsible for causing his death and the weight of that responsibility felt paralyzing.
CHAPTER SIX

Cara Murphy insisted that Piz wasn’t filing installments of his story. He called occasionally to check-in, but the messages were your basic “I’m making progress,” or, “the story is really coming together.” She also had no idea where Piz was staying. The only thing she could confirm was that his initial interview for the job was two months ago and he’d taken two weeks to wrap up his New York life before coming to Neptune.

Veronica thanked her for her time and Cara gave the generic, “please do not hesitate to call me if you need anything else.” Then she added a request that Veronica keep her up-to-date on the progress of the investigation because she really liked Piz and she was sorry about what happened to him. Her parting comment was that she didn’t really think his murder had anything to do with the story and that maybe Veronica was better off looking for a more personal reason.

When Veronica pressed her on the ‘more personal’ reason, Cara suggested a new woman in his life. Her exact words were, “Piz seemed lonely when he first got here so our conversations often strayed beyond work. At first, he seemed pretty broken up about you, you and Logan, but in the last week or two he seemed happier. Like he was finally letting go and moving on, know what I mean?”

Veronica knew what she meant, but she didn’t know how accurate it was. If Piz was really moving on with a new girlfriend why was he at her house trying to get her to move back to New York? Could this new girlfriend have found out about his visit to Veronica and his plans to ditch Neptune, and then killed him in a fit of jealous passion? Veronica was disconcerted to realize she had trouble imagining Piz inspiring that kind of passion in someone.

Her undeserved reputation in high school notwithstanding, Veronica’s experience with the opposite sex was…limited. There were a few men at college and one or two more during law school before Piz, but if she thought about them, they were the same. It was almost like she knew they would be boring and safe before getting involved with them. They didn’t challenge her and she was never fully herself around them. She was the edited version of Veronica. They were all men from the yellow cotton dress collection. All of them, except Logan. He was the strapless, red satin.

It wasn’t just the chemistry, which sizzled between them whenever they were in the same zip code. There was also their shared history and their shared loss. It was the fact that they got each other. Knew all the flaws and imperfections, and all the beauty and potential too. They could be vulnerable and they could also hurt each other like no one else. There was no safe. It was walking off the edge of the world together.

Maybe it wasn’t likely, but it was at least possible for someone to feel that passionate about Piz. Veronica just didn’t share Cara’s conviction that it wasn’t about his story. She hummed a few bars of “if you knew Neptune, like I knew Neptune.” If Piz found something he shouldn’t, the fine upstanding citizens of Neptune were not above putting him out of their misery, or at least getting their attack dogs to do it.

The question now was where were his notes? The bag he was carrying when he came to the house was a wheelie suitcase small enough to fit in an overhead bin. It was not a suitcase for a six week stay in Neptune and there was no laptop case. If he didn’t have it with him when he went to Wallace’s apartment, then it wasn’t part of the crime scene, which meant the Sheriff’s Department didn’t have it yet. It was either stashed some place or it was still wherever he’d been staying. Veronica made a note to ask Mac about tracing it. She knew it was possible with its IP address and service tag and some other wizard skills that she didn’t possess.
Of course if there was a laptop and it did contain notes that implicated the shmuckity-schmucks of Neptune in some nefarious plot it was a safe bet the Sheriff’s Department was expending a considerable amount of effort trying to find it. Luckily, while they had the manpower, they didn’t necessarily have the brainpower to achieve said task and they certainly didn’t have Mac.

Neptune was a beach town, a popular beach town. Sun-seeking tourists always littered the streets and during spring break you could barely move through the hoards of the horny that descended en masse. This equaled many places to stay, ranging from the very cheap on the outskirts of Neptune proper e.g. The Camelot all the way to the very grand as in, the Neptune Grand.

If Piz was paying cash and trying to fly under the radar, the Neptune Grand and other luxury hotels would be bad choices. Those kinds of storied establishments liked their credit cards to pay for the essentials- in-room massages, fully stocked bars, Michelin star room service, and luxury bathrobes. Trying to pay in cash might indicate bad credit and that just wouldn’t be tolerated by their ilk. No, Piz would’ve blended in better with the Camelots of the world.

Veronica made a detour to Ralphs before going to the office. Mac was engaged in her wizard magic when Veronica entered and she continued her rapid fire typing without looking up. A slight tilt of her head toward a vague spot on the desk was the only indication she even noticed Veronica’s arrival.

“The stuff you wanted on Books & Beans is there.”

“You’re ruining my grand entrance. I wanted noisemakers and streamers with party hats and cake.”

“Your birthday was last month.”

“Hey, now that you mention it, I didn’t get those things then either.”

“Next year, boss.” Mac finished on the computer and turned around. “What’s up?”

“What’s up is your slacking at your Momentous Event Planner job.”

“You mean my unpaid Momentous Event Planner job?”

“Aha, drum roll please.” Veronica presented her with a check. “Your very first Mars Investigation paycheck. I was going to have it framed, but then I thought the bank might frown on that, difficult to fit it under the teller window.”

“Good call.” Mac looked down at the check and then back at Veronica. “Are you sure we can afford this? Did you win the lottery and forget to tell me?”

“Wasn’t it on my calendar? Pick up dry cleaning, win lottery, buy shoes?”

Mac put the check away and passed Veronica a sheaf of papers. “Happy reading. Oh, and your dad's here.”

“Way to bury the lead.” She took her grocery bag and paperwork into the office. “Hi, Dad.”

“Just who I was hoping to see. What do you say to lunch at Luigi’s? All the manicotti you can eat?”

Veronica pulled a jar of peanut butter from the bag and waved it at him. “I have all the essential lunch fixin’s right here.” Bread, jelly, sliced apples and a bottle of fruit juice landed on the desk next to the peanut butter.

“Not exactly what I had in mind.”
“What did you have in mind?” She dragged a piece of apple through the peanut butter and popped it in her mouth before making them sandwiches.

“A little daddy, daughter conversation over cheap Italian food.” He took the sandwich she offered. “But this is nice too.”

They ate in silence. Veronica wasn’t trying to make it hard for him, but she didn’t know what to say so instead she made herself another sandwich. “Do you want one?”

“No, I’m good.” Keith watched her. “How are you feeling? Are you getting enough sleep?”

“Uh, Dick snores—loudly, but he’s not as bad as Wallace.”

“You could always move back home.”

This was the second man in her life to pose the same suggestion in the span of a week. “I think it’s time for me to start looking for a place. Before he shipped out, Logan gave me the contact information for the Ombudsman on base. She should be able to point me in the right direction for off base housing. I just don’t know—house or apartment? Rent or buy? Neptune or San Diego? Lots of pros and cons for each.”

“I thought you wanted to wait until Logan got home?”

Veronica shrugged. “Maybe my nesting instincts are kicking in early. You know me, always ahead of all the other kids in class.”

A smile flit across his face and then the somber expression returned. “Veronica I’m sorry. One day, very soon, you are going to understand that worrying is part of the job description. I just want to make sure you’re happy and safe. And safe? Safe, is pretty high up there on the list.”

“I’m not a little girl anymore.”

“You’re my little girl.”

“Wait, I think I’ve seen this movie, now we hug and play basketball, right? Cheaper By the Dozen? No, no, Father of the Bride. Either way that makes you Steve Martin.”

“He wishes he were as handsome as me, look at this chiseled jaw and these prominent cheekbones.”

Veronica crossed the room to him. “And that shiny head.” She kissed the top of his head and he pulled her close in a one-arm hug. “How come I can never stay mad at you?”

“It’s my charm.”

“Must be.” She returned the squeeze. “I love you.”

“I love you too and you know I am always here for you.”

“So did you come here just to mooch lunch off me or are you planning on earning your keep?”

“Just take it easy on me, remember I’m convalescing.”

“Look at you using those big, fancy words.” Veronica bumped his arm with her hip, and then leaned over the desk to get the stack of papers on Books & Beans. A quick scan of the top sheet told her that there was only one employee of the bookstore, the owner, Charles “Charlie” Gallagher. There were records from the California Department of Motor Vehicle, including a color printout of his
driver’s license and Mr. Misanthrope now had a name. She folded back the top pages so the picture was on top and passed the package to Keith. “Charlie owns and operates a bookstore cater-cornered to Wallace’s apartment. He was there the morning of the shooting and…”

Stupid, stupid, stupid Veronica, he just told you he’s worried about your safety and you start to ask him to look into the guy placing you at a crime scene?

“And?”

Veronica took the papers back from him. “And that’s what the non-convalescing detective gets to investigate. You, on the other hand, get to look into Marjorie Kincaid, we’ll call it the case of the bumbling bigamist, the bigamist’s blunder, the bigamist and the blonde?”

Keith was frowning at her, either because he didn’t believe her cover story, or because the jokes were bad. It was probably both. Veronica withdrew the Kincaid file from her bag and gave it to him. Then she settled down in the visitor’s chair to read about Mr. Misanthrope. His financial records showed he was in bad shape. No savings, no investment accounts, plenty of credit card debt and the mortgage on the bookstore was underwater. Money, in the form of a bribe, would be a powerful motivator for good ole Charlie to be lying through his teeth.

If there was a payoff, he didn’t deposit it anywhere. There were also no big, recent purchases he might have spent it on. No paid off loans. It didn’t mean it wasn’t stuffed in his mattress or that the payoff was only in the promise stage. Maybe he needed to tell the lie a few more times, to the Sheriff, to the press and then at her murder trial before he received the big bucks. Under that scenario, he was the donkey and the money was the carrot, but what was the stick?

She got up and stretched. “Cracked the case yet?”

Keith shook his head. “Your Marjorie Kincaid doesn’t exist. I had Mac run her through every database she could think of and--”

“When did you have her do that?”

“When I got back from the convention center.” Veronica noticed the file he was working through was considerably larger than the one she’d given him.

“So you were already working on it.”

“This ain’t my first day on the job, Blondie.” He handed her a copy of the check made payable to Mars Investigations. “The name on the check is Marjorie Kincaid, but the account number is a corporate account that belongs to Smart Start and the signature on the check actually matches the signature on file at the bank. It’s a good forgery.”

The “signature” was really only a bunch of loops and swirls, which toward the end could read Kincaid, as in James Kincaid owner of Smart Start, but only if you squinted and tilted your head just right. “Forgery, I suppose that means you reported it to the bank?”

Keith nodded. “Their fraud department is investigating and our checking balance is a little lower.”

“Why go to all the trouble of printing a fake check and perfecting a forged signature to hire me to investigate a man, who because he is not your husband, is not cheating on you? It wasn’t like she needed me to find him; she knew exactly where he was. What was her end game?”

“I don’t know Veronica, but I don’t like it.”
“You’ll figure it out.” She collected the ever-growing pile of files on Piz’s murder and shoved them in her bag for later reading. “Let me drive you home. I have a few questions for your roomie and I want to get some clothes.”

“You can pick up some clothes, but Wallace went home today after work.”

“He went back to school today?” Her BFF was apparently still mad at her. “Would you mind if Mac took you home? I really need to talk to Wallace. I promise I’ll come by later with ice cream?”

“Go. I want to have a closer look at Smart Start anyway. But I expect whipped cream, hot fudge and cherries with my ice cream.”

“But of course.” Veronica stopped by Mac’s desk to arrange a ride home for Keith and then left to confront Wallace. Too bad she didn’t have time to bake him some snickerdoodles. When in doubt, bring baked goods. There was a slight chill to the air and she regretted not grabbing a sweater from the closet in her office. Dad’s office, Veronica. They were going to have to do something about that soon, which meant talking to him about Logan’s check. The check she already used part of to pay this month’s rent and Mac’s salary.

She made the drive to Wallace’s apartment with the top up. That was something else she needed to buy, a new car. Preferably one that was safe and reliable with four doors, room for a car seat and not a convertible. The words “mini” and “van” flashed through her thoughts and she gave a small shudder. There were certain changes she was looking forward to and there were certain sacrifices she was willing to make, but a minivan wasn’t one of them.

The stores were closed, including Books & Beans, and there was plenty of street parking. She grabbed her purse and let herself in the courtyard gate. It was a two-story building with four apartments on each floor. The pattern of one apartment on the left, one on the right, and two across the courtyard repeated itself on the second floor. The only difference being that ground floor tenants made use of the courtyard with lawn chairs and barbecues, while the second floor tenants had to enjoy the weather from the exterior concrete walkway and enviously watch their neighbors over the railings.

Veronica crossed the courtyard to Wallace’s apartment and found him sitting outside in the shadows beyond reach of his porch light. “Whatcha doin’?”

There was a six-pack of beer between his feet. He reached down for two new bottles and passed one to Veronica. “They didn’t clean.”

Her fingers shook and the bottle slipped from her grasp. It landed on the grass with a dull thud. Veronica picked it up and slipped it back in the case before taking the chair next to Wallace. “Did you hire a company?”

“I didn’t know I had to. I’ve never had anybody…no one has ever…the police don’t…”

“Dad has someone you can use. We’ll call them tomorrow and schedule an appointment. I’ll call your landlord too, so he can let them in.” Veronica glanced at the front door to the apartment. It was hard to think about never seeing Piz again. It was easier to put him out of her mind and focus on the case, focus on solving the puzzle. She remembered the first time she met him, my God- the hair, and all his stuff stolen by the ‘welcome wagon.’ Where are you from, Brigadoon? “I can’t believe he’s gone.”

“Do you care?” Before she could respond, Wallace held out his hand. “I’m sorry V. I know you care. He was your friend and you loved him, I’m just…it’s bad in there Veronica.”
Images of the Kane’s swimming pool and the blood and Lilly’s body exploded through her memory. Another murder, another friend; she didn’t know if she had it in her to go inside. *Inside.*

Veronica got up and examined the door. There didn’t seem to be any tool marks on the locks, the door was solid and the jamb was intact. “Was the door locked when you left on Wednesday?”

“The bottom lock is automatic and I always lock the deadbolt when I leave.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m positive because I even remembered to leave my spare set on the coffee table so Piz would see them when he woke up.”

“And this is the same door, right? Your landlord didn’t replace it?” She asked the question even though the answer was obvious. It was the same faded, dull red as the other doors in the complex with the same wear and tear. This was not a new door.

Wallace didn’t bother to answer her question instead asking one of his own. “What are you thinking, Veronica?”

“If the door was locked and the locks weren’t tampered with, which doesn’t appear to be the case, and there are no broken windows?” She cast a hopeful glance at him and got the head shake she was expecting. “Then how did they get inside? Did Piz let them in?”

“Why would he?”

There were really only two answers to that question, he wanted to or he had to. “Where was he shot?”

“In the kitchen.”

Veronica took a deep breath and opened the front door. The coppery smell assailed her. She was pretty sure the pregnancy books didn’t have a chapter entitled, your sense of smell at a crime scene. She marched through the apartment, avoiding the kitchen, and threw open all the windows before returning to Wallace. “Do you really need to do this V?”

“I’ll be okay.” The front door opened directly into the living room. Two windows overlooking the parking lot were across from her. To her right was a brown suede overstuffed sofa still covered with pillows and a blanket. Hanging on the wall opposite the sofa was a flat panel television. Since she’d been home, there were many movie nights with Wallace. A large bowl of popcorn between them and their feet propped on the coffee table as they quoted their way through their favorite films. Veronica didn’t think she would be able to sit on the sofa again without thinking; *this is where Piz spent the last night of his life.*

She needed to get out of here. The kitchen was to the left off the living room. Before she could change her mind, she advanced on the kitchen and crossed through its open archway. Her steps faltered and she wrapped her arms around her body. There were bullet holes in the stainless steel fridge surrounded by blood and tissue. Her eyes dropped to the floor and the blood that had pooled along the base of the cabinets and dried there. Veronica turned away. It answered her question, but she needed the autopsy to be sure.
Veronica buried her face in Logan’s pillow. It was late by the time she got Wallace settled at her
dad’s house and she considered just spending the night there, but in the end, she couldn’t do it. She
gave up her room to Wallace, packed a suitcase and returned to Dick’s house. Staying there one
night would’ve turned into two and before she knew it Logan would be home and she’d still be
living with her dad. At least here she wouldn’t be tempted to stay too long.

She abandoned the bed and any thoughts of further sleep. There were things to do today including
her first prenatal visit and ultrasound. Somehow in the past two days she’d become resolute in her
decision to tell Logan about the baby sooner rather than later. She worried about it distracting him,
but there wasn’t any other way. Three months more of phone conversations and emails and Skype
sessions without her saying a word, would be three months of lying to him. Not a great way to
rebuild their relationship and work on their communication skills.

Veronica showered and dressed, but Dick stopped her on her way out the front door. “What, no
breakfast Ronnie?”

“I’m not really in the mood for ketchup packets and beer, Dick.”

“It’s the breakfast of champions. No? Okay how about eggs and toast with fresh fruit and yogurt?”
The loud grumble of her stomach gave her away. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

She followed him into the kitchen. “I wasn’t aware you even knew what a supermarket was, let
alone how to find one.”

“That’s what the help is for.”

“And you haven’t blown through your trust fund how exactly?” A plate with a perfectly cooked
omelet waited for her along with a side plate of toast, a bowl of fresh cut fruit and a container of
Greek yogurt. “Did you cook this?”

“I’m a man of many hidden talents. If you ever get tired of Logan I’ll show you a few others.”

Her first bite of omelet was amazing, he’d stuffed it with fresh spinach, mushrooms and gruyère and
she was halfway through when she noticed he wasn’t eating anything. “No breakfast for you?”

“You just ate my breakfast.”

“I’m sorry, I thought…”

“Kidding, Ronnie. You need to learn to take a joke.” He pulled another plate from the oven’s
warming drawer and leaned against the counter to eat. “So tonight you may want to amscray. I’m
having an open house beach party and you know Dick can go all night.”

“Are Frankie and Annette coming to Beach Blanket Bimbo?”

“Sure, it’s an open house Ronnie anyone can come.”

Veronica shook her head. “Never mind Dick, I’ll make myself scarce.” She finished the last bite of
omelet and a few mouthfuls of fruit. “Uh, thanks for breakfast, it was delicious.”

“Don’t mention it.” He tossed the words over his shoulder as he strolled from the kitchen. She rinsed
off their dishes and placed them in the dishwasher.

It was a day ordered from central casting as “typical, Southern California” with a bright sun and cloudless sky. Her doctor’s office wasn’t far from the beach and there was a gourmet food shop between the two, which offered a bruschetta trio platter for lunch that was without comparison. Maybe she could picnic and work at the beach this afternoon. Veronica chuckled. She’d just finished breakfast and already she was salivating at the idea of blue crab and herb remoulade on crunchy French baguette.

She used her phone to email Logan from the waiting room. Skype date night? Email me with a date and time and I’ll make sure I’m available- very available. Might even wear something sexy!

The visit was longer than the wait. One extensive health history Q&A, followed by a detailed (on her side) family medical history and an uncomfortable pelvic exam later they got to the good part. Veronica was transfixed by the image on the 3D ultrasound and she experienced a sharp stab of longing for Logan. “Can you print that for me?”

“Already done.” Dr. Villella called it a Nuchal Translucency scan and said it didn’t indicate any chromosomal abnormalities. She pointed out the nasal bone, and then found the heartbeat. After adjusting some knobs on the machine, the sound of the heartbeat filled the room. “I’ll make a recording of this for you too.”

When the image disappeared from the screen, she was disappointed. Veronica knew she could spend the entire day staring at the baby and she had a feeling the ultrasound picture was going to be slightly worn by the time she mailed it to Logan.

Dr. Villella made some notes in her chart and gave her a due date of April 6th. Then she gave her a prescription for prenatal vitamins, plus some pamphlets about eating well, foods to avoid and weight gain. There was also a list of symptoms she shouldn’t ignore. Finally she had the nurse come in to take blood and collect a urine sample.

After all the poking and prodding, Veronica decided she deserved the work at the beach afternoon she envisioned. The gourmet food store was exactly where she remembered it. It was a short walk to the beach from the store so she left Logan’s car in the lot. While she ate, she tried reading the information the doctor gave her, but her eyes kept wandering to the ultrasound pictures. It was still too early to know the sex of the baby and she wasn’t sure she wanted to. Part of her wanted the big announcement in the delivery room and part of her wanted to know what color to paint the nursery.

She’d just polished off her bruschetta and stopped staring at the ultrasound picture, when Sheriff Lamb found her. “Veronica Mars.”

“Do I have a tracking chip implanted in me?” She patted the top of her head, and then held up her arms to visually inspect for said chip. “How very MI6 of you.”

“I need you to come with me.”

She bit back her ‘and I need to see your warrant’ retort. He didn’t start by arresting her, but if she pushed him he might. There was little doubt in her mind that he could get the District Attorney to issue a warrant by the time she reached her car. The D.A. was another elected puppet of the Board of Supervisors. It was probably better for her to play nice for the time being. Poor people arrested in Neptune went directly to jail, they did not collect two hundred dollars and they did not make bail on capital murder charges. “Should I follow you?”

His expression clearly said he didn’t trust her to follow him anywhere. “You’ll ride with me.”
Veronica let him lead her to his cruiser and put her in the back. He kept up a steady stream of ‘I knew it was only a matter of time until I had this pleasure’ type comments and she tuned him out. This interrogation was going to be interesting. It was round two in her competition of matching wits with Dan Lamb, too bad he was still ill-equipped to play.

They went to his office. It was housed on a different floor than his brother’s old office and it looked very different. Gone was the wood paneling and warm earth tones, replaced by cool greens and a better view. A battered bulletin board hanging by the door appeared to have weathered both Lambs. One of the exposed corners of paper looked like Duncan Kane’s old wanted poster and a large map titled Incorporation of Neptune reminded her of Woody Goodman. Was this board an ‘Ode to Past Failures?’ If she flipped through the tacked pages would she also find a picture of Abel Koontz and Weevil’s arrest record for credit card fraud?

“Did I forget to pay a parking ticket? Was there a special permit required to eat lunch at the beach?”

“Where were you Thursday between six and nine in the morning?”

“Why?”

“I have a witness says he saw you outside the apartment where your boyfriend got shot.”

My car was outside and he’s my ex-boyfriend. So, Charlie Gallagher, a/k/a Mr. Misanthrope already repeated his story to the Sheriff. Now one more time for the press and the Court and maybe he could get his money. Veronica remained silent and waited. Silence unsettled some people and they felt the need to fill it. She was hoping Lamb was in love with sound of his own voice and would fill the silence with, what she liked to call, clues.

“We also have your prints and DNA in the apartment.”

Dan Lamb, genius detective strikes again. She tapped her fingers against the arm of her chair. This was turning into a waste of her afternoon. She wasn’t going to say anything without an attorney present. If there was one thing law school taught me, I’d rather look guilty at the mall than look innocent in prison, or did I learn that from Chris Rock?

“And here’s something interesting.” Veronica didn’t give any indication that she heard him. She continued to feign bored and blasé. “Stosh Piznarski had a quarter of a million dollar life insurance policy with you as beneficiary.” He sneered. “That’s probably a lot more than you’re making as a P.I., right?”

“I’d like to say this has been fun, but you know, it hasn’t. Am I free to go now?” It was a push and she waited to see if he would shove back. If this was all the evidence he had so far, he would let her go. If there was something more, something big, he would move to make an arrest.

“Don’t leave town.”

Veronica tilted her head. “Do you look up cop clichés online, or do they just come to you naturally?” She left without waiting for a response.

Logan’s car was back at the beach. With Wallace at work and her dad still unable to drive, her options for getting there were limited to Dick, Mac, or a cab. She called Mac. “Can you come pick me up?”

“Should I add chauffeur to my job description too?”

“If you want, you can put chief in front of it. Aren’t you glad you left Kane Software? Now you’re
like the rest of America, overworked and underpaid.”

“Where are you?”

“The Sheriff’s Department. Actually, forget coming to get me, I’ll just take a cab, or I’ll walk.” Veronica started walking in the direction of the beach. It was another of those helpful pamphlets from the doctor, *The Importance of Exercise during Your Pregnancy.*

“I was only kidding, I'll come get you.”

“I know, but I have bigger more important things for you to do. First, is there a way for you to trace Piz’s laptop with the voodoo that you do so well? Maybe if you can track it, we can find where he was staying?”

“Doubtful. First, I would need it to be on and the likelihood that he left it plugged in and running somewhere just so I could find him…moving on.”

“Can you get his emails? Go back six months, incoming and outgoing. Oh, and any private messages on Facebook. Plus can you see if he had a cloud account?”

“You want me to get the launch codes for the nuclear missiles and find out who really shot JFK too?”

“If you could throw that in, sure. And one last thing, apparently Piz took out a life insurance policy for himself and he named me the beneficiary to the tune of 250k. Could you be a peach and see what that’s all about?”

Mac whistled. “Is that why you were at the Sheriff’s? Did Lamb want to know about the policy?”

“One of the reasons.” Veronica ended the call with Mac as she arrived at the beach. From her previous incarnation as a private investigator, she remembered the locations of plenty of sleazy short-stay motels, but they usually rented by the hour. Piz would’ve stayed in a place a little a more upscale. She used her phone to Google hotels in Neptune and got over 100 pages of results. She would be twelve years into her life sentence before she ever found Piz’s hotel room.

She logged into her special super-sleuth search engine, which as far as she was concerned was a way better name than Accurint, and looked up Parker Lee. There were multiple listings across the United States, but only two in California and one in Parker’s hometown of Denver. Veronica compared the social security number for the Denver Parker against the two California listings and one was a match. She purchased the comprehensive report and read through the information until she reached the possible cell number. As soon as she logged off the site, she made herself dial Parker’s phone number. *Please let it be voice mail, please let it be voice mail.*

“Hello?” It was still the same chipper, upbeat Parker.

“Parker? I don’t know if you remember me, this is Veronica Mars from Hearst?” *Please, how could she forget you Veronica? Miss-failed-to-stop-her-rape.*

“I remember.”

Veronica winced. “Are you busy this afternoon? Maybe we could meet for dinner?” *A meal, Veronica? Do you really want to spend that long with Parker? “I could meet you in say an hour?”

“You call me out of the blue like we’re friends and ask if I want to get dinner? What do you want Veronica? You must want something, you always want something.”
Ouch. “I wanted to talk to you about Piz. I met with Cara Murphy and she told me you recommended Piz for a job with her radio program?”

“I did.”

“I didn’t really want to have this conversation over the phone, are you sure we can’t meet? I can come to you?”

“I’ll meet you in the lounge at Trulucks in La Jolla in an hour.”

Trulucks was a little pricier than she planned, but at least she knew where it was. Veronica pointed the car in the right direction and contemplated the best way to deal with Parker. There seemed to be way more animosity than she was expecting. Sure she didn’t stop the rape in progress, but she did catch the rapist. Plus she and Parker had moved beyond that into a quasi-friendship right around the time Parker began dating Logan. In fact that was the last time she saw Parker before transferring out of Hearst, outside Logan’s suite at the Neptune Grand. Veronica remembered that she was upset, but Veronica assumed she was upset with Logan, not her. Who wasn’t upset with Logan that day? As much as she tried to figure the reason for the coldness, it eluded her.

She availed herself of the valet service at the restaurant and went in search of Parker in the Stone Crab Lounge. She almost didn’t recognize her at first. Parker’s former blonde locks were now a warm shade of auburn cut into a short sleek bob. Other than that she remained unchanged. The past nine years were very kind to her. There didn’t appear to be any signs of aging at all. It was like walking back into her past. “Hi, Parker.”

“Veronica.”

She slid into the seat opposite Parker and a waiter appeared at her side as if conjured by a magic spell. He presented her two separate menus, one for drinks and the other for food, then waited while she perused the drink menu. Five star restaurants were like a foreign, exotic country. She passed the menu back to him. “Ginger ale please.”

Parker tapped the rim of her martini glass. “I’ll have another of these.” Once the waiter was gone, Parker drained her glass. “I’m sorry I was short on the phone with you.” She barked a short, mirthless laugh. “You think you’re over something and then, bam, a reminder of it and you’re back where you used to be. Not that I’m not over it, it was so long ago and it wasn’t like we were going to get married and have babies, right? I mean I suppose we could have, it’s not unrealistic to settle down and marry someone you meet in college. But we were both so young and well, you know.”

The only thing Veronica knew was that Parker still rambled when she was nervous, or excited and quite possibly that she’d had one too many martinis. Otherwise, she was at a complete loss as to what Parker was going on about. Fortunately, the waiter arrived with their drinks buying Veronica time to think of her response.

No worry, because Parker picked up the conversation without missing a beat. “Have you seen Logan? I heard after graduation he went to the Navy Aviation Officer Candidate School in Rhode Island? Is he stationed in San Diego?”

No frackin’ way. Please tell me she’s not still hung up on Logan. “He’s a Navy pilot stationed in San Diego and right now he’s on deployment.” Veronica took a long sip of her ginger ale.

“I’m happy he turned his life around. You’re the reason we broke up you know? He wasn’t over you and well, I couldn’t compete with that. Sometimes I don’t think he ever actually saw me. He had this way of looking through me like I wasn’t even there. He just wasn’t completely present. I always felt
there was a part of him missing. I guess that’s the part that was with you. But anyway, when you called it dredged up all those old, hurt feelings and as soon as we hung up, I realized how childish and silly I was being.”

“I’m glad you agreed to meet me.”

“Me too.” A brief pause. “What about Mac and Wallace do you keep in touch with them? I haven’t heard from either of them in years. Mac and I stayed in touch for a while, but then real life just got in the way. I moved back to Denver after college until just this past spring.”

“What about you and Piz? You two stayed in touch?”

“We’ve been Facebook friends for years, exchanging emails, but I hadn’t actually talked to him until he asked me about Cara. He remembered that Cara and I were friends so when he found out she was the content coordinator of this new radio show; he called me and asked if I could help him out. But don’t you know all of this all ready? Aren’t you two dating? I assumed that’s why you were here in California, that you came back out here with Piz?”

“Not exactly.” Roughly translated meant, no I know none of this. She had no idea that Piz was “friends” with Parker on Facebook or anywhere else. Did he mention it to her and she just didn’t remember? Was that possible? Maybe my relationship with Piz was exactly what Parker just described about her relationship with Logan. Did she see Piz; was she completely present in their relationship? The honest answer to those questions was probably no. “Piz and I broke up. I came back to Neptune to help Logan with something.”

“The Bonnie Deville murder, of course! I read about it as did most of the world. You were the investigator who helped clear him?”

“One and the same.”

“Poor Piz. That must’ve broken his heart. He talked about you in his emails. Just generic stuff about your lives in New York and you finishing law school; so are you a lawyer now?”

“No I’m working as an investigator with my father, which brings me to the reason I called you. Piz was killed Parker, someone killed him.”

The color drained from her face and for the first time since Veronica sat down, Parker remained silent. Their waiter chose this conversational lull to inquire about their food choices. Veronica wanted to order the warm goat cheese and peppadew salad, but for some reason goat cheese stood out in her mind as one of the 'foods to avoid when pregnant.' She settled for the smoked salmon flatbread and sweet potato fries. Parker chose the goat cheese.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know yet; I was hoping you could help me. Have you spoken to Piz at all since he arrived in Neptune?”

“He called me after his interview with Cara, to thank me for setting it up. He was in California then.”

“Do you remember where he was staying?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think he told me. All he said was that he’d gotten the job on a trial basis. He was going back to New York to give notice at his job, and he’d be back in a couple of weeks to start work on his story. He wanted to take me out to dinner to thank me.”
“Did he talk about the story at all?”

“You know, he did. He said it had something to do with a deputy that was killed. Max, maybe?”

“Sack?”

“Yes, that was it.”
“Guess who’s got two thumbs and can start driving again?” Keith popped his thumbs up and pointed them at his chest. “This guy.”

Veronica hid a smile. “It’s not that I don’t believe you, but…” She glanced at the doctor for confirmation.

Dr. Albers nodded. “Unless he’s taken his pain medication, he can drive and he can increase his hours at work. Light duty, for a few hours a day and no more than three days a week.”

“I’ll make sure he doesn’t overexert himself.”

Keith frowned at her and Veronica stuck her tongue out at him. “That’s very mature.”

“The ‘guess who has two thumbs’ kind of mature? Or the wise beyond my years mature?” She wrapped her arm through his. “Let’s take this daddy, daughter act and hit the road.”

They bid their farewells to Dr. Albers and left his office. “You know how my doctor’s appointment went, are you going to tell me about yours?”

Veronica almost asked how he knew, but then remembered they shared a desk and a desk calendar. “I got to hear the baby’s heartbeat.” At the sight of Keith’s smile, she asked, “What?”

“Your voice got all soft when you said that and your expression? Wonder and amazement, like when you were little and still believed in Santa Claus.”

“Come on, I never believed in Santa Claus.”

“Sure you did, back when you were five going on thirty. There was a week or two where I distinctly remember you writing a letter to the North Pole and baking cookies for the elves.”

“Are you sure that wasn’t you?”

He conceded. “Maybe.”

Veronica’s phone ‘pinged’ announcing a new email. Skype date. Late tonight? Eleven your time. Wear anything or nothing, I’m easy. Love, L. She smiled at the screen, and then slipped the phone back in her bag. “I’m going to tell Logan tonight.”

“Do you know how you’re going to do it?”

“Haven’t a clue.” She kept practicing the moment in her head. There was the blunt, I’m pregnant; the coy, you’re going to need to schedule leave time in April, paternity leave; and, the cute, taping the ultrasound in front of the camera so it would be the first thing he saw. They all seemed like good ideas for about a minute and then she changed her mind. What she wanted was something uniquely them, something memorable and something that wouldn’t freak him out too much. Good luck with all that, Veronica.

“Can I give you some advice without starting another fight?”

“You’re asking a hormonal, pregnant woman to promise to not get upset? What kind of drugs did the doctor give you back there?”

CHAPTER EIGHT
“I just don’t want you to be disappointed when you tell Logan. The news might make him a little anxious, a little worried. You’ve had some time to think about it and get used to the idea. This is all new for him.”

“So you’re saying no over-the-moon, jumping for joy reaction?”

“I’m just saying let him have his reaction, whatever it might be, without you reading too much into it.”

“It’s like you don’t know me at all.” Veronica pulled up in front of the house. Keith climbed from the car. He was still moving slower than usual, but she was happy to see his progress. Each day there was marked improvement on the path to his old self. “I love you, Dad.”

“I love you too and don’t worry, it will be fine.”

She waited until he was safely in the house before pulling away from the curb. Last night after leaving Parker, she’d taken a drive along the coast to think about the case. The news about Piz investigating Sacks’ death was both disconcerting and logical. The only things Piz really knew about Neptune were the things he’d heard from her. What did she talk about? The rich getting away with murder, literally, and the corruption within the Sheriff’s Department.

Need a story about corruption in order to land your big job? Why not use the headline hit-and-run accident of a Neptune deputy and imply there was more to the story than what was being reported. It was a great pitch because it was true. No one was investigating the “accident” as all the news media were calling it. There was not one hint of it being murder anywhere in the town of Neptune except in her father’s living room.

This morning on their way to his doctor’s appointment, she’d asked him point blank what his late night meeting with Sacks was about and he’d tried to change the subject. When she pressed him on it, he’d bluntly told her it was his case and he didn’t want her anywhere near it. It was very familiar territory for the two of them. Him wanting her to stay far away from anything he considered too dangerous and her actively defying his requests. Just like old times.

Veronica stopped to get Mac an afternoon coffee fix and then headed to the office. Mac’s back was to the door, her attention focused on the computer screens. “How did your Dad’s doctor appointment go?”

“How do you always know it’s me?”

“It’s our psychic link.” She turned away from the computer and took the latte Veronica offered.

“Oh, then what am I thinking now?”

Mac closed her eyes and place two fingers against her temple. “You are thinking, I wonder if Mac was able to get all of Piz’s emails and find out about the life insurance policy.”

“Wow, you are good.” Mac placed her hand on a stack of papers thicker than War and Peace. “Are those just his emails?”

“Yes and I’ve already gotten rid of all the spam… you’re welcome.” She wrote something on a Post-It and attached it to the top of the pile. “Name and phone number for the insurance company. Remember the Primerican Life automatic withdrawal on his bank account? It was the premium payment for this policy.”

Veronica glanced at the note, the name Chris Holley and a phone number. “Will he talk to me?”
“To be fair, I didn’t find him, he found you. He’s the insurance investigator handling the claim for Primerican.”

“Claim? I thought the beneficiary of the policy needed to file the claim?”

Mac shrugged. “He said Piz’s mother called the company to report his death and get whatever claim paperwork she needed. I gather she thinks she’s the beneficiary of the policy.”

“Anything else?”

“It was a CIA sharpshooter on the grassy knoll and the launch code is 3, that’s it just 3. They needed to keep it simple for certain presidents.”

“Makes total sense.” Veronica picked up the novel that comprised Piz’s emails. “Guess who I saw last night? Parker. She said to say hello and to let you know she’s back in California.”

“You talked to her about Piz?”

Veronica nodded. “She didn’t really have anything new to add, but she did say he called her a few weeks back. Do you think you could get her phone records?”

“I could…” Mac’s reluctance was evident in her tone, but she turned back to the computer and pulled up a site with the familiar AT&T logo in the corner. “Can we say invasion of privacy?”

“We can say it; it’s just not very helpful.”

In her office, Veronica retrieved both Parker’s home number and cell and buzzed Mac with the information. Then she scrolled through her contacts and found the number for the Ombudsman. This Navy stuff was all very new to her and more than a little overwhelming. There were support groups and chat rooms for Navy Wives, Navy Moms, and Navy Girlfriends. You could Google every question that popped into your head. Sometimes it was helpful and sometimes it scared the shit out of her. Her recent “how to tell your deployed spouse/boyfriend you are pregnant” search yielded pages and pages of advice. The one thread she found with helpful suggestions recommended that not only should you tell the Dad-to-Be, but also the Navy at large. Just in case. Those three words set off an entirely different search. You should just throw your computer into the Pacific, Veronica.

An older woman answered the phone on the third ring with a very chipper hello, which made Veronica smile. “Hi, I’m calling for Dottie, this is--”

“Veronica Mars, Logan’s fiancée.”

Identifying what in that greeting surprised her most – being identified by name, her familiarity with Logan, or the word fiancée – was a tough call. Please Veronica, you know it’s the fiancée part. She shrugged it off, probably Logan’s way of getting her access to more help and information.

Dottie chuckled. “The caller ID gave you away, Mars Investigations, Veronica Mars, but I had you going for a minute there didn’t I?”

“You certainly did.”

“My son serves with Logan and he mentioned you might be calling. How can I help you, Veronica?”

That was a nice twist, an offer of help. “I need to find a place to live and I’d really like a house, with a yard.” Once she spoke the words out loud, an image of her and Logan playing in the yard with
their baby popped into her head and she couldn’t dislodge it. Veronica gave her some ideas of size, location, and price.

“Great. I’ll make some calls and email you.”

Veronica gave her the email address. Now that the easy part was over, she was at a loss.

“Is there something else you need?”

“I’m pregnant.”

“Congratulations! I’m so happy for you both. Have you told Logan yet?”

It was nice to hear someone be happy for them. “I don’t know how much you know about Logan’s past, but there was this website…” She didn’t want to tell Dottie too much of Logan’s history, because it wasn’t her story to tell. At the same time, she wanted to make sure he received whatever support he might need while he worked through his fears about fatherhood and the ghost of Aaron Echolls.

“I was a Navy wife for thirty years and I’m the mother of three boys. I often wonder how I did all that without the Internet and then I think I’m glad, because it’s all too much information. Do yourself a favor and stay offline for a while.”

“I will, but in the meantime can you send the news up the chain of command? My plan is to tell Logan tonight and I’m not sure how he’s going to handle the news.”

“Don’t you worry; the Navy takes care of its own, including you and your little one.”

“Thanks.” They said their goodbyes and Veronica disconnected the call. Logan’s commanding officer made a perfect choice when he picked Dottie for her role as Ombudsman. Talking to her made Veronica feel better, and she regretted not calling sooner. It was nice to share her worries with someone who understood them.

She looked at the stack of Piz emails and wondered if she could ask the Navy to help her with those too. Mac put them in order with the most recent on top and oldest on bottom. As promised, they went back a little more than the six months she wanted. Veronica was reluctant to read them and Mac’s “invasion of privacy” comment knocked around her brain. It was hard to know where the line was. When she was a teenager, it was easier to skirt around some of the bigger moral issues. Her pursuit of the truth and doing the right thing often meant an ‘ends justify the means’ attitude, which was harder to maintain as an adult.

This was Piz’s personal life and not intended for public consumption. Plus she wasn’t really sure she wanted to read about herself and the end of their relationship from his point of view. As a delay tactic, she sat on the floor and sorted them by person.

Some of the piles were pretty slim, quick emails with colleagues about work, or friends confirming plans to get together. The emails with his mom were a little thicker. Veronica read a few of those and guessed they were typical mom, child emails. Reminders about such and such birthday, making sure that he was doing okay, and asking about work. She came across one dated right before she left for Neptune and it ended with “send our love to Veronica and tell her we can’t wait to meet her.” She experienced a slight pang of guilt.

The two biggest piles were Wallace, no surprise, and Parker, big surprise. Parker’s comment of “exchanging emails” was so casual; in her mind, Veronica had inserted the word occasionally before it. This was more than an “occasional” correspondence. This was frequent, consistent, on a regular
Veronica systematically picked up each pile and double checked the dates. Each pile was the same, lots of emails at first, but then less and less the closer the date got to the end of July. Then once he was in Neptune there was hardly any correspondence at all. This was true for everybody in his life, except Parker. Her pile was the exact reverse. Few emails at first, but then they started to pick up in length and frequency the closer it got to the 28th and they continued to grow in size during his stay in Neptune.

Veronica clipped the other stacks of emails together and put them all in the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet, with Wallace’s emails on top. She didn’t plan on reading those until she talked to her BFF first. *Curiosity be damned.*

She took the pile of Parker emails back to her desk and settled in for some “light” reading. The oldest ones were generic, one or two sentences; Parker: *heard your show on the radio here in Denver!* Piz: *loved those vacation photos you posted of France.* Blah, blah, blah, boring, boring, boring. Veronica barely glanced at them until she was close to the end of June. The date of the email was shortly after their breakup and a few days after the accident that killed Sacks and injured her dad.

*Dear Parker, I know this is out of the blue, but I seem to remember you being friends with a girl we went to Hearst with, Cara Murphy? She is the content coordinator of a new radio program called, Reveal, which is based there in California and I am interested in interviewing for a job with them. Are you still in touch with her? If so, is there any chance you could speak to her for me? Thanks,* *Piz.*

*Dear Piz,*

*You don’t remember Cara Murphy? She was in Dr. Kinny’s Intro to Sociology. Didn’t you take that class with Logan? Or maybe it was Wallace? Either way, you’re in luck, unlike the rest of my crowd from those days, I am still in touch with Cara. Forward me your resume and I will make sure it gets to her.*

*Love, Parker.*

Even in the email, Parker sounded a little bitter about how things ended with everyone. Veronica never gave much thought to what happened at Hearst after she left. She vaguely recalled Mac telling her that at some point Parker went back to Denver. It wasn’t immediately after Veronica left, that much she was sure of, but she couldn’t remember how long Parker stayed before returning home.

She turned her attention back to the emails. It was interesting to her that Piz started looking for the job with Reveal so soon after their breakup. Did this mean that he was thinking about changing jobs before the breakup or was he scrambling for a job in California so he could come after her?

The next few emails were the sending of the resume, arranging the interview, and the promise of a thank you dinner. Again, from her conversation with Parker, Veronica assumed it was a dinner that never took place. Yet lo and behold an email told a different tale.

*Dear Piz,*
Thanks for dinner. It was a lovely gesture and completely unnecessary. I am so excited that you will be moving back to sunny California. Is Veronica happy to be coming home? I’m sure she misses her Dad. Can’t wait to see you both soon.

Love, Parker.

Hmm, that was interesting. Lots of correspondence, maybe a few phone calls, and an entire dinner date yet no mention to Parker that she was already in California or that they weren’t together anymore. It took awhile for Piz to respond to that email and it was the day before he flew out to Neptune.

Dear Parker,

I am coming to California alone. Veronica is already out there. She went to help Logan and decided to stay. Needless to say things aren’t going well for us right now. Hopefully that will change once we’re in the same state again. Thanks for your help. Dinner was totally necessary.

Talk soon, Piz.

Well that answers your question, Veronica. Piz was definitely coming to Neptune to win you back. Yet when he got here, he didn’t let me know. Why? What happened between this email and his arrival to change his mind?

She marked her place with a Post-It note and clipped the Parker emails with a large binder clip before shoving them in her bag. It was time to get out of here. She needed something to eat and she needed to get ready for tonight’s “date” with Logan. Plus if she didn’t get home before Dick disappeared for his night of, whatever Dick did at night, she would be locked out of the house. Maybe it was time to ask him for a key.

“I’m heading out, got a hot date with some emails and dinner. Hey do you know of a toy store that’s close?” Mac raised an eyebrow and gave her a suggestive smirk. “What are you channeling Dick? Not that kind of toy store.”

“Well, Logan has been gone for awhile.”

“Never mind pervert.”

The toy store was a dumb idea anyway. She was going to buy an ‘I love you beary much’ teddy bear and use it as a prop in case she stumbled for words, but this wasn’t that type of conversation. It would be so much easier if he was here. Well, you know that’s not true.

Wonderful aromas emanating from the kitchen led Veronica in that direction. A woman she didn’t recognize was ladling homemade Paella onto two dinner plates. In her late fifties with graying hair, she was wearing a uniform that reminded Veronica of a classic television sitcom. Leave it to Dick to have his maid dress like Alice from the Brady Bunch. “Richard isn’t home so he asked me to wait for you. Are you hungry?” She didn’t wait for an answer; she set one plate on the table and put the other in the oven.

“This smells amazing.” Veronica grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and collected silverware
before sitting down. “I’m Veronica by the way.”

“It is nice to meet you Veronica. I’m Rosa.”

“Thank you for dinner Rosa and for waiting for me.”

“Richard said he will be home late and you shouldn’t wait up for him.” She picked up her purse and said goodnight.

Once she was gone, Veronica devoured the Paella and contemplated eating Dick’s share too. She’d missed lunch, which was not a smart thing to do. The brochure from the doctor talked about regular, small meals and eating five times a day– skipping meals, not recommended.

She needed to kill time until her date with Logan, but she couldn’t seem to concentrate on anything. She tried to pick up the Parker emails, but her thoughts kept returning to her impending conversation with Logan. The television didn’t help, she found herself mindlessly clicking through channels noticing shows about babies, shows with babies, commercials for baby products or toys. By the time eleven rolled around, she was a bundle of nerves.

Her computer was on and Skype was up and running. The alert for the incoming call made her jump. Veronica answered the call and Logan’s face filled her screen. From his expectant look, she knew he didn’t see her yet. A moment later a wide grin crossed his face. “Hey, you.”

It was so good to see him. His hair was a little longer than last time, which meant he was due for a cut and he looked tired. “I mailed you a present today.”

“Well it can’t be you since you’re still in Neptune. Those naked photos we discussed?”

“In your dreams.”

“Exactly.” He gave her that sexy little half smile. “Is it something good?”

“I think it is.” She took a deep breath. “It’s a picture of a baby, our baby. I’m pregnant, Logan.”

“A baby? God, Veronica.” Fear etched itself into his features and filled his eyes. He reached for the computer screen. “I want to touch you.” His eyes closed and he hung his head.

“Logan?”

When he raised his face, tears were streaming down his cheeks. “I don’t deserve you, or this. What if I screw it all up? I can’t lose you or our baby.” His eyes found and connected with hers. “Are you happy?”

She knew his question went deeper than are you happy we’re having a baby. It was are you happy with your choice to be here. Are you happy with us? With me? He was looking for assurances- a promise. Faith. “I’m very happy.”

“Have you been to the doctor? Is everything okay? How do you feel?”

“I went to the doctor yesterday.” She held the ultrasound up to the camera. His expression made her breath catch. The only word to describe it was awe.

“She looks just like her mother, tiny, petite, and right now, a little fuzzy.”

“She?”
“Most definitely.”
CHAPTER NINE

There was an email from Dottie waiting for her with listings for houses. She was better than a real estate agent. The houses were a compromise between an 09er, son of a movie star and a have to work for a living, regular girl. Of course they were still way beyond anything she could ever afford on her own. That is unless she passed the bar and went to work for a white-shoe law firm. Even then, million dollar homes near the beach would be a long way into her future.

Logan didn’t care. She told him last night that Dottie was going to help her find a house for them and he thought it was a great idea. When she offered to email him pictures and addresses so he could have some input, he cut her off, “Veronica I would live in a box if you and the baby were there.” Then he promised to get in touch with his lawyer to arrange for a Power of Attorney, which would allow her access to his money to “buy whatever you want.” Lucky for him what she wanted was a reasonable house in both size and price.

Most of the listings were near Neptune, some closer to it and some closer to the base, but there were only two listings in Neptune itself. Veronica was hesitant to even click on those links. It was possible to grow up here and be a good human being, but was it possible to grow up here and remain unscathed? Was Neptune really the place she wanted to raise her child? She deleted the two links and concentrated on the areas around Neptune.

Once she’d whittled down the list to a manageable ten, she emailed her choices back to Dottie with profuse thanks for her help. She’d already volunteered to not only arrange viewings with the real estate agents, but also to go see the houses with Veronica. She didn’t want to impose on Dottie’s generosity, but Veronica was looking forward to having the company. It would be nice to have an experienced someone with her. Someone she could talk to about which room would make a good nursery and if the school district was okay.

Not for the first time since finding out she was pregnant, Veronica thought of her own mother. She kept telling herself it was a natural reaction to think about your mother when you were about to become one. It was probably unfair to compare Lianne to Dottie, but she couldn’t see Lianne committing to this kind of time.

Actually Veronica was surprised at herself. The baby was revealing a soft side to her she wasn’t expecting. The lets doodle baby names and ooh over tiny clothes and research safe car seats side. Okay the last one was a little bit like her. She shut her laptop and went in search of Mac.

“If you were me and you wanted the case file and autopsy reports on Piz, what would you do?”

“You could dupe Lamb into think you’re Martina Vasquez?”

She shook her head. “Even Lamb couldn’t be dumb enough to fall for that again.”

Mac’s look said Veronica was underestimating the idiocy that was Dan Lamb. “Or you could cozy up to our former classmate Norris.”

It took her a minute to place the name. “Norris Clayton? He works for the Sheriff’s Department?”

“According to the Neptune Navigator’s, ‘Where Are They Now’ feature.” Veronica just stared at her. “What? Sometimes Wallace leaves the paper on his coffee table.”

She let the explanation slide. “Norris as a deputy, I can see it, but is he a good witch or a bad witch?”
“He hasn’t dropped a house on anybody yet.”

“Not that you know of.” She directed a meaningful stare at the computer. “And if YOU wanted the case file and autopsy reports?”

Mac followed her gaze to the computer and smiled. “If I wanted them? That’s easy, I would ask you.”

Veronica sighed. “All right then. Wish me luck.”

One time bully and antique weapons collector, Norris Clayton, was now a Balboa County Deputy. When she investigated him in high school she found him to be a pretty decent person despite the incidents recorded in his permanent file. A person who also happened to have a crush on her, which came in handy back then, but in all likelihood wouldn’t help her now. With the level of corruption at the Sheriff’s Department was Norris still a good guy or was he a Lamb-in-training?

There was nobody still working here from back when her father held the office. Not that she missed many of the old faces, but at least with the old force there were one or two deputies you could count on to care about their job. This new department was in it for themselves. The lofty ideals of giving back to the community and wanting to make a difference were lost in the principles of power and cash. A uniformed officer was at the desk.

“I’m here to see Deputy Clayton?”

He leaned over the desk and leered at her, his eyes roaming up her legs, over her body and stopping at her chest. “Anything he can do to you, I can do better.”

If Logan was here, he’d punch him. Veronica considered doing the same. “Deputy Clayton?”

He shrugged. “Norris! Some chick is here to see you.” At the word “chick” Veronica was sorry she’d resisted the impulse to deck him.

“Veronica Mars.” His appearance hadn’t undergone many changes since high school. He was a little leaner, which made the high cheekbones and square jaw better defined. His head was shaved and he brandished a thin mustache over his lips. Lips, which were parted in a wide smile. Apparently he was happy to see her, one point in her favor.

“I was hoping to take you to lunch.”

He looked behind him like she could be talking to somebody else, then pointed to his chest. “Me? Veronica Mars wants to take me to lunch? Should I be worried?”

“Probably.”

“That’s what I thought. Just let me clock out.” Veronica wandered away from the desk and the lecherous perv who was still ogling her. She studied the rogue’s gallery of wanted posters, which read like a game of who shall we frame this week? Granted her opinion was slightly colored by the treatment of Weevil over the Celeste Kane shooting, but still, she couldn’t help wondering how many of these “wanted felons” were really guilty and how many of them were just in the way.

“Ready to go?”

“Where do you want to eat?”

Norris shrugged. “How do you feel about a food truck at the beach?”
“Relieved. I thought you might pick Addison since it was my treat.” Addison was Southern California’s only five star, five diamond restaurant in the Grand Del Mar hotel. It was the site of Lilly Kane’s Sweet Sixteen. Veronica frowned, where did that come from?

The food truck he led her to was the California Love Truck. He ordered steak tacos and something called the Cali Love burrito. She opted for the carnita fries; fries loaded with pork, guacamole, chipotle slaw and sour cream. They took their food to a nearby bench. The silence was not the good, companionable silence of two friends enjoying a meal together. It was the awkward and uncomfortable what are we supposed to talk about kind of silence. It reeked of a bad blind date.

“Okay so why did you really want to take me out to lunch? It obviously wasn’t to catch up and reminisce about old times.”

“I’m sure you know my ex-boyfriend, Stosh Piznarski, was murdered.”

“I might’ve heard a rumor or two to that effect.”

“I think I’m being set up for it.” Veronica waited for his reaction to her words. He wasn’t aghast at the idea of her being framed for the crime, either because he knew exactly what the Sheriff was capable of or because he was in on it.

“How do I know you didn’t do it?”

“You know me, we used to be…” She almost said friends, but that wasn’t true. They were never friends, they weren’t even acquaintances. Their relationship boiled down to him stopping a bully from picking on her once and her suspecting him of being a mad bomber. “I didn’t do it.”

“Then maybe you should hire yourself a good attorney. I’m sure Logan can afford one for you.”

Was the answer to her where are they now feature, dating Logan Echolls? “I want to see the case file and autopsy report.”

“And I want to keep my job.”

“Is that your final answer?”

He gave her a strange look and stood up. “Thanks for lunch.”

She watched him walk away. Her “cozying up” skills were clearly in need of work. The investigation felt stalled. What she needed was a new lead. If Piz was working on a story of corruption and his starting point was Sacks’ murder then she needed to start there too. Her father wouldn’t talk to her, but maybe her father wasn’t the only one Sacks confided in. She finished her lunch while contemplating what she knew about Sacks, which mounted to exactly…nothing. She threw away her lunch wrappings and walked back to the car.

A manila clasp envelope with her name scribbled across the front was propped in the driver’s seat. Veronica scanned the parking lot and the street beyond. There was a couple across the street in the middle of an animated conversation. A redhead in gym attire was talking on a cell and walking her dog. An elderly man sitting on a sidewalk bench was reading his newspaper. No one was paying any attention to her. She glanced up at the windows to the Sheriff’s station, which were empty.

Veronica pushed the thick envelope over and got in the car. If her guess was correct, she wanted to tear the envelope open and start reading immediately, but doing it in prime view of the police was probably a sure way to get Norris fired, or worse. Maybe her cozying up skills weren’t that rusty after all.
She achieved a land speed record on her drive back to the office. “From your excitement and lack of coffee for me, I take it your meeting was a success?”

Veronica waved the envelope in the air. “If this is what I think it is, we have achieved success.” She gave Mac a brief rundown on her lunch beach date. “I really didn’t think he was going to deliver the goods.”

“You haven’t opened it yet.”

“Okay Debbie Downer.” Pausing outside her office, she turned back to Mac. “Before I forget, could you get me as much information about Jerry Sacks as you can find? And while you’re at it, let’s take a closer look at everyone working at the Sheriff’s Department, especially their financials. I’ll pull the file on Lamb.”

There was already a complete package on Dan, Daniel Lamb, in her office. While she was trying to help clear Weevil, she had Mac dig up everything she could find on their illustrious sheriff, from banking and property records to tax returns. It was all very clean, almost too clean, and none of it helped Weevil, which didn’t mean it wouldn’t help her now. Veronica dug the file out of the cabinet and tossed it on her desk. If she turned up something while investigating Sacks it was possible she would see a connection in Lamb’s records that she missed previously.

She turned her attention to the mystery envelope. The thick sheaf of papers was hasty photocopies of the case file. Each page was slightly crooked and they didn’t appear to be in any logical order. Veronica doubted this was everything. Granted they were only in their second week of investigation, but a murder generates a lot of paper.

The first sheet was the case report, which indicated it was a homicide. The box “Victims of Crime” was checked and the special circumstances stated multiple GSWs head and back. Name: Piznarski, Stosh, a/k/a Piz. His vital statistics included all the usual: height, weight, hair and eye color. In the box labeled condition, were the two words, “facial trauma.” Veronica put down the file. It was all very cold and sterile. Piz’s death relegated to a case and crypt number. This was difficult reading and she was only on page one. She wanted to convince herself that there was no need to read the report, but while she may occasionally lie to someone else, there was a strict no lying to herself policy in place.

Place of death was listed as Wallace’s address and place of injury simply said, kitchen. The basic synopsis was, “decedent found by responding officer lying on kitchen floor with multiple gunshot wounds to head and back.” There was the word “back” again. It was the answer she sought when she decided she needed the file in the first place. She skipped ahead to the Investigator’s Report, specifically to the Body Exam section. A stellate contact gunshot wound to the back of the skull… sooting…stippling circumferential to sooting pattern. The word perforating stood out at her. A perforating head injury as opposed to a penetrating head injury is one where the bullets passed through the skull and exited the body; hence the bullet holes in the refrigerator.

If the killer forced their way into the apartment with the gun intending to shoot Piz, there was no reason for them to be in the kitchen. There was actually no reason, other than maybe concealment, to enter the apartment at all. Piz opens the door, killer shoots him, and flees. Instead they enter the apartment and Piz goes into the kitchen, which doesn’t make sense if you are being threatened by a stranger with a gun. There is no way you turn your back on someone pointing a gun at you. Now if someone you know and trusted stopped by to see you, maybe you offer them something to drink? Piz went to open the refrigerator; the killer comes up behind him, and shoots. Veronica played the scenario through a few different ways, but she still came back to Piz knowing his shooter.

The next few sheets were the initial incident report, investigator’s notes and witness statements.
Eleanor Richter was the neighbor who reported the shots. Her address placed her in the apartment directly above Wallace. She stated that she was still home because her alarm hadn’t gone off and she was running late otherwise she’d be at work already. When she heard the shots, three shots to be exact, she knew right away what they were and immediately called the police. No she didn’t look out the window and no, she didn’t see anything or anyone. She stayed in her apartment until the sheriff arrived.

A door to door canvas of the building revealed that no one else was home during the incident. *That’s convenient, without the one faulty alarm clock; there would have been no one around to call the police for hours.*

The next page was witness statements from the neighborhood canvas and right at the top of the page—Mr. Misanthrope. The name Charles “Charlie” Gallagher was circled in blue ink so she knew it was added after the photocopies were made along with a note in the side margin, which read: “look into him, gambling and drug problems - deep debt.”

Gambling and drug problems coupled with deep debt. In her time in Neptune gambling and drugs would lead her right to the Fitzpatricks. *Did anything ever change here? Logan said he’d live anywhere, I wonder how he’d feel about Timbuktu?*

Change. Her eyes rested on the Dan Lamb file. Weevil tried to change and look where that got him. Thanks to Lamb and the Balboa County District Attorney, he was facing charges ranging from assault with a deadly weapon to illegal possession of a firearm. They even charged him with resisting arrest. *Were they afraid he might bleed on them?*

She picked up her cell and scrolled through the contacts for Weevil’s number. Jade stood by him after his arrest, but once he started riding with the PCHers, she’d had a change of heart. She’d taken Valentina and gone to live with her mother. She claimed she understood his reasons, trying to get information to clear his name, but it didn’t mean she wanted that influence around her daughter. It broke Weevil’s heart and it made Veronica angry. Now though she wondered if she would do the same. Would she want to expose her three-year-old daughter to a biker gang?

“I was beginning to think you’d forgotten all about poor Weevil.”

“How could I? You’re the only reason I have street cred.”

“Never say those words again.”

“You mean I don’t?”

“Only if by street you meant Rodeo Drive.” A door closed and the background noise disappeared.

“What do you need Veronica?”

“Tell me about the Fitzpatricks, are they still in business?”

“Yeah, they’re still around, but after Liam went down for killing his brother, it’s mostly small stuff. What trouble are you looking to get into?”

“If I had a gambling problem and owed a lot of money who would I owe it to?”

“Playin’ the ponies again?”

“You know me, always looking for easy money.”

“Can’t you just stay home and bake cookies or knit something?” Veronica waited him out. “Nico
“And where would I find this fine upstanding citizen?”

“Remember where The Seventh Veil was? That’s his place now, Nicos.”

“Very original.”

“Might not be clever, but he’s mean. Don’t go there alone. I’m serious V.”

“Aww, are you worried about me?”

“That’s no on the knitting? I could use a scarf.”

“Christmas is coming.” Veronica glanced down at the papers on her desk. She’d written, Nico Benedetti, Seventh Veil, and the word mean. She’d underlined it twice. “Feel like going with me?”

There was a long pause. “He’s always there on Fridays. I’ll get you after work.”

“Thanks, Eli.”

“The things I do for you.”

His parting shot made her smile, but her good mood evaporated the second she returned to the case file. The last few pages Norris gave her were the forensic reports and evidence log. Fingerprints from the scene were what you would expect to find at Wallace’s apartment. His prints, hers, Piz, Mac, her dad, his brother Darrell, Scott Brown, identified in the report as, “teacher- Neptune High,” and Alicia. God, Wallace don’t you ever dust? The DNA mostly belonged to Wallace, but they also found DNA from Piz and as Lamb said, her DNA was found on a glass in the kitchen. A notation at the bottom of the report said, “still waiting on results from the sweater found at the SDCC.”

Veronica read the sentence twice. The SDCC was the San Diego Convention Center and the only connection she could make between this case and the convention center was her. Shit.
A key was waiting for her on the kitchen island along with a note from Dick, “Ronnie, going to TJ for the weekend.” She didn’t want to think about Dick in Tijuana for an entire weekend- all of Mexico could be in trouble. The Greek yogurt and fresh strawberries for breakfast left her unsatisfied. She fixed a bowl of Cheerios with bananas and made some toast too. *This is why your jeans don’t fit, Veronica.* She ignored the thought and slathered her toast with butter and jelly.

When the bell rang she considered ignoring it too, but a peek around the corner revealed Wallace and Mac standing at the glass door. She shoved the toast in her mouth and opened the door.

Wallace frowned at her. “You’re not dressed yet.”

“Am I supposed to be?”

“You’re taking us to the airport.”

Crap, she’d forgotten. “Gimme five minutes.” Did she really not own one pair of sweatpants? She pulled on the biggest pair of jeans she owned, left the button undone and covered it with one of Logan’s button-down shirts. Tiny and petite worked for crawling in cabinets to hide, but not for hiding baby weight. She was going to have to make time today for a wardrobe update. “Okay let’s hit the road, jack.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to come with us?”

Before Mac finished asking the question she was shaking her head. An extra night in Beaverton was not going to happen. To be honest, she didn’t want to go at all. She was already about as welcome as a nun in a strip club. “I’ll be there first thing in the morning. Tonight I have to see a man about a horse.” They exchanged the ‘Veronica’s crazy look’ they’d perfected through the years, which she pretended not to see. “Did you get a chance to call Parker?”

Mac nodded. “I spoke with her last night. She said she is going to fly up tomorrow morning too. Maybe you two can go together?”

And maybe pigs would fly and hell would freeze over. She caught sight of Mac’s expression in the rearview mirror. “You didn’t.”

“It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“So did bell bottoms and New Coke.” Two and half hours trapped on a plane next to Parker. Did she have time to buy a parachute while shopping for new clothes? “You didn’t talk to her about Logan did you?”

“Why would I?”

“No reason.” Despite Parker’s assertion to the contrary, Veronica didn’t believe she wasn’t bitter about Logan. Nine years later and she was still smarting from their breakup, which begged the question, why? While she and Logan talked about their years apart, two weeks wasn’t enough time to cover much ground, especially when they were busy with other things. Veronica smiled at the memory of ‘other things.’ They certainly didn’t talk about Parker. “When did Parker leave Hearst?”

Wallace shifted in his seat to look at Mac. “Middle of our sophomore year?”
“That sounds right. She went home for Christmas and didn’t come back.”

“I know her and Logan split up right before I left, but did they get back together after the summer?”

Both of her friends looked like they would rather be some place other than in the car with her. “I’m guessing by your silence and uncomfortable looks, the answer is yes?”

Mac caved first. “They got back together before the summer. They went to South America together.”

“I thought that surf trip was canceled?”

Wallace shrugged. “All we know is Dick, Logan, and Parker went to South America that summer and when they got back, Logan and Parker were together right up until she left for Christmas.”

“Yeah, what he said.”

The longer relationship helped put things in better perspective. It wasn’t unreasonable then for Parker to get ideas about a future with Logan after dating him for a year. It was, however, a little unreasonable to put the blame on Veronica for the breakup when she hadn’t been at Hearst for months at that point. She pulled up to the departure gates. Wallace got out of the car and Mac leaned over into the front seat. “You are going to come tomorrow right?”

“With bells on.” Even with the reassurance, Mac appeared doubtful. “I promise.”

Mac shut the car door, paused and turned back. Veronica was afraid she was going to ask for a blood oath to guaranty an appearance tomorrow. Instead she said, “I left that stuff on Sacks on your desk for you.”

“Thanks.” Once they disappeared into the airport, Veronica pulled away from the curb, but rather than heading to the office, she turned in the direction of the mall.

After three stores and multiple trips to the fitting rooms she was frustrated and ready to quit. Everything she tried on was too big in some places and too tight in others. Her cell phone rang, a picture of Logan in uniform appeared on the screen. “Was your spidey sense tingling?”

“I think we both know that’s not my super power.” He was in playful, seductive mode.

“Cocky much?”

“You’re getting warmer.”

Heat suffused her cheeks. “Well your super power has made it so none of my clothes fit.”

He chuckled. “You’re making this too easy.”

“Didn’t anyone tell you you’re supposed to let the easy ones go?”

“Oh, I always walk away from the easy ones, it’s the challenges I love.”

Veronica smiled. “Said the pot to the kettle.” She pushed the clothes off the dressing room bench and sat down. “I miss you.”

“When you say things like that I’m tempted to go AWOL. I have access to planes you know.” He sighed. “We’re almost halfway there.”

“Hey, why did you and Parker break up the second time?”
“I’ll take totally random questions for a hundred, Alex. Why are you asking me about Parker?”

“I saw her the other night and, well, she still seems rather bitter.”

“Please refer back to my earlier comment- easy ones, Logan walking away.” Veronica waited. “No? Okay, she was angry because she knew I still loved you and I would never feel the same about her.”

“That was the first time. What about the second time, just before Christmas?”

“It was the same reason. She was hinting about us getting serious and asking me to come to Denver with her for the break and I was a dick to her.”

“Not you.”

Logan ignored her commentary. “I told her I was never going to feel that way about her. Actually, it was more like, uh, I’ve been using you as a distraction to get over Veronica and it’s not working for me any longer, but hey thanks for playing, sorry there are no parting gifts.”

That solved her personal Parker mystery. “Nice.”

“What do you want me to say Veronica? You just disappeared without a word. You were the only person in my life that mattered to me, hell, you were my life and you were gone. I was messed up for a long time.”

_I was messed up for a long time- yeah, me too._ “I’m sorry Logan.”

“You don’t have to apologize. I wanted to be a better man for you Veronica and now I think I am. We’re here, together, we’re having a baby, and that’s all that matters to me.”

“To me too, Logan. I love you, and I’m glad we found our way back to each other.” She wiped at the tears cascading down her face. “And for the record I always thought you were a good man.”

“That makes one of us.” He fell silent. She thought she lost the connection until he asked, “How are you feeling?”

“Hungry. All the time.”

“And you’re getting fat, huh?”

“You did not just call me fat.”

“Hmm, I think I did and I can’t wait to see it, I’m sure you’re beautiful.”

“Remember you said that when I’m the size of a house and you don’t want to touch me.”

“I’m always going to want to touch you.” His voice dropped to a husky whisper. “In fact, if you have a few minutes I will tell you in great detail what I would like to do to you.”

Her pulse quickened. “A few minutes? Is that all it’s going to take?”

“I’m very good at what I do.” _Woof._

“Overconfident flyboy.”

“Scared?”
Veronica swallowed. “No, but I’m in a public fitting room.”

“I can work with that.”

“I’m hanging up now. I love you, stay safe.”

He laughed. “Chicken.”

Phone flirting with Logan was better than mood altering drugs. With a renewed vigor for shopping, she managed to piece together a few new outfits, even managing to find an outfit for the funeral tomorrow. Armed with some flattering shirts and cute empire-waist babydoll tops, she was ready to face the maternity section for jeans with stretch panels and maternity leggings.

Once her shopping spree was over, she headed back to the office for the information Mac left her on Jerry Sacks. Corruption was difficult to investigate. There were no crime scenes, and no eyewitnesses to interview. By nature it was a very hush-hush crime with no reason for anyone benefiting from the spoils to start blabbing about the scheme, but something made Jerry come forward. She wasn’t sure if it was just an attack of conscience or if he was afraid of imminent exposure. Veronica was rooting for imminent exposure because it would mean there was a mistake made somewhere along the corruption chain. A mistake she could find.

Mac was efficient and organized with her file on Sacks. Not that Veronica would expect anything less. Five years of tax returns, six months of bank statements, property records, and as an added bonus, she’d retrieved his personal emails going back three months prior to his death. Veronica started with his most recent tax return.

Your average California Sheriff’s Deputy made around fifty grand a year to start and, figuring in pay increases for years of service, the seventy thousand reported on Sacks’ income tax return was not unusual. She scanned his Schedule A, Itemized Deductions, and stopped short at the real estate taxes. A third of his salary, twenty five grand, was spent on his annual real estate taxes. Veronica whistled. That amount of money meant his house had to be valued for around two million dollars. *Pretty nice digs for a deputy without an 09er trust fund.* She skipped down a few lines to the home mortgage interest and found a big, fat zero. No mortgage interest meant no mortgage. So Jerry was living in a fully paid-off, two million dollar house.

She pulled out the file on Lamb to check his tax return. There were no real estate taxes or mortgage interest, because Lamb didn’t itemize, instead choosing to take the standard deduction. Veronica frowned. She was positive Lamb owned a house. Flipping through the file she found a copy of the real estate deed. In the consideration section of the deed was the amount of two hundred thousand dollars. On a first pass she could see why she missed it. Two hundred thousand dollars was a perfectly reasonable amount for Lamb to pay for his house. Thanks to her recent foray into the joys of purchasing a house, she realized the only problem with the amount was that real estate in Neptune wasn’t that cheap.

Veronica found the deed for Sacks’ house. The street name was very familiar to her. It should be. She’d spent four years of her life going to sleepovers and swimming in the pool at the house just down the road. So how much did Sacks pay for the privilege of being neighbors with the Kane family? Two hundred thousand dollars.

Was this how they were being paid off? With prime real estate sold on the cheap? What she needed to do was talk to someone with more real estate experience. She copied down the addresses for both Sacks and Lamb. Maybe when she was out house hunting with Dottie she could get a fast education from the agent on housing values and Prop 13 real estate taxes.
What she needed to do now however was get something to eat. The pizza she had at the mall was hours ago and the mixed nuts she’d been munching on were not enough. Her life was beginning to resemble a never-ending quest for food. She was insatiable. *Note to self, never utter that phrase around Logan.*

If she timed it right, she could get something to eat and be back here for her date with Weevil. It was a little chilly, but rather than go back inside for a sweater, she retrieved the cardigan from her new purchases. With the addition of the cranberry sweater, her new ‘shabby pregnancy’ fashion style was complete. Vogue was sure to be calling her for a cover photo shoot any day now.

She headed to The Promiscuous Fork for their coconut jalapeno rice and the best Fork’n Chicken Sandwich Ever made with habanero pesto and roasted green chilies, then topped with cheddar and bacon. Eating for two was more like eating for twenty-two. Her joke of being as big as house was going to come true sooner rather than later if she didn’t stop fantasizing about food. Pregnant women talked about ‘baby brain’ and apparently hers didn’t involve forgetting things it was just a big Zagat’s guide to all the eating establishments in Southern California.

On her way to the restaurant she drove past the Kane house. Next week was the anniversary of Lilly’s death. The proximity to the date was probably the reason for the increased thoughts about Lilly. Sometimes she allowed herself to indulge in the alternate universe fantasy where her best friend wasn’t murdered and the trajectory of all their lives was different. Where would they be now if Lilly hadn’t died? That was a feature she would like to see in the Neptune Navigator.

She stopped in front of the address for Sacks. It was a new construction. Modern and boxy with multiple levels and an over abundance of windows. Set back from the road and protected from trespassers with a Magnalock security gate, it was impossible to get a full view of the house, but it looked enormous. A for sale sign touting ‘exclusive listing and by appointment only’ was discreetly nestled in the pristine landscaping. Veronica pulled out her phone and sent a quick email to Dottie. *Think we can add one more house to our Sunday afternoon?* She added the address and hit send.

Her daydreaming and detour meant taking her food to go and eating it in the car on her way back to Weevil. He was leaning against his car waiting for her when she pulled into the parking lot. She locked up and went to join him.

“Look at us, it’s like we never left high school. You dating Logan Echolls and snooping into other people’s business. Me, riding with the PCHers and saving your ass.”

Veronica knocked on the hood of his Impala. “You, still driving the same car.”

“It’s a classic.”

“That’s what we are my friend, you and me- classics.” Once they were settled in the car, she turned to Weevil. “Tell me about Nico Benedetti.”

“You’ve got your basics, prostitution, drugs, gambling, and loan sharking. The average mafia boss, but think more Rico Suave than Al Pacino.” He glanced at her. “Okay, my turn, what’s the point of our impossible mission?”

Veronica waggled an imaginary cigar. “There’s this dirty rat, see, and he’s fixin’ to send me up the river to the big house.”

“Is that Jimmy Cagney or Mugsy?”

“Have you been watching Bugs Bunny again? Aw, that’s so cute, Weevil and his cartoons.”
“You’re not going to be laughing when we’re taking a swim with cement shoes.”

“Touchy, touchy. There’s a witness, Charles “Charlie” Gallagher who is trying to place me at a crime scene. He’s got a serious gambling problem and I’m guessing someone is using his debt as leverage to make him lie.”

“So just ask him.”

“Sure. I hear you’re in debt to the mob and they’re forcing you to lie, want to tell me about it?”

“Sounds better than this little road trip to death.”

“Road trip to death, wasn’t that a movie?”

“Yeah and it didn’t end well.”

The former Seventh Veil was still in the seedier section of town, but gone were the neon lights advertising ‘nude girls,’ and the silver sign above the door was now a brass plaque engraved with the words, Nico’s Lounge. Inside were walls of exposed brick and a gleaming walnut bar. It reminded her of a 1920’s speakeasy with the small linen-covered tables, dance floor and live jazz music.

Weevil grabbed her hand and pulled her through the room like they were being chased by the hounds of hell. A large man with a neck as thick as the Great Wall of China held out a hand to stop their progress. “You can’t go back there.”

“We need to see Nico, my girlfriend is in trouble.” Weevil jerked her forward so the linebacker could see her. “Tell him.”

On cue, Veronica started to cry. “You’re hurting me baby. It’s not my fault; I didn’t know it was fixed.”

“You see what I’m dealing with?”

His eyes traveled between the two of them. “Wait here.” He disappeared into the office.

“A little over the top don’t you think?”

Weevil shrugged. “You get what you pay for.”

“I’m not paying you.”

“Exactly my point.”

The door troll returned and told them they could go on in. Rico Suave was an apt description for Nico Benedetti. Tall, dark and packed with machismo. His black hair was an expensive cut, but not as expensive as the cut of his navy blue Brooks Brothers suit. He wore a white silk dress shirt open at the collar revealing a small gold cross and a deep even tan. You could put lipstick on a pig, but it was still a pig.

“Please sit.” He gestured toward the two club chairs. “How can I help you?”

Weevil got them in, now Veronica took the lead. “I’m in trouble and I need a loan.”

“Why did you come to me? I run a respectable business here.”

Veronica almost snorted. What is it with the clichés in this town? Did everyone spend their weekends
watching *GoodFellas* and *The Godfather?* “I, um, uh…” she stammered. “A mutual friend, Charlie Gallagher, said I could, um, said that, uh, you could help me.”

“Charlie Gallagher is not a friend of mine.”

Veronica nervously jumped out of her seat. “Oh my God, I don’t know what I’m going to do if you can’t help.” She started pacing around the office, randomly adjusting the pictures on the wall and rearranging the items on his desk.

Nico reached out and grabbed her hand. “Why don’t you sit down, Miss?”

“Rory. Rory Gilmore.”

“Why don’t you sit down Rory. I didn’t say I wasn’t going to help, I just said, Charlie wasn’t a friend of mine.” He pulled a black ledger book with a red spine from his desk drawer. “How much did you say you needed?”

“Oh thank you so much *Nico,*” she breathlessly panted his name. “You are literally saving my life.” She tilted her head and gave him a soft smile. “Ten thousand dollars. Is that too much for you?”

He opened the ledger book and grinned. “I think I can handle that.”

Veronica leaned closer to him. “I’m sure you can.”

“The interest is twenty percent a week.”

“Twenty percent?” She leaned further over the desk allowing her shirt to gap open affording him a view of her newly swelling breasts. Veronica slid her hand over his. “Do you think we could work something out for that interest?”

“I’m sure we could come up with something.”

Weevil grabbed her arm and pulled her off his desk. “Hey man, that’s my girlfriend you’re talking to.”

Nico stood up. “I wasn’t the one trying to negotiate.” His emphasis on the word ‘negotiate’ clearly translated to *sorry your girlfriend’s a whore.*

Weevil started dragging her toward the door. “Well thanks, but no thanks.”

He didn’t let her go until they were out on the street. “Wait.” Veronica pulled a pen and paper from her bag. She wrote down, 500L s. 75c $350k.

“We don’t have time for you to write your shopping list. It’s milk M, I, L, K. Let’s go Veronica.” He pulled her across the street and practically shoved her in the car.

She handed him the paper. “While you were learning how to spell milk, I was perfecting my upside down reading skills. Now I just need to figure out what it means.”

Weevil held the paper near the window, illuminating it with the street lights. “Maybe you should’ve spent more time in Petty Crime 101. It means Charlie Gallagher owed him five hundred large, that’s five hundred thousand dollars for those in the remedial class. The s means he sold the debt for seventy-five cents on the dollar and walked away with three hundred and fifty thousand. Does that help?”

“Yes and no. It confirms Charlie was in trouble, but I still don’t know who was pulling his strings.
Good thing I also had the foresight to plant a bug in Nico’s office.”

“Is that what all the redecorating was about?”

“Hey, a girl’s gotta do, what a girl’s gotta do.”
CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mac had warned her that the only nonstop flights to Portland from San Diego in the morning were ridiculously early, but did she listen? No, which was why she found herself falling asleep on her feet, cursing the inventor of the alarm clock and seriously missing caffeine. Her flight was due to land at a quarter past nine. By the time she picked up the rental car, made the twenty minute drive to the hotel and got through check-in, she’d have maybe an hour to nap before she had to get ready for the funeral.

It was going to be a one day affair. The funeral service and burial were taking place at the same location, Sunset Hills Memorial Park, followed by a funeral lunch at the Piznarksi’s house. This was not the way she envisioned meeting his parents and seeing his childhood home. She pushed away thoughts of Piz. It was easier to focus on the murder investigation because it kept her from having to deal with her loss.

The listening device she planted in Nico’s office was a slim, flat rectangle with its very own SIM card inside. It wasn’t the tiniest bug she owned, but its voice activation feature would call her cell phone whenever there was any detectable sound and it had enough power to transmit for nine days. She could also dial into the bug and listen whenever she wanted. Using double-faced tape, she’d stuck it behind the credenza while leaning over to straighten pictures.

She’d called the bug on the return drive to her office to make sure it was working. Her mistake was putting the call on speaker allowing Weevil to listen to Nico’s, “interesting ways to make Rory pay off her interest,” speech. It involved her spending a lot of time on her knees and prominently featured her breasts. Eww. Veronica disconnected the call, but not before noticing the grin on Weevil’s face.

Parker arrived at the gate right as they were starting to board. Apparently, she’d decided to get ready for the funeral before landing in Portland. A tailored black pantsuit accentuated her lithe frame and both hair and makeup were flawless. Veronica didn’t care that she in Logan’s black Henley thermal shirt and maternity leggings looked frumpy in comparison, but she was envious of one thing- the steaming, hot cup of coffee Parker was carrying. She wanted to stand next to it and inhale its Arabica goodness. Could she absorb caffeine by osmosis?

“Good morning. I was afraid I was going to miss our flight, but I had to stop and get coffee, first. I can’t seem to function without my morning cup.” Veronica tagged along behind her as they boarded the plane and Parker kept up her running commentary. “Of course I didn’t sleep very well last night, thinking about today, and poor Piz. I can’t even imagine what his parents must be going through, to lose their only child and in such a horrible way.”

Veronica murmured an, “Mmm hmm.”

“You look like you had a bad night too.” She felt vaguely insulted by Parker’s observation.

The Boeing 737 was a narrow plane with one aisle down the center and seats in rows of three on either side. Their seats were midway down the plane. Mac booked the aisle seat for Veronica and the window for Parker. Veronica usually wanted the seat next to her to remain empty, but this time she was hopefully watching each person who walked toward them, silently wishing for someone to sit between her and the chatterbox. When the steady stream of people dwindled to a few last stragglers, she knew her wish wasn’t going to be granted.

She’d stowed her carryon in the overhead and her snack bag under the seat in front of her. She grabbed the bag of food and put it on the seat next to her before Parker got the idea of moving closer.
“What made you decide to move back to California?” It was the safest topic she could find in her under-caffeinated brain.

“My dad died back when I was in college and then mom died last year so once I settled her estate, I realized there was no reason for me to stay in Denver anymore. I’d always loved California so it seemed as good a place as any. Besides, you can’t beat the weather, right?”

“I’m sorry to hear, about your parents, I mean.” Veronica retrieved her cup of apple slices and peanut butter. “Your dad’s death, is that the reason you left Hearst?”

A sad, faraway expression crossed her face as if she were reliving the unpleasant experience. “One of the reasons. What about you? How do you like being back and working with your dad?”

“I’m really happy.”

“That’s good.” It didn’t sound like she thought it was good at all. Bitter, party of one. “If you don’t mind me asking…” Uh-oh, those words usually preceded a question you would mind. “When did you and Piz officially break up? He made it sound like you were still together when he came out here.”

Veronica did not want to talk about Piz. “We weren’t. He ended things when I decided to stay in Neptune and continue to help Logan.”

“Ah, the irresistible pull of Logan Echolls.” Great, they were moving along from one bad topic to the next. “There’s no way Piz could compete with that right? Are you guys an item now?”

Lie, Veronica, lie. “Yes. We’re going to move in together when he gets back from deployment.” From Parker’s stricken demeanor, you would’ve thought Veronica announced she was a serial killer who liked to torture small animals. “What about you? Are you seeing anyone?”

It took a minute for Parker to recover her affable attitude. “I was and now I’m not. How’s your investigation going? Are you making any progress? Does the sheriff have any suspects?”

One-me. “I’m making some progress. I’ve been trying to trace his movements in the weeks leading up to his death, reading his emails…” she let her sentence trail off, hoping that Parker would realize the ramifications of it and fill in some blanks.

She didn’t take the bait. “Learn anything interesting?”

“Not so far. When you went for dinner with Piz, did he mention the name Nico Benedetti to you?”

At the mention of their dinner date, Parker’s face remained impassive. “I don’t think so. We spent most of the meal talking about you. Piz said you were going through a rough patch, but now that he was in Neptune, he was hoping things would go back to normal. Oh and we talked about real estate.”

Veronica perked up. “Real estate?”

“Yes. I just bought a house. Not in Neptune, but in La Jolla, that’s why I had you meet me at Trulucks. It’s on the beach, views of the ocean from every room.”

Settling her mother’s estate must have netted Parker some big bucks. Real estate on the ocean in La Jolla did not come cheap. “Congratulations.”

“You’ll have to come see it. Maybe when Logan gets back the two of you can come for dinner? I
can invite Mac and Wallace, it will be like old times.” She paused. “Except for Piz.”

Veronica resisted the urge to check her watch. Instead she stuffed her mouth with a handful of almonds and offered the container to Parker, who politely declined. This flight felt longer than waiting for Logan to come home. She could hear each minute ticking away. “We should definitely do that.” Never. “So what else have you been up to?”

Parker blathered on about her new job working at some company doing something with someone. After awhile the sound of her voice took on a droning quality that synched with the hum of the airplane and Veronica fell asleep.

Parker gently shook her shoulder. “We’re landing.”

Her sleep haze took a minute to clear. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to fall asleep on you. I guess I was more tired than I thought.”

“It’s fine, Veronica. I’m sure last night was a rough one for everybody.”

Once they disembarked, they waited in baggage claim for Parker’s suitcase. It was a huge, unwieldy thing that blocked two seats on the shuttle bus and took up most of the trunk space in their compact rental. “Are you staying at the Comfort Inn too?”

Parker frowned at her. “You’re staying at a hotel?”

“You’re not?” If she wasn’t staying in Beaverton, what was the big suitcase for? Multiple wardrobe changes and makeup?

“I’m staying at the house.” Parker showed her a slip of paper with the address and directions.

“Oh,” was the only response she had. She shouldn’t be surprised or offended that Parker was staying at the Piznarskis, but she was both.

Veronica took the on ramp toward the interstate and Parker navigated. The drive took them thirty minutes, and fifteen minutes out of her way. She turned into the cul-de-sac and slowed to look for the numbers. The colonial was covered in beige siding and each window was framed with blue shutters. A brick portico protected the front entrance from the elements. Six cars were squeezed into the wide driveway in front of the two-car garage. She parked at the curb and popped the trunk for Parker.

“Are you going to come in?” Veronica shook her head. “Okay, then, I guess I will see you later?”

“Do you need help with your bag?”

“No, thanks.” As soon as Parker’s suitcase was clear of the car and she’d closed the trunk, Veronica put the car in gear and headed back to the hotel. Tears welled in the corners of her eyes and she blinked them away. No, I will not cry. I will go to the hotel and get ready and… She pulled over and buried her face in her hands. Shit. Now that she’d allowed herself to cry, she couldn’t stop.

She was really never going to see Piz again. Just because she didn’t want to spend her life with him, didn’t mean she didn’t want him in her life. She’d hoped that in time they could be friends. Maybe, a long time once he learned she and Logan were having a baby and moving in together, but there was still a possibility and now that chance was gone. No more endearing smile and awkward dance moves.

Veronica wanted Logan. He would understand. She’d seen his grief over Lilly, his mom, Bonnie and he would get it. Loss was something they both knew intimately and if he was here she wouldn’t feel so alone. She pulled herself together and drove the rest of the way to her hotel.
Since she’d slept on the plane there was no longer a need for a nap. She took a shower, did her hair and makeup, and got dressed. The gray, swing dress was made with a soft jersey fabric and had a wide black band at the empire waist. It fell just past her knees and came with a matching short black jacket. Veronica tugged on a pair of boots and grabbed her overcoat. When she checked in, she saw the Black Bear diner across the parking lot and that’s where she headed now.

While she waited for something they called ‘The Volcano,’ three sweet cream pancakes, bacon, sausage, and eggs, she called the airline to change her flight. There was no way she was going back to the Piznarski’s house for the funeral lunch and there was no reason for her to stay the night in Beaverton. The seventy five dollar fee and increase in ticket cost was totally worth it. She didn’t bother calling her dad with the new travel plans. Her flight would get in late and she could just take a cab from the airport.

The idea of a cab made her think of Piz. When he showed up at Wallace’s house Wednesday night he was drunk. Even if he had a rental car, there was no way he would drive himself to Wallace’s house under the influence. There were two major cab companies that serviced the area, Neptune Taxi and Yellow Cab. If Veronica could see their call sheets for that night, they would give her a pick up address; an address, which might be in the vicinity of his hotel. It would certainly narrow down her Google search of hotels from hundreds of pages to one or two.

She finished up her second breakfast of the day and paid the check. Mac and Wallace were meeting her in the hotel lobby so they could go to the funeral together. Veronica put her bag in the rental car and checked out of her room while waiting for them. They weren’t going to be happy with her change of plans, but she wasn’t happy with them either. Neither of them mentioned staying at the Piznarskis and she was a little miffed at them for the omission.

The second Wallace saw her; he enveloped her in a big hug and she was done being mad. “How was your flight with Parker?”

“It was good, except for you know, the Parker part.”

“Don’t ever change Veronica, because your skills at making friends and influencing people greatly inspire me.”

“The things I have yet to teach you my dear Wallace.” She smoothed down the lapel of his dark, navy suit. “You’re looking very sharp Mr. Fennel.”

“The man makes the clothes.”

Mac rolled her eyes. “I’m really sorry about Parker, Veronica.” She looked around the lobby. “Where is she? Do you have her tied up in the trunk of your car?”

“I thought about it, but I left my stun gun and zip ties at home. Airport security, it’s a bitch.”

“No, but seriously, where is she?”

“You don’t know? Parker is staying with the Piznarskis.”

Wallace’s mouth dropped open. “Shut the front door. How did that happen?”

Veronica shook her head. “That’s a good question. Ask her for me and report back.” They left the hotel. “We need to take separate cars. I’m not going back to the Piznarski’s after the funeral, I changed my flight.”

Instead of being angry, Wallace looked concerned. “Are you okay, V?”
She thought about joking her way through it then changed her mind. “I don’t think I can handle it. Listening to his friends and family talk about him and sharing their favorite Piz stories. I just want to make it through the funeral and go home.”

The service was held in the chapel on the grounds of the memorial park. It was a closed casket, for which Veronica was eternally grateful. But she couldn’t escape seeing Piz. The family had set up poster boards with pictures of Piz throughout the room. It was a photographic journey of his life; as a baby, his first day at school, camping, and high school graduation. Veronica lingered by the photo of Piz going off to college. He was standing next to his car, packed with all his belongings and holding the 1967 Gretsch Astrojet red top guitar he loved.

“Hi, I’m Heather, Heather Brown. I went to high school with Piz.” She tapped one of the pictures. “I was his prom date. Look at that hair, his I mean. You are?”

“Veronica Mars.”

“Oh. It’s nice to meet you Veronica.” Her tone said it was anything but nice. She backed away and disappeared into the milling crowd.

It was a good turnout, which wasn’t surprising. Everyone who met Piz immediately liked him. He was the antithesis of her. What was surprising was how like the Neptune High cafeteria tables it was; conversations ending when she got too close, whispers and long looks in her direction. She imagined the dialogue went something like, ‘that’s Veronica, I can’t believe she came.’ She should’ve just worn a scarlet B on her chest for Bitch and saved everyone the trouble of pointing her out.

No matter where in the room she moved, Piz’s parents seemed to be at the polar opposite end. It was as if their internal radar let them know exactly where she was at all times. They were surrounded by friends and family and Veronica saw no need to intrude. They wouldn’t want her condolences anyway, but Wallace clearly had other plans. He grabbed her hand and walked across the room with her.

“Wallace it was so good of you to come.” Mrs. Piznarski hugged him. She was the same height as Wallace. Stocky in a Midwest, work hard for a living, kind of way. Her bottle-blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail and her grief ravaged face wore no makeup. Her eyes were swollen and red and in the instant she turned toward her, Veronica felt the tears come back. Piz’s mom pulled her into a hug. “And you too Veronica, Piz loved you so much.”

“I’m sorry,” Veronica mumbled the words into her shoulder. They disentangled themselves and then it was Mr. Piznarski’s turn to hug her. He looked like Piz; same height and build and coloring. It was like staring into an older version of Piz. The Piz she would never get to see. “My Dad wanted to come, but he’s not allowed to fly yet. He sends his condolences.”

Mrs. Piznarski took her hand. “We got his flowers; tell him they were lovely.”

“I will.” I’m going to catch him. I’m going to find the person that did this. The person who took Piz away from you.

After her interaction with Piz’s parents, the mood in the room felt different. Defensive much, Veronica? The family pastor delivered the eulogy, and then a few friends including Wallace shared memories of Piz. When it was over, she pulled Wallace to the side. “I’m going to go, please give my apologies to the Piznaskis.”

“But what about…” Wallace cut himself off. “Are you going straight to the airport?”
“I have cabbies to track down and bugs to listen to. Hey, do you know what cab company brought Piz to your house?’”

“No Neptune Taxi. He didn’t have any money so I paid for the cab.”

“Do you perhaps remember the driver’s name?”

“No Encyclopedia Brown, I don’t. I was too busy trying to hold up Piz and pay the man.”

“At least you know he was a man, that’s helpful.” She tilted her head. “Want to be even more helpful and do me a tiny little favor?”

“There are no permanent files for me to steal here V.”

“Could you ask around and see if anyone heard from Piz recently? And if they knew where he was staying? See if they know anything about the story he was working on?”

“I live to serve.”

She patted his cheek. “That’s the spirit.”
“Caitlin.”

“Wrong girlfriend. This is Veronica, V, E, R, O…”

Logan interrupted. “I meant for our baby. Caitlin.”

“Uh, no.” The suggestion fully roused her from sleep. “Caitlin Ford - ring any bells?”

“If we’re going to take out the names of all the women I’ve done, we’re not going to have that many to choose from.”

“You’re not funny you know.”

“Really? My other girlfriends think I’m a hoot.”

“Ha, ha. What if it’s a boy?”

“No problem, Wyatt or Billy.”

Veronica smiled. “I am not naming our son after characters from *Easy Rider*.”

“Not an issue, since it’s a girl. Hmm, a little girl named Wyatt, Wyatt Echolls.”

“I love you, but no.” She stretched and got out of bed. “Don’t you have more important things you should be doing like swabbing the deck or KP duty?”

“More important than coming up with a name for our baby?” Gone was the teasing banter. “I think about her all the time.” He fell silent. Something was bothering him. She could feel the tension emanating through the phone. “What if I’m a really shitty dad, Veronica?”

“You won’t be.” The assurance was easy because she knew. It didn’t matter that people, even her own father, thought there was a ‘darkness’ in him, she knew Logan Echolls and she didn’t have any doubts. But how did she convince him of that?

“I’ve been talking to the psychologist on board, you know, to work through my issues and he’s grounded me, for a few days at least. The Navy has to protect their multimillion dollar planes.” Veronica could hear his frustration. Days with nothing to do, but think were going to drive him crazy. She wanted to hold him and comfort him. She wanted to make him feel as sure about this as she was.

“I love my dad Logan. He’s a good, no, he’s a great dad. And you? You are more like my dad than you are like Aaron.”

“How can you even say that, Veronica? How do you know?”

“Because I know how you love me.”

“But I was such a dick to you after Lilly died.” Obviously she wasn’t the only one with the anniversary on her mind.

“Logan you were a sixteen year old kid and you were hurting. Alcoholic mom, abusive dad, and your girlfriend was just murdered, cut yourself a little slack. You are not that person anymore.”
“He’s still in here.”

“I know and I love him too. Just like you love vengeful, angry Veronica. She’s still in here too, but we are better than our past.”

“I love you and our baby so much. She’s not even here yet, but she is so real to me. I don’t want to fuck this up.”

“You won’t. Come on look at us, having real conversations and sharing our feelings. Communication? Nailed it.”

Her attempt to lighten the mood earned her a soft laugh. “How was yesterday?”

“I’ve had better days.”

“I don’t think I’ve said it, but I’m sorry about Piz. He was a good guy.”

“Yeah, he was. I’m going to find who killed him Logan.”

“I have no doubt. Just be safe okay? If anything happened to you…No lectures, I promise. I know you can take care of yourself and I’m not going into my usual overprotective asshole mode, but it doesn’t mean I can’t worry.”

“No unnecessary risks should be our new family motto.”

“Our family…I like the sound of that.”

“Me too. Now I hate to break it to you, but your daughter is demanding that I hang up the phone and feed her. We’re thinking about waffles.”

This time she got an actual laugh. “Go, go feed Wyatt.”

“Get it out of your head, because it’s not happening.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, but not enough to agree to Wyatt.”

“We’ll see.”

Dick’s kitchen was huge. She started her search in the cabinet closest to the door and progressed from there. “Watcha doin’ Ronnie?”

She jumped. “You scared the shit out of me, Dick. I thought you were in Tijuana?”

“Just got back.” The kitchen resembled a scene from The Sixth Sense; every cabinet and drawer stood open. “Are you looking for my porn?”

“I don’t even want to think about why you would have porn in the kitchen.”

“Well, you see…”

Veronica held her hand up. “Don’t. I’m begging you, don’t finish that sentence.”

Dick grinned. “Well since you’re begging…”

“I’m looking for a waffle iron.”
He crossed the kitchen, opened the pantry and took down the waffle iron from the top shelf. “Do you even know how to make waffles?”

*Not without burning them.* Veronica shrugged. “I was going to Google it.”

Dick went back to the pantry and returned with flour, baking powder, salt and sugar. Then he got eggs, butter, and milk from the fridge. From the cabinet next to the stove he took down a small bottle of vanilla. “Why don’t you make yourself useful Ronnie and cut up some strawberries.”

She did as instructed, but her eyes kept straying to the sight of Dick making waffles. Just when you think you know a person, they go and surprise you, again. He mixed up the batter, glanced at her and went back to the pantry. When he emerged he was carrying a bag of chocolate chips and her knees went weak. “Where did you learn how to cook?”

“I own a restaurant Ronnie. Actually I own *five* restaurants up and down the coast.”

“Get out, no you don’t.”

“Chicks dig food. You’d be surprised how much play I get when I cook them a hot meal.” *And they were back.*

Dick put a fresh, hot chocolate chip waffle on a plate then doused it in whipped cream and added the fresh strawberries to the top. Veronica practically drooled at the sight of it. In the middle of her third waffle she started to slow down. “You’re going to make someone a good wife one day, Dick.”

“Marriage.” He shuddered. “Thanks for ruining my day Ronnie.”

“My pleasure.” She rinsed her dish. “Thanks for the waffles, they were really good and don’t worry, I’ll clean all this up.”

“Leave it for Rosa; she likes to take care of me.”

“Yeah I’m sure that’s it, nothing to do with a paycheck at all.” Her phone conversation with Logan and her pressing desire to eat altered her plan of visiting Neptune Taxi this morning. She had just enough time to clean the kitchen and get ready before Dottie came to get her for their afternoon of house hunting.

Veronica dressed for comfort. She had a feeling “comfort” was going to be her default setting for the next six months. When the doorbell rang, she was ready to go.

Dottie was not what she was expecting. Her personality on the phone made her seem so big and vibrant and well, motherly. Veronica was expecting a nice, grey-haired grandmother type. Instead she was a few inches taller than Veronica and just as petite. Reddish-blonde bangs escaped from her ponytail and framed her face. Laugh lines crinkled the corners of her eyes and from the wide grin; it was easy to see how they got there.

“You must be Logan’s Veronica. It’s good to finally meet you. He talks so much about you I feel like I know you.” At her skeptical look, Dottie continued. “He has talked about you for years, long before you came out to help him with that Bonnie nonsense.”

Dick sidled up to the door. “Hey who’s the MIL...” Veronica elbowed him in the stomach to keep him from finishing his sentence, but unfortunately the sound he made completed the ‘F.’

Dottie laughed. “You must be Dick.”
“I must be Dick.”

“Put an ‘a’ in that sentence and you would be right.” Veronica gave him a gentle shove out of her way, joined Dottie on the stairs and shut the door before Dick could say anything else. “Sorry about Logan’s pet, we tried to housebreak him, but it didn’t take.”

“You are exactly like Logan described you.” Veronica didn’t know if that was a good thing, or a bad one. Dottie was walking toward her Toyota minivan, but when she saw Veronica hesitate, she stopped. “Would you rather take your car?”

“No, this is perfect.” She climbed in. “So is it a rule? Do all moms have to drive minivans? Will I be kicked out of the club?”

Dottie laughed again. It was an infectious, easy laugh and Veronica had a feeling she did it often. “This is actually my son’s car. I drive a Mustang.”

“That’s a relief.”

“The real estate agent is going to meet us at the first listing. I thought we’d start with the one furthest away and work our way back.” She glanced at Veronica. “How are you feeling?”

“Hungry and tired. If I could find a way to eat in my sleep, I might never get out of bed.”

“I was like that with my last one. I would be eating one meal and planning the next. It got to the point where I was dreaming about food.”

“How old are your kids now?”

“Jake, my oldest, is the one serving with Logan; he’s twenty-eight like you. Patrick is twenty-five and my baby”—she gave her a wry grin—“Nick, is twenty-two.”

“On the phone you said, were a Navy wife, has your husband retired?”

“He passed away three years ago.”

_Open mouth, insert foot._ “I’m sorry, I didn’t know.”

“How could you? We were married for thirty great years. High school sweethearts, sort of like you and Logan, but without all the high drama, multiple breakups and lengthy separation.”

“So… not like us at all then?”

“Well, Tommy could be a bit of a jackass. Not the smash your headlights with a crowbar kind of jackass, but he had his moments.” She laughed again. “Why are you surprised? I told you he talked about you a lot. I always thought…never mind what I thought.”

“No, please tell me.”

Dottie remained silent for so long, Veronica didn’t think she would ever find out the end of that sentence. “I thought you were his one. The one. He went to OCS with Jake and the first time I met him, he was”—she shook her head—“forlorn. Lost, like without you a piece of him was missing.”

It hurt Veronica to think of Logan suffering like that and it made her think of the way he was suffering now.

“When he took up with that Bonnie…” Veronica smiled at both the phrase, ‘took up with’ and the,
‘that Bonnie.’ Carrie would probably not like being called, ‘that Bonnie,’ especially in that tone. “She was all wrong for him. And that anyone believed he could actually kill that girl? Nonsense. Now, you on the other hand, you, I like.”

“Maybe you should reserve judgment until you get to know me.”

“Trust me, a mother knows these things.” The way she said it made Veronica happy for Logan and for herself. Finally, there was another person with faith in Logan.

By the time they arrived at the first house, she’d ruled it out. It was too far for her to commute to Mars Investigations each day especially once you factored in commuter traffic. The next three houses didn’t even warrant getting out of the car. Hello? Curb appeal? Anyone? Anyone?

Dottie told the real estate agent they needed to make a quick stop before house number five and drove Veronica through an In n’ Out Burger. “Figured you were hungry. Is this okay?”

“Perfect.” She ordered a double-double, animal style, fries well done, and a root beer float. Dottie ordered the same and ate while she drove.

“Do you like being a private investigator?”

Was there anything Logan hadn’t told her? “For the most part,” she hedged. “Actually Dottie, I love it. I like snooping through other people’s trash, and uncovering all their secrets. Eavesdropping and surveillance and a little B&E. I’m kidding about that last part, well, mostly kidding. See I told you to reserve judgment.”

“No judgment, I think it’s great. Everybody should do what they love.”

“I’m glad you feel that way because, you see, the last house we’re going to? Is strictly for snooping purposes.”

“Does that make me your unofficial partner?”

It was Veronica’s turn to laugh. “I suppose it does.”

Houses five and six were okay, if you wanted to drive an hour to the beach, which she was sure Logan did not. The rooms were small and their layouts were weird. All of the houses were starting to blend together. She couldn’t remember which one had the nice backyard, but the tiny bedrooms and which one had the nice rooms, but the hideous, bright orange bathroom. “I’m beginning to think I’m doomed to live with Dick forever.”

Seven was okay, but number eight was the keeper. The second they pulled up front, Veronica was in love. Grey cedar shake shingles with dark blue shutters and a big bay window. It was surrounded by a white picket fence and you could see the beach from the brick front porch. The floors were dark hardwood and there was crown molding throughout. A fire was going in the family room and a set of French doors led directly to a broad deck and a perfectly landscaped yard. Each room was better than the one before it. She used her phone to take pictures for Logan.

“From that reaction, I would think we found our winner?”

It was the winner until she heard the $2.6 million dollar price tag. “And we’re moving on.”

Dottie took note of her disappointment and called the real estate agent over to them. “I think we’re going to skip the next two houses and move right to the last listing in Neptune.”
“You know that’s an exclusive listing right?” The implied, if you can’t afford this house, why even bother wasting my time with that one, was hard to miss.

Dottie’s gaze narrowed and her hands went to her hips. “Are you saying we should find a better qualified agent to show us around?” She injected the exact right amount of haughtiness to the words to put him in his place and make him second guess his assumptions. Lilly Kane couldn’t have done it better.

“No, no, of course not.”

When they got back in the car, Veronica laughed. “I think that moved you up from unofficial partner to partner for this expedition.”

“Excellent.”

“When we get there, just try to keep him distracted and away from me. Also, if you can, ask him how easy it would be for someone else to pay your real estate taxes.”

“The intrigue, I love it.”

“You might not want to mention that to Logan.”

At the house, Veronica made sure she was in close proximity to the agent when he entered the code into the Magnalock security gate, then Dottie took over her duties of keeping him occupied.

According to the paperwork Mac gathered, Sacks died without a Will. The intestacy laws in California roughly followed the same diagram as New York. No spouse, to the children, no children then to the decedent’s parents and so on. Unfortunately for Jerry Sacks he had no close family, which meant the Public Administrator’s office was in charge of his estate. It was their responsibility to secure all the assets, settle the debts and look for any heirs. This explained why the house was first on the market three months after his death. The wheels of the government turn slowly.

She didn’t expect to find anything in the house. The P.A. would’ve taken all the personal papers into custody to help them research his assets. Ditto the personal property. Anything worth value would’ve been sold. Normally the house would be sold at auction, but Veronica was guessing its price tag made this route more profitable. A detailed audit and accounting of all their activities would be filed with the Probate Court, but it could be several months before that happened. If it happened at all here in Neptune. A “matter of Public Record” took on an entirely different meaning in these city limits.

She wandered aimlessly through the vast, empty rooms. It was a cold, sterile environment and it just left her feeling sad for Sacks; this big house and no family to share it with. Veronica abandoned the entire idea and went to get Dottie.

They left the agent and Dottie drove her back to Dick’s house. “Our less than helpful agent said anyone could pay the real estate taxes. The County didn’t much care who wrote the check, just that there was a check.”

“That’s pretty much what I thought.” Give them big houses, fancy cars, and pay all their bills in return for whatever favor you might need. As long as there was no paper trail, who would know? Lamb actually did a pretty good job of it. His deed said he only paid two hundred thousand for his house and he didn’t make any claims on his tax return. Sacks on the other hand, committed it to paper. “Thanks for coming with me today, I really appreciated it.”

“It was fun. Oh, here, you dropped your phone before when you got out of the car.” Dottie passed her the cell. Veronica doubted that, but she slipped it into her purse without comment. At Dick’s
house, Dottie got out of the car and hugged Veronica goodbye. “Please call me if you need anything, or when you’re ready to go out house hunting again.”

“I will and thanks again for your help.”

Veronica waited until she was gone before checking her phone. It was just as she’d suspected, all the pictures of house number eight were attached to an email addressed to Logan. Hey love, this is Dottie. Look at the house Veronica found. I think she’s ready to move tomorrow. Picture number two is the nursery. Hope you’re behaving yourself. Give my love to Jake. “Well played, Dot, well played.”

She didn’t bother going in the house. Veronica stopped at Project Pie for a personal artisan pizza with artichokes, tomato, red onion and mozzarella, then headed to the office to eat and do a little of her own computer magic. Before heading out, she grabbed a black windbreaker and a clipboard from the closet.

Logan’s car, while a luxury, could sometimes be a pain in the ass. She had to park it far away from her destination and walk. Poor, public employees did not drive BMW’s worth more than their yearly salary. She flashed her “ID” at the one lone driver in the garage, “BC, TAP, where’s your dispatcher?”

He stepped aside and pointed toward the back of the garage. It never failed to surprise her how an innocuous clipboard and an officious attitude could convince people to do what you wanted. The “office” was a room in the back corner of the garage. A large interior glass window allowed the dispatcher to see the drivers as they came and went. Veronica walked through the door without knocking.

“Surprise inspection. BC, TAP.” She flashed him the same ID she showed the driver. She really had no idea if the Balboa County Taxi Authority conducted surprise inspections, but she was betting on the fact that he didn’t either. “I need all your call sheets for the past month.”

His ‘desk’ was a piece of three-quarter inch pine balanced on top of two short filing cabinets. He opened one of the file drawers and pulled two thick files from it. One labeled August and one September. He started to hand them to her, then stopped and pulled them back. “Nobody told me you were coming.”

“Did you miss the word surprise in my sentence? No one was supposed to tell you I was coming.” She glanced up at his clock. “Traffic was a bitch and I still have three stops to make before I can go home, can we hurry this along?”

Blame traffic and complain about your job, two things every working person could relate to. “You can’t take these originals.”

Veronica gave him a look that said she could if she wanted to and then relented. “I only need copies.”

He handed her the file and gestured toward the machine. She waited. “Fine. Gimme them.” She passed the files back. “What do they want these for anyways?”

She shrugged. “Beats the shit outta me. I just do what I’m told.”

“Don’t we all.” Veronica turned away so he wouldn’t see her smile.

She didn’t linger. As soon as she attached the copies to her clipboard, she gave him a wave and rushed out. Two blocks from the garage was an open coffee shop. Veronica ordered a slice of
blueberry pie and decaf coffee. The call sheets were in date order, which made it easy to find the day she wanted. She scanned the destination column until she found Wallace’s address, drop off time 1:20 a.m. Pickup at 1:00 a.m. from a place called the Sandpiper Bar on Beach Drive. Yahtzee.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Veronica stripped and stepped into the shower. It was a long and frustrating day. She’d started with the hotels within walking distance of the Sandpiper Lounge and worked her way out from there and nothing. Not one clerk remembered seeing Piz. Nor was he a registered guest at any of them. Of course, she assumed that he was staying under a false name, but what name, was anybody’s guess. Her plan was to take a break and head back tonight with her picture of Piz; first, to the lounge itself and then back to the hotels to see if any of the night staff recognized him.

She’d just finished towel drying her hair when the pounding on the front door started. Dick’s exclaimed, “What the hell?” was answered with, “Warrant.” Veronica recognized Lamb’s voice. She tugged Logan’s shirt over her head seconds before Dan Lamb threw open the bedroom door. Two deputies she didn’t know were standing behind him.

“We have a warrant to search the premises” --he advanced on her-- “and a warrant to arrest you.” Lamb grabbed her arm and spun her away from him so she was facing the wall. With his foot he kicked her legs apart. His hands roamed down her body, traveled each of her bare legs, first down and then back up. She clearly wasn’t armed since she was naked except for the shirt, but it didn’t stop Lamb from assaulting her under the guise of a ‘frisk.’ “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law.”

Veronica tuned him out. She could recite the Miranda warning in her sleep. Instead she thought about the forensic report and the waiting on results of the sweater found at the SDCC notation. Whatever the results, they were enough to give him probable cause for the search and arrest warrants. For the first time in a long time, she was scared. Lamb handcuffed her before dragging her from the bedroom.

Dick came barreling toward them. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“She is under arrest for the murder of Stosh Piznarski.”

“Dude, at least let her put some clothes on.” Dick blocked their path and gave no signs of moving any time soon.

“If you don’t get out of my way, I will arrest you too.”

Dick opened his mouth to argue and Veronica shook her head. She had no doubt that Lamb would carry through with his threat to arrest Dick. “It’s okay, just move.”

He shot Lamb a nasty look, but reluctantly stepped out of the way. “Don’t worry Ronnie; I’ll get you a lawyer.”

Lamb sneered. “She’s gonna need a good one. I’ve got her dead to rights on this.” He took her outside and shoved her in the police car. Then he proceeded to make her wait while they finished their search. Finally he climbed into the driver’s side. He held up a plastic evidence bag with a 9mm Ruger inside. Veronica felt her stomach drop, this was not good. “I couldn’t get your boyfriend, but I’ve got you, Veronica Mars.”

He started to drive. When they pulled up to the station she understood why the long wait at the house. It was so they could time their arrival for the evening news. The perp walk wearing next to nothing was meant to humiliate her, like she humiliated him on national television. Plus there was the added advantage of it being too late for her to have an arraignment hearing.
Not that it mattered in her case. A regular murder charge had a set bail amount of a million dollars, which would require her putting up a non-refundable down payment of one hundred thousand dollars, plus having the assets to secure the bond. Even if that were in the realm of possibility, the D.A. was probably going to charge her with special circumstances, capital murder. They were going to contend that she murdered Piz for financial gain. Special circumstances meant no bond.

Lamb walked her right through the center of the reporters. Veronica wondered when he called them. On his way to arrest her, or once he had her in custody. It was hard being pulled through the crowd in handcuffs while simultaneously trying to keep the t-shirt covering the essentials. They were probably going to charge her for indecent exposure too.

Once they were at the door, Lamb passed her off to one of the deputies for booking so he could take his spotlight. They took her fingerprints and mugshot and put her in a holding cell. Thankfully she was alone, but she was freezing and starving and a little dizzy. Veronica sat on the bottom bunk, pulled her knees up to her chest and pulled the shirt over them. It was going to be a long night.

She leaned against the wall and closed her eyes. There was little chance of her falling asleep. Dick would probably call her dad and he would show up with the only lawyer they knew and could afford, Cliff. Somehow that sweater must have traced back to her and now there was the gun they “found” at Dick’s house. While she thought her arrest was inevitable, she’d been hoping for more time. Now she was going to have to rely on her dad to clear her name and get her out of this.

“Veronica?” She’d lost all track of time. It could’ve been twenty minutes, or twenty hours, but the sight of Norris filled her with relief.

“Have you come to bust me out of this joint?” Her attempt at levity failed and she realized just how close she’d been to crying.

“Thought you could use these.” He pushed blue prison scrubs through the bars along with a pair of white canvas shoes. “They're the smallest I could find. Are you hungry?”

“Starving.”

“I'll be right back.”

The few extra pregnancy pounds were enough to hold up the pants. She cuffed the bottoms and put on the shoes, but she passed on the shirt. Wearing Logan’s shirt gave her a modicum of comfort. When Norris returned he passed a large paper sack through the bars. The bag he handed her held a chicken parmesan hero, a container of pasta salad, two bags of potato chips, sugar cookies, an apple, and a large bottle of chocolate milk. “Is this your dinner?”

“Don’t worry about it Veronica. I can always get something else. You” --he tapped the bars-- “can’t go anywhere.”

“How long have I been down here?”

“Few hours.”

“How bad is it?”

“Maybe you should eat first.”

“That bad, huh?” She took his advice and bit into the sandwich. It was like heaven in her mouth. Then again, she was so hungry, the canvas shoes probably would have tasted good. In between bites of sandwich she alternated between chips and sips of the chocolate milk. Once she was done with
the sandwich and both bags of chips, she started on the pasta salad.

“T’m in awe. How does such a little person eat so much?”

“I got mad food skills.” She saved the apple and cookies for later. “Okay, break it to me, what does he have?”

“They found a bloody sweater and gloves in a trash bin at the San Diego Convention Center. DNA on the sweater came back this morning, two donors. The blood belonged to Stosh Piznarski and the other DNA was yours. Before you ask, an anonymous tip led them to the clothes.”

Veronica wondered about the prenatal care in prison. It wouldn’t be as good as the über expensive ob/gyn she was currently seeing, but maybe Logan could pay extra for special house calls. Or would they be prison calls?

“Hey Norris, her attorney is here.”

He disappeared from view. Veronica pressed herself against the bars for a better look, but it wasn’t the men she was expecting to see. Instead it was Dick and an older gentleman. He was dressed in slacks, a polo shirt and topsiders, casual, but expensive. “Told you I’d get you a lawyer, Ronnie.”

“You could have just called my dad.”

“Are you crazy? If I didn’t get you the best money could buy, Logan would’ve kicked my ass, especially now.”

“Thanks, Dick, I…what do you mean, especially now?”

He gave her a duh look. “Uh, since you’re preggers.”

“Logan told you?”

“Ronnie. This is Dick you’re talking to, boob expert, and those” --he pointed at her chest-- “are baby boobs.”

“While this is a riveting conversation, I need to discuss the arraignment and bond hearing with my client.”

Veronica scoffed, “Bond.”

Dick jerked his thumb toward the lawyer. “That’s what Mr. Thousand Dollars an Hour is here for, to get you out.”

“And I can’t do that while you’re still present, Mr. Casablancas. I need to speak to my client, alone.”

“Whatevs.” Dick sauntered away.

When they were alone he introduced himself as David Bartlitt and Veronica was floored. She knew David Bartlitt, everyone knew David Bartlitt, by reputation alone. He was the top of the criminal defense food chain, up there with F. Lee Bailey, Alan Dershowitz, and the late Johnny Cochran. When Dick said the best money could buy, he wasn’t kidding around.

He explained the charges to Veronica. It was as she suspected- murder with special circumstances due to reasons of financial gain. His plan was to get the special circumstances dropped so he could request bail. The way he moved on to “once that is accomplished” made it seem like a foregone conclusion that he would be victorious in his argument, he would ask for bail to be set. He warned
her that while at a minimum it would be a million dollars, the judge would probably ask for more.

“I can’t post that kind of bail.”

“Mr. Casablancas has agreed to take care of it, which is why I’ve already scheduled a 1275 Hearing.” His confidence was soothing. “My paralegals are gathering the paperwork we’ll need, but it won’t be a problem with Mr. Casablancas’ resources. Are you familiar with a 1275 Hearing?”

He didn’t wait for her answer. “Since the bond needs to be collateralized with real property equal to one hundred and fifty percent of the bail, the purpose of the hearing is to make sure the funds weren’t obtained illegally.”

“How much do you think the judge will ask for?”

“In my experience he will ask for five, and I will get him down to three.”

“Three million?” The math was easy, a non-refundable down payment of three hundred grand and security worth $4.5 million. Veronica felt ill.

He glanced at his Patek Philippe watch. “I will meet you at the courthouse in the morning. In the meantime, try to get some rest.” His eyes moved past her to the cell beyond. “I will make sure they bring you pillows and blankets and something to eat.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t talk to anybody, including your friend Deputy Clayton. If they try to interrogate you, insist on having your lawyer present and either I or one of my associates will be here. I’m serious Miss Mars, not one word to anyone.”

Treatment post-lawyer visit was a complete 180-degree difference. Two deputies entered her cell, one bearing sheets, blankets, and pillows and the other a tray of hot food. They pulled the mattress from the top bunk and added it to the second bunk for extra comfort and made her bed. “Are you going to tuck me in too? Do I get a mint?”

Not one word probably included her sarcastic, snappy comments, but the deputies didn’t seem all that interested in her witty repartee anyway. They left her alone and the time ticked slowly toward dawn. Veronica managed some sleep, but she felt worn down and ragged by the time they came to collect her for her day in court.

The scales of justice in Neptune were unequally balanced, but this time they were tipped in her favor. Her arraignment was handled with little fanfare; charges were read, her plea of ‘not guilty’ was entered, and she was to be held without bond. Then things got interesting. David Bartlitt was impressive to watch. He moved through the courthouse like it was his own personal chessboard and he was a grandmaster player.

A different judge was hearing his motions to quash the special circumstances and to request bond. When they entered the courtroom, her dad, Mac, Wallace, and Dick were in the first row of seats behind the defense table. Another familiar face was on her side of the room, a few rows back- Dottie. Veronica smiled. “My very own cheering section.”

“Are you okay honey?” Dad looked worse than Veronica felt. If their daughter caused even half as much trouble as her parents, both she and Logan would be completely gray by thirty-five.

“Don’t worry about me- three hots and a cot with plenty of yard time.” Keith scowled at her. “Too soon?”
The District Attorney made his argument for the special circumstances. Veronica murdered Piz to get her hands on his two hundred and fifty thousand dollar life insurance policy. It was a premeditated, cold-blooded killing for profit. Bartlitt called it implausible. “To wit, Miss Mars is engaged to Logan Echolls and, as such, she is his Attorney-in-Fact with access to funds in excess of fifty million dollars.” He entered the Power of Attorney and bank records into evidence. He argued that it was “highly unlikely” she would kill someone for the “paltry” sum of money she would receive from the life insurance. He then produced a sworn affidavit from the insurance investigator, Chris Holley, attesting to the fact that from his initial investigation Veronica was “unaware of the policy” and had “made no claims” against it.

His easy conversational style with the judge made it seem like they were old friends and that this was clearly a show for the prosecution. The judge dismissed the special circumstances and moved on to the matter of bail. No surprise, the District Attorney was adamantly opposed.

Again, David Bartlitt was well prepared. There must have been a bevy of paralegals and associates working through the night to prepare. Veronica could practically see the legal fees spinning out of control like the numbers going up on a gas pump. He gave the standard; my client poses no flight risk, ties to the community speech and offered the surrender of her passport. Then he mentioned that she was “currently in escrow on a new home.”

She thought the argument lacked flair and apparently so did the District Attorney who brought up Duncan Kane and the suspicion that she helped him flee the country on more than one occasion. He contended that a surrendered passport would do little to stop Veronica Mars from fleeing jurisdiction.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but I don’t think His Honor is interested in your groundless accusations and wild speculation. This is about the facts of the case.” Now that he’d silenced his opponent, he moved in for the coup de grace. “Your Honor, my client is an innocent, pregnant woman, who does not deserve to spend even one more night behind bars.”

Dear Modern Maternity, how do I tell my two best friends I’m having a baby? Signed, Locked Up and Knocked Up.

Dear Locked Up and Knocked Up, Have your attorney do it in open court.

The judge set bail at five million and Bartlitt countered with the three million. After providing him with proof of her “access to over fifty million dollars,” Veronica didn’t see how he was going get the reduction, but with a little fancy legal footwork regarding “terms of the trust,” he got the judge down to three. He also got him to waive the need for a 1275 Hearing and they were done.

“Pregnant?” was the first word out of Mac’s mouth.

“Really, that’s what you’re choosing to focus on? Accused of murder, recent millionaire, engaged to Logan Echolls, buying a house, and you pick pregnant?”

“Oh, I was going to get to those too.”

Dottie chose that moment to join them and Veronica gave her a big hug for both showing up and for saving her from The Awkward Inquisition. She introduced Dottie to everyone.

Bartlitt interrupted the festivities and said he would take care of processing her bond and that he would be in touch regarding a meeting to plan her defense. Veronica hoped the only planning meeting necessary would be for her “you’re not going to jail party,” which she would throw as soon as she caught Piz’s killer.
Her dad pulled her close to his side. “Dottie thought you might be hungry and suggested lunch. What do you say rich lady, want to treat us to a meal?”

Inspiration struck and she looked at Dick. “Maybe Mr. Casablancas will take us to his restaurant, he owns five of them you know.” Now that everyone was focused on the fact that Dick actually had a job, instead of her courtroom bombshells, Veronica relaxed. It didn’t last. On their way out of the courthouse she saw the headline of The Neptune Register: *Neptune’s Own Bonnie & Clyde*.

She plucked the paper off the bench. A photo of her and Logan from high school with the caption, *Deadly Lovers* was featured along with each of their mugshots; his for Bonnie’s murder and hers from last night.

*Veronica Mars was arrested last night on charges that she murdered her ex-boyfriend, Stosh Piznarski to collect on his life insurance policy. Ms. Mars is expected to be charged with special circumstances for the cold-blooded killing and held without bond. Just a few short months ago, Logan Echolls, son of movie star, Aaron Echolls was also charged with murder in the killing of his famous popstar girlfriend.*

*Ms. Mars has a long and sordid history with the notorious bad boy. Friends since the age of twelve, the couple began dating in high school and continued their romantic relationship through college. Recently the couple has been seen around town and rumors suggest that they are in fact back together. Now that this deadly couple has been reunited it can only mean bad things are in store for the city of Neptune.*
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Running the gauntlet of reporters outside the courthouse gave Veronica new insight into Logan. Cameras shoved in her face and questions shouted from all directions.

“Did you kill him for the money?”

“Are you sleeping with Logan Echolls?”

“Are you really pregnant?”

“Veronica, whose baby is it?”

That last question made her stumble. Dick wrapped his arm around her shoulder and pushed his way through the crowd. He scooped her up, put her in the passenger seat of his black Hummer and shut the door. He took a step toward them and the teeming, writhing mass of reporters backed up. Veronica was afraid he was going to punch someone. Instead, he circled around the hood of the SUV and climbed into the driver’s side. The rear door opened and both Mac and Wallace scrambled into the backseat.

En masse the reporters converged on the car. Veronica averted her face, but not before they snapped their photos. She could see tomorrow’s headline, Bonnie’s Getaway, or Bonnie Makes Bail. Flashbacks of a similar ride with Logan plagued her.

Dick revved the engine and they wisely cleared a path. Veronica had no doubt that, in his current mood, Dick would’ve run over any stragglers. He was pissed. “Are you okay, Ronnie?”

“Where are my dad and Dottie?”

Mac piped up, “They’re following us.” Dick’s driving reflected his mood, angry and aggressive. “That is if they can keep up. Uh, you might want to slow down, Mario Andretti.” Dick didn’t say anything, but he eased up on the gas pedal.

Veronica felt unsettled. She could practically hear Rod Serling intoning the words; you’ve just crossed over into the Twilight Zone. People actually believed she was a killer. How did Logan do it? She felt ashamed of herself for ever having doubted him. For even just a minute believing that he could have killed Lilly all those years ago. Standing on this side of the accusations was humbling. If she had to look into the eyes of the person she was in love with and see doubt, it would be her undoing. Knowing that, despite the evidence, Logan’s faith in her would never waver made her feel worse.

“We’re here Veronica.” Wallace was standing at her open car door. She’d been so focused on thoughts of Logan, she’d missed their arrival. “Are you sure you don’t want to go home?”

Veronica forced a smile. “Me? Miss a meal? We have not been spending enough time together.” She shook her head. “I know it’s my fault, but life on the inside is hard, man.”

“You don’t have to make jokes.”

“Really? I’m pretty sure I do.”

Mac and Dick were waiting across the street in front of the restaurant with Keith and Dottie. All four of them looked awkward and uncomfortable. Crossing the street was entering bizarro world where
everything looked the same, but wasn’t quite right. They were going to have lunch in a restaurant owned by Dick. Veronica wanted to travel back in time by about three minutes and tell Wallace yes, let’s go home. Too late now.

The restaurant, Breakers, was right on the beach. Dick walked them through the main dining room, which was all glass with expansive views of sand and surf, to the back deck. Rattan chairs with thick blue and white striped cushions were grouped around expensive teak wood tables. Large white market umbrellas offered shade for those diners who didn’t want to bake in the California sun. The railing on the outside patio mimicked the rails of a ship and life preservers with the name of the restaurant hung every few feet. It was like dining on a lavish yacht. Their table was the best on the patio with an uninterrupted view of the Pacific.

Keith opened a menu. “So Richard what would you recommend?”

Veronica nudged Dick. “He’s talking to you.”

“Uh, everything’s pretty good, I guess.” He leaned down to whisper in Veronica’s ear. “Lunch with the ‘rents? I don’t think so. I’m out, Ronnie.” Dick made some excuse about ‘work to do in the kitchen’ and disappeared. Veronica knew she was in trouble when she contemplated following him. She buried her face in the menu. When the waitress came to take their order she was ready.

For an appetizer she picked the artichoke frizzles; artichoke hearts coated in a seasoned batter and then deep fried before being served with a garlic cream and ranch dressing. As a main course she selected something called The Deckhand, a burger with bacon and smoked Gouda. She also asked for an order of tortilla soup, a salad, and for dessert a brownie ala mode.

Wallace was staring at her. “Was that order for the whole table or are you going to eat that by yourself?”

Veronica echoed his earlier comment. “You don’t have to make jokes.”

“Who’s joking?”

Everyone else placed their considerably smaller lunch orders and the waitress collected the menus. Subjects not to discuss: the baby, Logan, current events. What’s left Veronica? Maybe Weevil’s right and you should learn to knit.

When Keith asked Wallace: “How was Beaverton?”

Veronica tacked on, “Did you hear any juicy gossip for me?”

“Juicy gossip. Hmm, let me think.” Wallace seemed to ponder her question. “Van Clemmons is conducting random locker…oh wait this isn’t high school.”

“Ah high school…those were such happy days, hanging out at Arnolds, drinking milkshakes with Richie and Potsie.”

A slight smile teased the corners of his mouth and quickly faded. “The Piznarski’s were disappointed you left early. They expected all of us to stay with them not just Parker.” There was a slight emphasis on the word ‘all.’

Mac nodded in agreement. “It was a full house. I don’t think they wanted to spend the night alone.”

Keith gave Veronica a meaningful look. “That’s understandable.”
Veronica added *parental concern* and *potential jail time* to her ever-growing list of taboo subjects. “Did you ask them about Neptune and Piz’s story?”

“They didn’t even know he quit his job,” Wallace responded. “And they had no idea he was in Neptune until you called.” Another dead end, if Veronica didn’t get a lead soon, the only time she would see her daughter was through three inches of Plexiglas on visiting days. *Daughter? Great, now Logan has me calling the baby a girl. Next thing you know, I’ll be agreeing to Wyatt.*

When the waitress brought their food, Veronica asked for a milkshake and Wallace shook his head. “What? It sounded like a good idea.”

Silence fell over the table while everyone ate. Mac made an ‘mmm’ sound as she bit into her veggie burger. “Did Dick really cook this?”

“I know right? Hard to believe there’s another side to Dick Casablancas.”

“Whoa, slow down, Veronica. Just because he can flip a burger doesn’t actually add depth to…”

Veronica grinned. “Depth to Dick? Is that what you were going to say?”

“To his *character*, depth to his character.”

“I knew what you meant.” She gave her an exaggerated wink and Mac rolled her eyes. Keith was frowning across the table at her. “Not even a little bit funny?”

“It’s not that.” The familiar ‘I’m worried’ expression was back on his face. “Why don’t we drive you home now so you can get some sleep?”

“Sleep sounds great, but first I have to make a stop at the office.” Dottie ducked her head, Mac and Wallace exchanged a guilty look and Keith sighed. “What are you not telling me?”

“Dick’s house wasn’t the only one searched last night. Deputies executed warrants at my house and the office.”

“We need to go there right now.”

“It can wait until tomorrow. You’ve had a long day and you need…”

Veronica was shaking her head before he finished speaking. “I need to know what they took.” There was no need to add that her freedom was hanging in the balance; everybody at the table was already aware of the stakes.

A somber pall descended on their group and the drive to Mars Investigations was a quiet one. The office was a wreck. All the filing cabinet drawers were pulled out, their contents strewn across the floor. Ditto for the desks. One of Mac’s monitors was broken. The sofa was upended and its cushions ripped. And everything was gone; the computer hard drives, the emails, her case files, every piece of information on Piz’s murder—all gone.

Her first thought was Mac. “Am I going to have to bail you out of jail once they have a look through your hard drives?”

“Please, like they’re going to find anything.”

“Good I was worried.” Veronica paused. “On the plus side we could be cellmates…” *Shit, Norris.* She sat on the edge of the desk and called the Sheriff station. Her case files were gone, which
included the police and autopsy reports. Lamb was an idiot, but even he could piece together where she’d gotten them. With her best Texas twang she asked to speak with Deputy Clayton.

“Who’s this?”

If you can’t beat ‘em. “Bonnie, Bonnie Parker.”

It was a long wait before Norris picked up the phone. “Clayton.”

“Hey, it’s Veronica. Just a heads up, Lamb has my files. All my files.”

“Okay.”

“Don’t you get it? He’s got the case file and autopsy reports.”

“Thanks for thinking about me, Bonnie, but remember I have keys to the evidence lockup.”

“Gee, if only I knew someone with keys…hey, I don’t suppose you…”

“I’m hanging up now.”

It was worth a shot. Her eyes traveled over the chaos trying to decide where to start and came to rest on the ransacked closet. Jackets and sweaters were pulled from hangers, which were broken and tossed on the floor. Obviously Lamb and his merry henchmen got off on the destruction. Veronica could only imagine what they’d done to Dick’s house. She knelt on the floor and sorted through the clothes. One small, grey-marbled cardigan from Abercrombie & Fitch was missing. She racked her brain, trying to recall the last time she’d seen it. Definitely before Piz’s murder.

“Mac, when Marjorie Kincaid was here, did you leave her alone in the office at any point?”

Mac shrugged. “Maybe?”

Marjorie was the reason she was at the SDCC that day and if her missing cardigan was the one they found covered in Piz’s blood, Veronica had a pretty good idea how it got there. With Keith temporarily out of commission, business was slow. The only traffic in the office in the days leading up to the murder was Marjorie. But what did she have to do with Piz? Could she be the elusive new woman in his life? Plotting his murder and executing a plan to frame Veronica did not exactly shout-heat of the moment, passion.

She headed into the office. Keith and Dottie were kneeling on the floor, their heads bent together as they tried to organize what little paperwork remained. “Hey, have you had any luck finding Marjorie Kincaid?”

“They were right, she was exhausted. She stopped to say goodbye to Mac and Wallace. Mac’s laptop was open on the desk and she’d hooked it up to the printer. “I’ve started with the emails. I’ll bring in better equipment tomorrow and reconstruct the background checks. Oh, and the Caltrans footage… I
should make a list.”

“Thank you.” The words seemed insufficient.

Wallace gave her a big hug. “Don’t worry V, we’ve got this.”

Out on the sidewalk Veronica stopped. She looked back at the building. Since it was the last building on the corner there was nothing on its left and on the right was the parking lot- no help. She turned back toward the street and scanned the buildings and stores across the way.

“Are you coming?” Dottie was waiting at the car.

“Sorry.” Veronica climbed into the passenger seat. “Thanks for coming to court today.”

“I would’ve been there even if I wasn’t under strict orders to make sure you were okay.”

“Orders?”

Dottie nodded. “Logan was worried about you. When he couldn’t reach you all night, he called me.”

“Did you tell him about the arrest?”

“I did. I’d seen it on the evening news and had already spoken with Dick before Logan called. I told him not to worry, that Dick was getting you an attorney and you would make bail.”

Telling him not to worry would have the same effect as trying to put out a forest fire by spitting on it. At least he was still grounded. When they arrived at Dick’s house a large van with the name The Cleaning Specialists was parked in his driveway. Veronica said her goodbyes to Dottie and headed inside. Dick’s house was in worse shape than the office. Nothing remained unscathed. Furniture was ripped open. Anything breakable was smashed. So much for the rules of search and seizure.

A five man crew was working on getting things in order. It was a good thing she didn’t intend on staying, because there was no place to stay. She managed to find her purse, cell phone and keys.

“Any idea when you guys will be done?”

“Six, seven?”

Plenty of time for what she had in mind. She slid behind the wheel of Logan’s car and checked her cell. The voice mail feature listed ten missed calls. Three were from the bug in Nico’s office and seven were from a restricted number- Logan. The time of the first call was during the search and her arrest. Another call three hours later and the last five were spaced throughout the night. Her finger hesitated over the play button. Listening to them now would be a mistake and she had things to do.

She drove back to Mars Investigations, parking around the corner and out of sight. The only building with surveillance cameras was an office park directly across the street- a squat, flat building surrounded on three sides by a parking lot. Cameras on the corners of the building were angled toward the lots themselves, but Veronica was interested in the one mounted on the front of the building.

She stood under it and faced the same direction. It offered a perfect view of the walk leading up to the office, the street, and the front door of Mars Investigations. Veronica went inside. The main lobby was non-descript; unadorned beige walls, fake ferns in cheap plastic pots and a glass directory, which offered a map of the building’s layout. One of the rooms in the back of the building was labeled ‘security office’ in tiny print. Veronica wound her way through the maze.
Room was an exaggeration, more like a glass box the size of a closet. A small desk was shoved into the space with three computer monitors and a keyboard on its surface. An empty chair was pushed under the desk. The two monitors on the ends were cycling through pictures of the parking lots, but the one in the middle was a steady view of the front. She could clearly see the door to her office across the street.

She tried the door and found it locked. It was a cheap office lever lock. If she had a paper clip and an hour to kill she could get it open, but not before the guard came back from his rounds and called the sheriff. She was pretty sure breaking and entering would get her bail revoked. Good thing she didn’t need to go through the trouble. She pulled out her key ring, located the correct bump key, opened the door, and then called Mac.

“I need to retrieve a video file and email it to you, talk me through it.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be home sleeping?”

“I am sleeping; this is what you call a dream sequence.” Mac told her to confirm the current date and time were correct and then talked her through finding the video files for the Monday morning of Marjorie’s arrival and departure. Veronica found the files without any problem and emailed them. She returned the computer screen to the way it was, pushed the chair back in and left the office. “Very lax security in our neighborhood.”

“Where are you?”

“Across the street. Want to do me a little favor? Print out the best pictures of Marjorie Kincaid from those videos, oh, and a picture of Piz, then meet me on the corner.”

Veronica crossed paths with the security guard on the way out the door. He reeked of cigarette smoke, which explained his lengthy absence. She smiled at him as she passed.

It didn’t take long for Mac to join her. “I feel like we should be wearing trench coats and hiding behind newspapers.”

“I left my trench coat at the cleaners, but next time, I promise.” The pictures weren’t the greatest, but gone were the days of the grainy black and white picture. According to the date and time stamp, the first two pictures were of her arrival. Neither was a full-face view, but they weren’t completely in profile. The third picture was the money shot. It was taken as she was leaving. It was a high angle shot, but it captured her entire face. The fourth picture was the same shot, but Mac enlarged the image. It was good enough to get an identification from it.
CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Logan was interfering with her plan of a relaxing morning. Not him specifically, but her desire to talk to him coupled with the stubborn silence of her cell phone made taking it easy, not easy. Veronica checked the volume on the phone, which was fine and then went to her voice mails. She fell asleep listening to them last night and she listened to them again this morning. If she didn’t know better, she might actually think she was pining for Logan Echolls. She pressed play.

His first message was flirty. “Voicemail, huh? I’m going to pretend you’re taking a shower and picture you naked, soapy, and wet.” Veronica smiled.

The second was sweet. “This is Logan with today’s inspirational message. ‘The most important thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother.’ Henry Ward Beecher…I love you Veronica Mars.”

“Isabelle? Charlotte? Skyler? No scratch that last one, I think I definitely maybe slept with a Skyler, and she was probably a bitch, but the other two should be okay…where are you Veronica?” Sweet, snarky, and concerned all in the same message; the man could certainly multitask.

His last messages were just concern reflected by an increasing level of panic: Fourth: “Are you mad at me? Tell me what I did wrong so I can fix it.” Fifth: “God Veronica, are you okay? I know you can’t call me back, fuck.” Sixth: “Dick isn’t picking up the phone either, did something happen to you?” Seventh: “I’m calling Dottie. I just need to know you’re okay.”

It was frustrating to not be able to call him and to have to wait. Regular mail and emails were the only contact she could initiate, but both were iffy. Regular mail could take days or weeks to reach him on the ship and sometimes it was delivered out of order. When she wrote, or sent him something, she numbered the outside of the envelopes so he would know which piece to open first. Emails were slightly better, but even those could be delayed by days if there were higher communication priorities. Veronica didn’t want to think about the reasons for those higher priorities. There were lots of things she didn’t want to think about right now, Logan’s safety and her impending life sentence were on the top of the list.

She rolled over, plumped up the pillows and tried to find a comfortable position. It was useless. She was not made to be a lady of leisure, especially when there were lying witnesses to confront, bugs to listen to, and bad guys to track down. “Sorry baby, but mommy has to go to work.”

Mommy. The word fell from her lips with ease, but the ramification of it pinned her to the spot. She was going to be someone’s MOTHER. They were going to be PARENTS. How could something be so equally exciting and terrifying at the same time? It will be fine Veronica. You’re already doing such a bang up job of it; arrested for murder, skipping meals, and now you can’t even give yourself a few hours of much needed rest after a night in jail. She sighed. Relaxing was just stressing her out.

She went back to her voice mails, saved Logan’s first three messages and deleted the panic filled others. Then she pressed play on the first message from the bug in Nico’s office. It was four minutes of a one sided conversation and it picked up in the middle of his sentence. “--transfer come through?”

The bug had a decent range so it was doubtful that he was speaking to someone in the office. Her surmise was a telephone call. An unpleasant telephone call from the exasperated tone of Nico’s voice. “I know, but it gets later and later each time.” Exasperated slid into angry. “I don’t care who he is.” Angry then moved to threatening. “Maybe he needs a reminder that he isn’t the boss and we’re partners on this.” He listened some more. “You do that.” Bang. The slamming of the phone
startled her. An unhappy Nico sounded like a dangerous Nico. Veronica didn’t want to guess what kind of reminder he was planning, but she did want to know more about this partner.

The second message started with blaring trumpets and saxophones belting out Duke Ellington’s, Take the ‘A’ Train. It disappeared with the closing of a door. Veronica wondered if it was the guard troll coming into the office. Nico asked, “Did you take care of it?”

“It’s done.” Not the troll, somebody new. “I got him a room at the Neptune Grand.”

“Did you tell Petra?” Petra Landros, owner of the hotel- interesting.

“She knows to take care of him.” Take care of him how?

“Is there something else?” Impatient. Obviously this was an underling and someone Nico wasn’t interested in spending any more time with than necessary.

“Uh, no boss. I’ll just go back to work.” Piano and a pretty good singer doing Ella Fitzgerald’s version of All the Things You Are. Some day my happy arms will hold you. Veronica could relate. Some day was under a hundred days, but still too far away. My God Veronica, you ARE pining.

She moved on to the next message. “Hey Nico, did you see the papers this morning?” It was the door troll and he was teasing him. “What did she say her name was, Rory?” Uh-oh, don’t poke the bear, door troll.

The office was silent. Veronica was afraid the bug would shut itself off if they didn’t say something soon. “Go find me Charlie Gallagher.” She scrambled out of bed. If they found Mr. Misanthrope before she did, it would not be good.

The company Dick hired did an amazing job. Not only was everything pristine, all the damaged items were removed and replaced. It was back to pre-search warrant condition without missing a beat. She would like to be back to pre-search warrant condition just as easily. Too bad there wasn’t a 1-800-FIX-IT, for life in general. Veronica found her things and got ready.

Since she was still avoiding the café with her favorite breakfast burritos, she stopped at the first place she could find with breakfast to go and ordered two unappetizing looking pancake wraps to eat on the way. They weren’t too bad once you doused them in syrup, but by the time she got to Books and Beans she was sticky. Never too early to stock up on baby wipes. She licked her fingers and wiped them on her pant leg.

Charlie Gallagher wasn’t hard to find. He was sitting on his stool behind the counter reading a book. When the door chimed, he glanced up and grimaced. “Veronica Mars.”

Apparently, being charged with murder was going to severely limit the “undercover” part of her investigation. “You might want to head out of town for awhile.”

“Why, are you planning to shoot me too?”

“I’m considering it.” She leaned on the counter. “We don’t have a lot of time, correction, you don’t have a lot of time, so let’s skip the how have you been part of our conversation. Why did you lie about seeing my car and who put you up to it?”

His eyelids twitched as he studied the glass door and the street beyond. “Why don’t I have a lot of time?

Veronica snapped her fingers. “Focus here, this is important. Why did you lie?”
“I…don’t know what you’re talking about. That car,” he pointed through the window to Logan’s BMW, “or one exactly like it was parked across the street the morning you offed your ex.”

*Offed Her Ex- not a bad headline, but it lacked pizzazz, maybe with some practice he could get a job with the Neptune Register. “Is that what you told the sheriff?”*

“Of course I did. It was my civic responsibility and I had a moral obligation…”

“Excuse me, did you say moral? You are hardly a shining example of morality, mister I owe the mob five hundred grand in gambling debts.”

“I haven’t killed anyone.” *Touché, Mr. Misanthrope.* His eyes zeroed in on her. “What did you do?”

“Why do people always ask me that?”

Charlie hit a button on the register and the cash drawer popped open. He scooped out the bills and slammed the drawer. “You need to leave now.”

“But we were having such a nice chat.”

“Look, I don’t know what your problem is, but I did see that car. No one put me up to anything; now get out of my store.” He shuffled her out the door. “Oh and hey, good luck at your trial.”

He shut the door in her face, made a big show of locking it and then flipped the sign to closed. Veronica watched as he disappeared from view. Not wanting to be caught standing on the sidewalk when Nico’s goons came to collect Charlie, she got back in her car.

It wasn’t long before a black Toyota Corolla came flying out of the parking lot behind the store. Veronica considered following him, but abandoned the idea. It was hard enough to follow a person not looking for a tail; keeping up with someone watching over his shoulder would be fruitless. She made note of his license plate, but tracking him down later might prove to be a real problem. Unless she wanted to ask Nico, which part of the ocean he used for dumping bodies. No, her real problem with confronting Charlie was that she didn’t think he was lying.

He stuck to his story. He wasn’t evasive. He didn’t embellish or contradict and he wasn’t exactly unnerved by either her appearance or her questions. Veronica headed for the freeway. This time she didn’t park across the street, but pulled into the lot reserved for both employees and customers.

The reception area was just a desk and two chairs in the front of a large open space akin to a warehouse or car dealership. Tables and desks littered with computers and audio/visual equipment filled up the rest of the space. There was a mix of people; some in business suits and ties, some in jeans and t-shirts and still others in the tan Smart Start uniforms. Lots of ringing phones, talking and a constant hum of activity generated a considerable amount of noise in the cavernous space.

A cute brunette, hair twisted into a bun and held up with a pencil through it, was staring at her. She gave her a wide smile. “May I help you?” The question came out hectic, but friendly and slightly confused as if Veronica was in the wrong place.

“I would like to speak with Jim Kincaid if he’s available?”

“Sure thing hon, just have a seat.” She answered four consecutive calls with, “Smart Start, please hold,” and then buzzed an intercom on her desk. “Jimmy someone’s up front for you.” She went back to answering the steady stream of calls and Veronica felt a pang of jealousy. At least there was one business in the area that was actually, you know, busy.
James Kincaid didn’t keep her waiting long. “Hi, how can I help you…” He waited for her to supply her name, which she did. “Veronica Mars? Any relation to Keith Mars?”

“He’s my father.”

Jimmy tapped his temple. “I’m good with names. It helps in this business. Are you here about the private investigator symposium?” A rueful smile twisted her mouth. “From your expression, I gather the answer is no? Why don’t we speak in my office? Coffee?”

“No, thank you.” She didn’t want to impose on his hospitality. He ushered her into his office. It was not a space designed to impress or for show, it was a space for work. Jimmy cleaned the pile of paper from one of the chairs and dumped it on his already overflowing desk.

“Trust me; I know where everything is, mostly.” He grinned. “How can I help you?”

“This is awkward. My father and I are both private investigators, but he didn’t meet with you because of any symposium. I don’t even know if there is such a thing as a convention of P.I.’s? I’m guessing there would be a lot of fedoras and sarcasm.” Veronica shook her head. “Anyway, my father was following you.”

“Following me?” His shock was genuine. “Am I being, what do you kids call it, punked?”

Veronica smiled. “Yes that’s what we kids call it and no you’re not. A couple of weeks back a woman came into my office calling herself Marjorie Kincaid and claiming to be your wife. She said you were cheating on her and wanted me to get pictures of you in the act.”

“This is about that check, isn’t it?” He started flipping through the stack of papers closest to him. “The bank called me about it. They put the money back in my account, actually they had me open a whole new account, said they would investigate. Here it is.” Whatever he found, he didn’t hand it to her. He held on to it and sat back in his chair. “I can’t say what I find more surprising, being followed by a private investigator, or someone accusing me of cheating. Are you married?”

“Not yet.” Not yet? Where did that come from, Veronica? “Why do you ask?”

“I was just curious how your husband felt about you skulking around motels trying to catch people in the act. Poor bastard wouldn’t stand a chance if he thought about cheating on you.” He immediately looked chagrined. “I’m sorry; this is the point where my wife usually tells me to shut up. I hope I didn’t offend you?”

Maybe if she thought Logan cheating on her was in the realm of possibility his words would bother her, but it was the one thing she’d always been certain of, Logan’s faithfulness. “I’m not that easily offended, don’t worry about it.” She pulled the picture of Marjorie from her purse, held it back for a second or two, and then passed it across the desk to him. “This is a picture of the woman who posed as your wife, do you recognize her?”

He studied the surveillance photo. “I can’t say that I do, I’m sorry.”

“Would you mind if I showed it to your employees?”

“No at all. Most of them are here today, we’re getting ready for a big show. It’s pretty crazy, but if it will help.” He shrugged. He looked at the picture one more time before handing it back to her. Then seemed to realize he was still holding on to whatever he’d found on his desk and handed that to her too. “The bank faxed that over. They called it check washing?”
Veronica was familiar with the practice. You stole an original check to someone else, covered up the actual signature and then using nail polish remover, paint thinner, or bleach you removed the name of the payee and the amount. Once the check dried you were able to make it payable to yourself for whatever amount you wanted. Or in this case make it payable to Mars Investigations for fifteen hundred dollars.

The fax from the bank was a copy of the original check. It was only for three hundred dollars and made payable to a Mr. Thrifty. “What is Mr. Thrifty?”

“Car rental place, we needed to transport this screen for a last minute presentation. I won’t bore you with the details, but that’s how much he charged us for two hours. Needless to say he wasn’t very thrifty.”

“Do you have their address and phone number?”

“Sure, just give me a minute.” She gave him ten, but eventually he found their business card and handed it over. “Keep it; I won’t be using him again.”

Veronica thanked him for his time, reminded him that she was going to show Marjorie’s picture to his staff, and left his office. All of the employees were just as friendly and accommodating as their boss, but like their boss not one of them recognized the picture of Marjorie Kincaid.

After striking out at Smart Start, Veronica decided to console herself with a good lunch. She picked up two roasted turkey sandwiches loaded with cranberry sauce, stuffing, and gravy on fresh baked ciabatta and headed for her dad’s house. “Anybody home?”

“We’re back here.”

We’re? The living room didn’t look too bad and the kitchen was clean. Veronica regretfully put the sandwiches down and murmured to them, “Don’t worry I’m coming back for you.”

She found her dad in her bedroom with Dottie. “Now I know why the house is clean. If it was up to Dad, it would’ve stayed in shambles until the next search warrant.”

Keith smiled. “It wasn’t so bad, it had a nice lived in feel.”

“For Oscar the Grouch maybe.”

He stood up and pulled her into a hug. “Are you calling me a grouch?”

“No, I’m calling you a slob.” Veronica looked around the room. It was all her stuff, not her California things, but her life in New York stuff. Everything was neatly organized. Her clothes were all folded in orderly stacks on the pullout sofa. Three towers of books, mostly from law school, were on the desk. Her remaining personal items were separated into piles on the floor. “My boxes.”

Dottie stood up as she spoke. “They were all ripped open and tossed around the living room. We brought everything in here until we could get new boxes.”

“You don’t have to do that, I can get them, the boxes I mean. You’ve already done so much, too much.”

“Please Veronica, it was nothing and your father has been wonderful company. He was just about to feed me lunch.”

She gave a distracted wave in the general direction of the kitchen. “I brought sandwiches, they’re all
yours.”

Keith rubbed his hands together. “Turkey from Capriotti’s I hope?”

“Is there any other kind?”

“You’re in for a real treat Dottie, way better than anything I could have come up with.” He let Dottie precede him from the room before turning back to Veronica. “Are you coming?”

“I’ll be there in a minute.” As soon as they were gone, she went through her books until she found George Orwell’s 1984. “Please be here, please be here.” Still taped inside the back cover was an unopened letter from Logan written during their nine years of radio silence. She ripped it out and slipped it in her purse. Then she knelt on the floor in front of the mountain of personal papers and notebooks. It took her awhile, but she didn’t find anything from Piz.

These were her boxes from New York. The boxes he shipped to her right before leaving for Neptune. There was no way he sent her all her things without so much as a note. **Why didn’t I think of this sooner? Like before Lamb tore apart my life?** Whatever Piz sent her was either destroyed or tagged into evidence.

Veronica dug out her phone and called Norris on his cell. “So here’s what I’m thinking.”
Norris didn’t really like what she was thinking, but he agreed to look and ‘be in touch.’ It was not exactly what she had in mind. What she wanted was for him to go look while she was on the phone, but she didn’t want to seem too pushy. Before returning it to her purse, Veronica checked the volume on her phone yet again and yet again it was at the maximum. Where are you Logan? She was afraid he was no longer grounded. A grounded Logan would be calling her. What I need is a distraction.

Veronica left the bedroom in search of whatever remained of her turkey sandwich. Her steps faltered outside the kitchen.

“--could both use a little happiness, don’t you think?”

“Yes, but I’m not sure he’s the one to make Veronica happy.”

Dottie was taken aback. “Have you listened to her? The only time she seems remotely happy is when she talks about Logan and the baby and their future together.”

Veronica stepped into the tension filled kitchen effectively putting an end to their conversation. Keith looked up. “Are you ready to eat? We saved you a sandwich.”

“No. I was just coming to say goodbye. I, uh, am going baby shopping.” Since when, Veronica? “Apparently, I need a lot of stuff.” She turned to Dottie. “Would you like to come with me?”

Relief spread across her face. “I would love to.”

“Great. So what exactly is a Johnny Jump Up and more importantly, do I need one?” She gave Keith a quick kiss on the cheek. “I will call you later.”

They agreed to take Dottie’s minivan because it would give them more room for their purchases. “Are you sure you own a Mustang or did you just tell me that to make me feel better?”

Dottie’s laughter was strained. “It’s still in the shop, but I promise I have one.” She gave Veronica a sidelong glance. “You weren’t really going baby shopping were you?”

“Was I that obvious?”

“A little.” Dottie drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. “So where do you want me to take you?”

Evidence lockup, the Neptune Grand, Cara Murphy’s office, the Sandpiper Lounge, Nico Benedetti’s club, an aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf. “Baby shopping.”

Dottie was right. The only time she was happy lately was when she was thinking about Logan and the baby. Maybe she couldn’t spend a day lounging in bed, but she could indulge herself in a normal afternoon. They drove to a place called Goodnight Baby. The face of the store was painted to resemble the cover of the children’s book, Goodnight Moon and the glass doors were framed in red with moons and stars on them.

They were greeted by their own personal shopper, Rebecca-but-please-call-me-Becky. Becky had her complete a Mommy-to-Be card with her name, the daddy’s name, due date, sex of the baby, and shipping address. When she got to the shipping address, Dottie took the card from her and filled in the address of the house. Veronica arched a brow at her, but didn’t say anything. She could always
call the store later and change it.

Next, Rebecca handed her a “baby checklist” that was two pages long and daunting in its detail. Veronica was exhausted just looking at it. Dottie reassured her. “We don’t need to get everything today; we can just focus on the big items.”

Focusing on the big items entailed them starting with a crib and something Becky called a “co-sleeper,” which was essential if you were going to breastfeed. “You are going to breastfeed right?” The way she asked the question made Veronica panicky, like if she gave the wrong answer she would fail. Fail at what she wasn’t sure, baby shopping, motherhood? Why did you think this was a good idea, Veronica? Why don’t you stick to what you’re good at? Investigating clues and finding killers.

Dottie steered her away from the helpful Becky. Once they were on their own it was easier for Veronica to breathe and to select a crib, a sleigh crib in a warm honey colored wood. They ordered the matching dresser and changing table along with a glider rocking chair and ottoman. A co-sleeper, carriage, car seat, and bouncer later, and she was done. She handed the list to Dottie. “To be continued.”

“But you didn’t get any of the fun stuff.”

From Dottie’s frown, Veronica knew her expression clearly reflected her thought that none of this was fun. She forced a smile. “Where is this fun stuff you speak of?”

She hesitated unsure if Veronica really meant it, but then led her to the back of the store. One half of the back room was devoted to baby bedding and the other half to tiny baby clothes. Dottie started filling a cart with onesies—“You can never have enough of them”—socks, mittens, caps, and pajamas while Veronica trailed behind her. Whenever she would hold up something and ask, “Isn’t this adorable?” Veronica would nod and offer a non-committal, “mmm hmm.”

Absently, Veronica flipped through the racks of baby clothes. She paused when she came across a baby sailor dress. It was white with navy blue polka dots and two bands of navy on the hem. There were matching blue bands on the collar and it had a blue bow, which tied at the neck. It came with a navy diaper cover with polka dot frills across the butt, a polka dot beret with a bow and a pair of tiny navy blue booties. Her heart melted and she was hooked.

By the time they were done the back of Dottie’s minivan was loaded with bags. “Did we leave anything in the store?”

Dottie laughed. “I don’t think so.”

“Can we make a quick stop on our way home?”

“Food?”

“Computer store.” Veronica checked her still very silent phone and composed a quick email to Logan: Hey, not sure you got my earlier email so I’m trying again. Think you can arrange a Skype date? I miss you. She hit send and tried to forget that it was over twenty-four hours since his last attempt to reach her and three days since she’d last spoken with him.

After stopping to purchase a new laptop, webcam, and printer, Dottie drove her back to Keith’s house for her car. Veronica didn’t want to go inside and acknowledging that fact made her sad. Normally it was easy for her to compartmentalize, avoiding the topic of Logan in most, if not all, of their conversations. Whenever he did come up, they kept is light. Dad would ask how he was and
she would respond, he’s good and then they moved on to easier subjects. She knew he was worried about her and she also knew some of that concern was her fault. It was probably long past time she had a serious talk with him about Logan.

“Don’t worry it will get easier between the two of them once they spend more time together.” The spending time together was what she was worried about. A lifetime, her child’s lifetime, of birthday parties and holidays and family get-togethers stretched in front of Veronica. It would not be good if daddy and grandpa could not build some sort of relationship.

“Here’s hoping.” All of her purchases would not fit in the trunk of Logan’s car. Dottie volunteered to follow her back to Dick’s house and Veronica readily took her up on the offer. No one was home when they arrived and it took them multiple trips to get everything inside. When they were done, Veronica said her goodbyes and promised to call when she was ready for round two of baby shopping.

She took a quick shower and did her hair and makeup. Her outfit choices were limited. The dress she wore for Piz’s funeral was too sedate for her plans. She put on a stretch black miniskirt, a black sleeveless shirt with a sheer back and a pair of black espadrilles that laced up her legs. Her black leather sleeved jacket still fit, if she didn’t plan on closing it at any point in the evening.

Dick was standing in the living room amidst all her shopping bags. He whistled when he saw her. “You don’t need to put that much effort into it for me Ronnie, I’m easy.”

“Easy is a step up from where you are Dick.”

He grinned. “So what is all this? Someone else moving in to Chez Dick and if so please say it’s a hot redhead.”

“It’s stuff for the baby.”

“How many babies are you having?”

“Five, like a litter of puppies.” She deadpanned before opening the door. “Don’t wait up.”

“Wasn’t planning on it.”

The Neptune Grand had undergone some changes while she was away, but the main part of the hotel was still the same. A new five-star restaurant, Salacia, now occupied the top floor of the added north tower. Salacia, the wife of Neptune was worshipped as a goddess and ruled over the ocean. Veronica smiled; obviously Petra Landros had a high opinion of herself. She stood around the lobby for awhile in clear view of the front desk, hoping the clerk would remember her later, and then took the elevator to the restaurant.

Veronica gave her name to the maitre d’ and he escorted her across the marble floor to a table by the windows. The view was the same from Logan’s old balcony albeit from a higher vantage point. Since there wasn’t time to indulge in multiple courses, she skipped right ahead to the entrée of a grilled lamb chop and mixed vegetables. The one, very skinny lamb chop looked wonderful and tasted even better; however like all good nouvelle cuisine she left with both an empty wallet and an empty stomach. There was definitely going to be a fast food drive-thru in her future.

After paying the check, she got back in the elevator and went down one flight to a floor of guest rooms. The hallway was deserted. She wandered down the hall toward the stairs until she found a fire extinguisher cabinet. As long as there were no fires in the next fifteen minutes, she should be safe. Veronica opened the cabinet, wedged her purse behind the canister, closed the door and
stepped back to make sure you couldn’t see it. *Too bad the air vents are all out of reach.*

Logan.

With her luck, he would call while she was away from her phone. She ran her fingers through her hair until it looked properly “mussed” and took the elevator back to the lobby. The second the doors slid open she rushed to the front desk.

“May I help you?”

“Hi” --she glanced at his name tag and lowered her voice-- “Ethan. This is a little embarrassing, but I was having a *date* with one of your guests and we had a slight disagreement over *price* and when I stepped out of the room to call my…let’s call him my *manager*, my date locked me out. Problem is I left my purse in his room and I can’t remember which room number it is and we didn’t exactly exchange names, if you know what I mean.”

Ethan flushed a deep shade of crimson and started to fidget. He stammered, “I’m, uh, not really, uh, sure how I can, uh, help you.”

“He’s a new guest, he just checked in on Monday. Nico Benedetti made the reservation, if that helps?”

“I don’t think I can--”

Veronica cut him off. “Look, Petra Landros gave specific instructions to take care of this guest and if I screw this up I will never be able to work this hotel again. Do you want that to happen to me?”

He started clicking keys on his computer. “We had a lot of check-ins on Monday.”

Veronica considered the problem and factored in the involvement of the hotel’s owner. “How many are single males in hospitality suites?”

Ethan did some more tapping. “One. I could lose my job if…”

“No one will know, I promise.”

He leaned closer to her. “Lev Sorokin, room 1210.”

“Sorokin?” She felt dizzy and it wasn’t from lack of food. Weevil warned her that Nico Benedetti was dangerous and connected, but she wasn’t expecting this. Veronica stepped away from the desk and took the elevator upstairs to retrieve her purse. Nico was waiting on a transfer, she assumed a money transfer, from his partner on the same day Lev Sorokin arrives in town. Was he the partner or the reminder? Either way it meant there was trouble in river city, trouble with a capital T.

A familiar face, hawk nose and cleft chin, was walking toward the elevator. Even though he wore an expensive, tailored grey suit and matching tie, on him it didn’t look so much like a style choice as it did a uniform and his unruly mess of curly brown hair ruined any hint of gentility. When he noticed her, he stopped short. “Veronica Mars.”

“Ratner.” She saw the brass nameplate pinned to his lapel. “Are you still working here?”

“Are you still sticking your nose in where it doesn’t belong?” He smoothed down his tie. “I’m the manager now.”

“Bully for you.”
“What are you doing in my hotel?”

“Leaving.” She retrieved the car from the valet and drove to The Spot to pick up a dinner that would satisfy more than a baby bird. Veronica ordered their spicy chorizo potato skins, the French Dip sandwich, and a bottle of water to go. It was a short drive to the Sandpiper and she managed to snag a spot on the ocean side of the PCH near the overlook.

Lev Sorokin, Gory’s uncle, the ‘dispose of cut up bodies in hefty bags’ uncle. Veronica didn’t peg him as the man with the money, but rather someone brought in to take care of a little clean up. On the plus side, he arrived before Nico realized she wasn’t Rory Gilmore, so she felt relatively safe. On the down side, she had no idea if this had anything at all to do with Piz or if it was just business as usual for the mob.

Her cell phone chimed the arrival of a new email: *Lucy, you’ve got some ’splaining to do. Skype tomorrow night, nine your time. I’m glad you’re okay and I miss you too.* Relief washed over her and she finished her dinner with renewed zeal.

After locking up the car, she tossed her trash in the nearest bin and walked the two blocks to the bar. The Sandpiper Lounge was what you would call a dive bar. Locals referred to it as the dirty bird and they loved it, despite the five dollar cover charge, the dirty floors, and the dim lighting. It was what every local bar should be- rowdy and entertaining, except for tonight.

Tonight there was no band, but she still had to pay the cover charge, and there weren’t many people. According to Yelp, Thursdays were their busiest night, aside from the weekends. Good thing Piz decided to get smashed on a Wednesday; it increased the odds that someone might remember him.

Veronica took a seat at the bar. The bartender looked like Gandalf. He was busy serving drinks at the far end of the room and it took a long time for him to wander over to her. She expected him to say, *a wizard is never late, nor is he early, he arrives precisely when he means to,* but instead he offered the more generic, “What can I get you pretty lady?” Veronica was disappointed.

“I was hoping you could help me.” She put her bag on the bar and slid out the picture of Piz. “A friend of mine has gone missing and this is the last place he was seen.”

He barely glanced at the picture. “Haven’t seen him.”

“Could you please look again?” Veronica started to cry. “He’s not just a friend. He’s more than… I’m really worried about him. I don’t know what I’m going to do if I can’t find him.”

His expression said he wasn’t buying her act, but he picked up the photo. “When did you say he was here?”

She debated on how much information to give him. She didn’t want him to associate the date with the murder and realize Piz was more than missing, but she wanted to supply him with enough facts to jog his memory. “It was a Wednesday night, beginning of the month; friends say he got really drunk?”

Gandalf stroked his beard and shook his head. “Nope, sorry, nothing really stands out about the guy.”

“Was there anyone else working?”

“Wednesday nights it’s usually just me.” Veronica slid the photo back in with the pictures of Marjorie.
“Going to show me that other one?”

Veronica shrugged. *What do you have to lose?* She handed him the photo of Marjorie Kincaid.

It took him no time at all. He banged his pointer finger down on the center of Marjorie’s face. “Her I remember. Took an entire four top for one person, then nursed a club soda all night and left no tip.”

*Here’s to being cheap.* “Was it the same night maybe? Wednesday?”

Gandalf was excited. “Most definitely. We’re pretty slow early part of the week, ladies night or a Friday, Saturday we would’ve made her give up the table.” His eyes wandered across the bar toward said table. “Let me see the other dude again.” Veronica put the picture of Piz back on the counter. “Yes. Now I remember him. Completely shitfaced, drinking *cocktails.*” His ‘real men don’t have fruity mixed drinks’ opinion was inherent in the way he used the word cocktail. “I had to call him a cab.”

“Were they together?”

More stroking of the beard. “No, but now that you mention it…” Veronica followed his gaze as it moved back to the table, and then down to a seat at the far end of the bar. “I kinda feel like she was watching him. ‘Course it could just be that he was an ass. At some point he started singing that crappy eighties song, what was it?” He snapped his fingers. “*Love Stinks. You know the one, you love her and she loves him.* He got pretty loud and obnoxious. Hell, half the bar was staring at him.” Gandalf seemed pretty impressed with himself and his memory.

“Did they leave together?”

“No. After his jacked up karaoke I called the cab, but she did leave right after him, and I mean right after him.”
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It was late when she got home and she spent most of the night checking the bug in Nico’s office to see if she could learn anything more about Lev Sorokin. There were conversations about the liquor supply, a new waitress, the crappy job the laundry service did on the table linens, but nothing about their guest at the Neptune Grand. The only thing slightly interesting was a throwaway comment about the start of the month and the bills being mailed. Of course they could’ve just been talking about their bills for whisky and cigars.

Late night notwithstanding, Veronica didn’t roll out of bed until well past noon. Bathroom, breakfast, and then baby clothes. She wanted to sort through her purchases and find the items to show Logan including a little onesie that said, “I’m the present Daddy gave Mommy before he deployed.” Maybe the cute, tiny outfits would work their magic and he would forget all about the ‘splaining she needed to do.

Dick was gone so she was left to her own devices when it came to food. She passed on the bacon. Eating it wasn’t the problem, but the smell of it cooking was something she rather not chance. Veronica tossed some fresh fruit into her Greek yogurt and made toast. It wasn’t exactly an inspired breakfast choice, but it would hold her over until her planned lunch date. First, she needed to go in to the office and see how far Mac had gotten with reconstructing the Piz files.

Veronica read the paper while she ate. Fortunately, no new bodies turned up in Neptune overnight. She couldn’t see Jeff Ratner and Gandalf being very agreeable alibi witnesses. The latest story on the adventures of Bonnie and Clyde was tucked away on page six. This time it was a picture of them Veronica didn’t even remember. It was shortly after she’d moved to Neptune and the four of them became friends. She was wearing her soccer uniform and Logan’s arms were loosely wrapped around her. The background was too hazy to reveal any details, but they were probably at the school and Lilly was probably the photographer.

She sighed. The caption read, “Innocence Lost” and the story was a side-by-side comparison of their past “crimes.” Bum fights and fake IDs. Vandalism, Lilly, kidnapping, helping an escaped fugitive, Felix, tampering with evidence, Bonnie, and Piz- they’d hit all the high points, or low points depending on how you looked at it. Veronica went to throw it away, hesitated and cut out the picture of her and Logan before discarding the rest. She tacked the photo to the fridge.

When she was finished sorting the clothes her neutral pile was substantially smaller than her girl pile. “Your daddy better be right baby or he’s going to be spending a lot of time in the return line.” The bedding she’d picked out was neutral, classic Winnie-the-Pooh in soft greens and beiges. When Dottie made her put the crib bumper back because they could cause “suffocation, strangling, or entanglement,” Veronica almost passed out. How did she reach her age with no baby knowledge at all? Was she missing some kind of mom gene? Again her thoughts wandered to Lianne, but Veronica pushed them away, got dressed and left for the office.

Mac wasn’t alone at Mars Investigations. Dad was there, pretending to understand as Mac explained all the new computer equipment and what it did. Veronica took one strong sniff of Mac’s latte before putting it on her desk. “What is all this stuff and what bank did we knock over?”

“Not a joke you should be making, Bonnie--we rob banks--Parker. I used petty cash.”

“Petty? This is more like considerable cash.”

“You’re rich now.”
Keith shook his head. “Mac just spent an hour telling me what it all did and I still couldn’t tell you, but isn’t it fancy? We’re moving up in the world, kid.”

There were four large monitors on her desk, multiple keyboards, a very expensive looking printer and a whole bunch of things, Veronica couldn’t identify. “See I knew I would be the best rich person, generous gifts for my friend and an expensive lunch with my dad.”

“An expensive lunch? Is it hiding in your purse?”

“No, I’m taking you out to eat. Anywhere you want, under twenty dollars.”

“Each?”

Veronica shook her head. “Total. I have to keep my frivolous spending to a minimum.” The computer was cycling through images of a four way intersection at a rapid clip, when it suddenly stopped. A picture of Logan’s car appeared in the corner of the monitor. “What’s that?”

“Cars, Veronica.” She swiveled toward the screen and frowned. “It’s the Caltrans footage from the corner of Wallace’s block.”

“From a different day, right?”

Mac’s silence was her answer. Veronica studied the screen. The car was in the distant edge of the shot. Its top was up and you couldn’t see the driver only the hood and a dark rectangle of windshield. Mac hit a few keys and the frame advanced, the car started to make the right turn exposing the full side of the BMW, still no driver. Mac advanced to the next shot. The car was completing its turn, and you got a glimpse of the rear bumper, but no license plate. The next frame the car was gone. “I could delete them from the system.”

“No. You can’t, but thanks for offering.” Mr. Misanthrope wasn’t lying. There was a dark blue BMW, but Veronica knew it wasn’t her car, so there needed to be another explanation. “Go back to the previous screen for a minute.” Mac did as she asked. It was all from the wrong angle. “This is from across the street. It’s meant to catch the people traveling north going through the red light.” She tapped the very clear image of a license plate on a northbound white Volvo. “I need you to get me the footage from the camera for the southbound traffic.”

"It will take me a little while.”

“And in the meantime, one of the two of you will tell me what this” --Keith gestured toward the screens-- “is all about. Preferably the tiny blonde one.”

“This is what I wanted to talk to you about over lunch, well, part of it.”

“Then I suggest we get to it.”

“While we’re gone could you do me one more teensy weensy favor? Work your magic in the DMV database and get me BMW registrations and maybe a list of all the places that rent luxury cars?”

“You mean in my spare time?”

“You’re the best. Oh, and did you get a chance to reconstruct the financials on Lamb and Sacks?” Mac handed her the paperwork and Veronica shoved it in her bag. “Thanks. Want me to bring you back anything?”

“Red Bull and licorice.”
Keith wasn’t happy. His expression and body language made that abundantly clear. To soften him up she drove them to Luigi’s for manicotti. The restaurant was a few levels above ‘pizza joint,’ but several notches beneath ‘five-star dining.’ It was also every stereotype you could imagine for an Italian restaurant. Red checked tablecloths, candles in wine bottles; Veronica wouldn’t be surprised to find Lady and the Tramp sharing a plate of spaghetti and meatballs at a corner table.

In the middle of the day, there was only one other table occupied, which was another reason Veronica chose this place- privacy. She ordered the Portobello mushroom parmesan, the manicotti and a side of garlic bread. Keith asked for the same. Once the waiter departed, he got right to the root of his unhappiness. “I thought I told you to stay away from the Sacks investigation.”

“That right there is our first problem. I am no longer in high school trying to figure out who faked the purity test scores or where the senior class trip money went, I’m an adult and, hopefully, your partner. We can’t keep things from each other, and you can’t order me off a case because it might be too dangerous. It just won’t work.”

Keith was quiet, then offered --“I will try, Veronica. That’s the best I can do”— before falling silent again.

The waiter used the lull in their conversation to deliver the appetizers and drinks. “Just so you know, I didn’t start investigating Sacks to be defiant.” She filled him in on the new job that brought Piz to Neptune and her conversation with Parker.

“What was he thinking?”

“I think he was hoping we could get back together.”

Keith studied her for a moment. “It’s not your fault what happened to Stosh, honey. Aren’t you the one that keeps telling me we have to make our own decisions in life? Well, that was his.”

Veronica knew he was right, but it didn’t make her feel better. She moved on to the reason for the Caltrans footage, Charlie Gallagher’s eyewitness statement, and then brought up the gambling debt.

“This next part you’re not going to like. Weevil took me to see Nico Benedetti; apparently, he’s the one-stop-shopping for all your criminal needs.”

“I know who he is and you’re right I don’t like the idea of you anywhere near Nico Benedetti.”

“I planted a bug in his office.” She retrieved her cell. “And I need you to listen to these messages.” She showed him which calls before passing him the phone. He listened to the first three from the night she was in jail and then she had him listen to the fourth message with the line about the bills.

“Real estate tax bills get mailed now and the first payment is due on the first of November.”

“Why would they be talking about tax bills?”

Veronica found the deeds for Sacks and Lamb in the paperwork Mac gave her, along with a copy of Sacks’ tax return. She showed Keith the two hundred thousand dollar purchase price for both pieces of property and then the amount of taxes Sacks claimed on his return. “I think that’s how they are being paid off.”

“Jerry didn’t have time to tell me anything before the…before he got spooked. He was working up to it. I think he was trying to understand where he went wrong. How he crossed the line without even noticing.” He sadly shook his head. “So Nico gets a wire from the money man and he pays the taxes, but what does it have to do with Stosh?”

“I don’t know. Somehow he found proof and they killed him for it? Maybe he witnessed something
he shouldn’t have?” Their waiter returned with the manicotti and garlic bread. It smelled so good; she couldn’t resist eating a few bites before continuing. In between mouthfuls she told him about her visit to the Neptune Grand and Lev Sorokin.

After destroying the evidence of her break-in at Jake Kane’s, losing the election for sheriff, and facing criminal charges, Keith was owed an explanation from her about the Castle and its secrets, including her, using the term very loosely, ‘sex tape.’ It was one of their last conversations before she left for Stanford. At the time it was a reason for her decision to walk away from everything, but now it meant he had no trouble recognizing the name Lev Sorokin.

“My first reaction is to tell you to stay far away from him, the Neptune Grand, Nico Benedetti and this entire case. Then, I would like to suggest putting your new found wealth to good use and recommend someplace warm, with no extradition.”

“But you’re not going to do that.”

“But I’m not going to do that. I will ask you to be careful. I’m still allowed to do that, right?”

Veronica smiled. “Like I could stop you.” She pulled the surveillance photo from her purse. “Meet Marjorie Kincaid.”

“Where did you get this?” A proud smile lifted the corners of his mouth as she told him about her little stint of breaking and entering at the security office across the street. “Do you know who she is yet? And how does she fit into the bribery?”

“It’s my compelling alternative theory.” Veronica shared her conversation with Cara Murphy and the idea that Piz was involved with someone here in Neptune. She added in the conversation with Jim Kincaid and the check washing. “The only problem with the theory is timing. The check had to be stolen well in advance of her arrival at the office and stealing my sweater to plant at the convention center took planning. And why frame me?”

“You said it yourself; Stosh was hoping you could get back together. If she was in love with him that would give her a very good reason to hate you.”

“Look at me making friends wherever I go.” Lunch was over, but she knew the conversation wasn’t. She signaled for the waiter, but instead of asking for a check she ordered dessert.

“There’s more?”

Veronica nodded. For this she didn’t want to be interrupted. She waited for the cheesecake and cannolis to arrive and the waiter to depart. “We need to talk about Logan.”

He sighed. “You overheard my conversation with Dottie.”

“The end of it, but yes.” She toyed with her cheesecake, put the fork down and met Keith’s eyes. “I love him.”

“Veronica, I don’t think Logan’s a bad guy, he saved my life…”

“He saved mine too, more than once.” This was hard. How could she put it into words? Love seemed insufficient. It didn’t begin to explain the connection between her and Logan. It was too small to convey all the feelings that she needed her father to understand. “Aaron wasn’t just a bad example, he abused Logan. I’ve seen the scars.” Physical and emotional.

“I didn’t know.”
“He doesn’t like to talk about it, but I think it made him feel helpless and when his mom killed herself, he felt like he failed to protect her somehow.”

“I’m sorry he went through that. It’s something a child should never have to live through, but…”

She held up a hand to stop him. “All those times he mouthed off to you, or he got angry, were because he was worried about me. The idea of something happening to me and him not being able to protect me, terrified him.”

“Honey, I know he has his good qualities. You don’t need to convince me that he loves you, I can see it.”

“It’s more than that. I need you to see how I feel. Logan may be hurt and damaged, but so am I. That damage and those losses chip away pieces of you, but Logan makes me feel whole. He is the best part of me. For the first time, in a long time, I’m happy.”

“Then why did you leave? If he makes you happy, why did you not see him or talk to him for nine years?”

*Good question, Veronica.* “It scared me. All of it, not just him. I wasn’t ready for any of it, but now I am. I want a future with Logan and I know it’s not going to be easy.” *But no one writes songs about the ones that come easy.* Veronica put her hand over his. “You need to let him in. For me and your granddaughter.”

He squeezed her hand. “If he makes you happy and this is what you want, that’s good enough for me.”

Veronica leaned over and kissed his cheek. “Thank you.”

Keith covered the silence by eating a cannoli. “Granddaughter?”

“Logan is convinced it’s a girl.”

Keith laughed. “Then I hope you’re not too fond of his hair.” He rubbed his bald pate. “You see this? This is what happens when you raise a girl.”

“Don’t blame me for your bad genes.”

“Your genes too.”

“I only got the good ones.”

He pointed his fork at her. “Shut up and eat your cheesecake.” Not only did she eat her dessert, but also three of the four remaining cannolis before paying the check. On the drive back to the office she got Mac’s supplies and gave them to her father to pass along. There was still enough time for her to see Mr. Thrifty and have dinner before her Skype date.

Despite her father’s assurance that it was “good enough” for him, Veronica was sure this was only the first of many conversations about Logan. It went well and he would try, but the Mars family tended to hold on to things. *Missing mom gene, double dose of holding grudges gene- check.*

Mr. Thrifty was up the coast in Encinitas. Veronica got on the 5 heading north. Fingers crossed, Mr. Thrifty dealt in high-end luxury rentals and Marjorie was working behind the desk. She could have the entire case wrapped up by dinner and present the fait accompli to Logan with a bow.
The car rental was in the middle of a block filled with dealerships, fast food places, a gas station, and a pool hall. Mr. Thrifty was a dump, an 8x20 metal office trailer surrounded by a sea of jeeps and trucks in a large enclosed lot. The chain-link fence wouldn’t keep out a toddler.

Her hopes dashed, Veronica crossed the lot to the “office.” A freestanding mailbox in the same dingy gray as the metal hut was wedged next to the stairs. Its lock was broken and it was stuffed with mail. Veronica gave the mail door a little nudge and it flipped open. Postmarks indicated none of it was more than a week old, but it wouldn’t take a criminal mastermind to pilfer a few checks. They were easy to spot in their glassine window envelopes. This entire trip was beginning to resemble a waste. *Hey Jude, it's me, Veronica Mars, the new patron saint of lost causes.*

She took the two steps and knocked on the door. “It’s open.”

A fireplug of a man with bright red hair was the sole occupant of the office. *Strike two.*

“Mr. Thrifty I presume?”

“Uh, there is no Mr. Thrifty. I’m Ian, are you here to rent a truck?”

“No. I’m a private investigator.” She showed him her license. “I’m investigating a case of mail fraud and check tampering.” Veronica put the picture of Marjorie on the counter. “Do you recognize this woman?”

He studied it for a while and then shook his head. “Nope.” *Strike three.*

“Are you the only one working here?”

“Just me. I own the place.” His chest expanded with pride.

*Do not say anything Veronica; let this man enjoy his paved paradise.* “The bank believes this woman took a check from your mail and used it to steal fifteen hundred dollars from one of their customers.”

“You’re not with my bank, right?”

“No, the money was stolen from someone else’s account.”

“Good. Well not for him, I guess.”

She returned the photo to her purse. “You might want to invest in a new lock for your mail box.”

“Sure thing, I’ll get right on that.” Veronica had the feeling he would be getting a new lock around the same time she got her pony.

The drive back home took double the amount of time thanks to the oxymoron known as rush hour. She picked up a large pizza with everything and a six pack of beer, in case Dick was home, which he wasn’t.

After eating her half of the pizza, she rummaged through the baby bags and came up with the floating octopus bath thermometer. *One, not-too-hot bath, coming up.* She slipped into the warm water and sighed. One of Dick’s Supima cotton, costs eighty dollars each, towels made an excellent pillow. If she could get a tub like this in her cell, prison might not be so bad. Except for missing the baby, her hand curled around the gentle swell of her tummy, and Logan. *Hmm, a bath with Logan,* she closed her eyes and imagined the idea. *Naked, soapy, and wet indeed.*
The chime of the incoming Skype call startled her awake. Veronica clambered out of the tub, grabbed her towel headrest and streaked across the house. She hit accept with one hand while trying to wrap the towel around her with the other.

Logan filled the screen. She knew the instant the call connected by the look on his face. His mouth dropped open, forming a silent sexy ‘oh,’ and the very tip of his tongue grazed his bottom lip. “If you were trying to distract me it totally worked.”

She wrinkled her nose at him. “I fell asleep in the tub.” He bent his head and moved lower. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to sneak a peek under the towel.” She wrapped it tighter. “Tease.”

A quick glance over her shoulder confirmed she was still alone and she dropped the towel. Logan’s sharp intake of breath caused an immediate response deep within her.

“Beautiful.” Her shiver had nothing to do with the ocean breeze and everything to do with the way he was staring at her. It was too raw.

She suddenly felt vulnerable and exposed and alone. Veronica grabbed his t-shirt from the bed and tugged it over her head.

His expression was pained. “Logan?”

“Give me a minute.” His breathing slowly returned to normal. “I love you, Veronica. It scares me how much I love you. If something…are you okay?”

Was she okay? “I don’t know. I’m worried. I can’t stop thinking about what’s going to happen to me, if I don’t find who killed Piz.” She sunk her teeth into her bottom lip to keep from crying. “They’re calling us the Bonnie and Clyde of Neptune.”

He closed his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t do that. Don’t start taking the blame for something that isn’t your fault.” Maybe you should take your own advice, Veronica. An awkward silence settled between them. “Hey, I went baby shopping.” That garnered her a slight smile. “Let me show you.” She held up the sailor dress for him.

“You bought a dress.” Full-fledged grin.

“Someone, not naming any names.” She fake coughed ‘you.’ “Keeps insisting it’s a girl and look.” Veronica held up the pink onesie with the deployment present slogan, which earned her an actual laugh.

“Chloe will look great in that?” She shook her head. “Riley? Allison? You keep shooting down all my names and I’m going to start believing you’ve agreed to Wyatt.”

“Charlotte wasn’t bad, like Charlotte Lucas from Pride & Prejudice or Charlotte Brontë.”

Logan shook his head. “Think more like Charlotte, Charlie, Blackwood from Top Gun.”

Veronica smiled. “You really need to read more.”

“So you mean like, Charlotte’s Web?”

“That’ll do pig, that’ll do.”
“Now who needs to read more? That’s from *Babe*; the radiant pig in Charlotte’s Web was Wilbur.”

“I didn’t know they had a Cliffs Notes version of that.”

He smirked. “I have it right here next to my copy of *Now You Too Can Speak Sarcasm*. It’s only supposed to take thirty days to achieve full fluency.”

“I think you’ll have it mastered in less.”

“That’s funny; the book seems to have been written by Veronica Mars.” They were grinning at each other like two fools.

Her smile slowly faded. “Logan? I, umm, have a confession. The letter you sent me in New York?”

There was a soft, ‘mmm hmm’ from him. “I still have it, but I…I never opened it.”

“I wondered…just throw it away, it’s not important anymore.” He frowned. “Why did you keep it?”

“It was from you.”

The smirk was back. “There were more. I wrote to you almost every day for a year. I’d write them and when I was done, sometimes before I was done, I’d rip them up and throw them away. That one managed to get by me.”

“Can I read it?”

“You and the reading again.” He shrugged. “Do whatever you want with it Veronica, it’s yours.”

Someone called his name. “I have to go.”

“I love you.”

“Always.”
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Just throw it away, it’s not important anymore. Veronica couldn’t decide what he meant with those words. A year of writing letters he never sent had peeled away all his layers of snark and sarcasm until there was nothing left, but raw emotion, much like the look in his eyes during last night’s Skype date. The one page letter was a heartfelt plea for forgiveness, a declaration of love, a marriage proposal, and a promise of forever. Veronica read it again:

Dear Veronica,

You know those movies where one small decision changes the entire course of your life? What if I’d turned here or did this or said that would you still be here with me? I’ve fucked up so many times even if I went back I’m not sure I’d ever be able to find the right words to make you stay. I do know that I don’t want to be without you another year, a day, an hour, or a minute longer. I want to marry you Veronica Mars. I’m so sorry that I hurt you and I want to spend the rest of my life making up for the moments that made you leave me.

You are my heart. It kills me that I’ll never be able to hold you again and that the only thing I have left of you is a memory. I miss your sass and your random questions. I miss everything about you. Most of all I miss your faith in me and your belief that I could be a better man.

This past year has been hell. I’ve achieved new lows that would surprise even you. I want to change for you, but I’m not sure how to do that without you here to tell me and call me on my bullshit. You’re the only person left who means anything to me at all and without you there doesn’t seem to be a point to it. Life. My life anyway, is worthless without you in it. God, Veronica, I love you. But this isn’t about me, right? It’s about what’s good for you and I’m afraid I’ll never be the man you deserve.

This is the last letter I’ll write to you Veronica. I’ll resign myself to the fact that I won’t ever know if you’re happy. I’ll never know if your life is the way you want it. I’ll never know if you think about me or us the way I think about you. Please be happy Veronica and know that if you ever change your mind, I’ll always be here for you. I won’t just love you for the rest of your life; I will love you for the rest of mine.

Logan

Just throw it away, it’s not important anymore. What wasn’t important anymore? Yes, they were back together and all the reasons for their separation certainly didn’t matter, but what of the rest of it? Veronica knew he loved her. It was clear in the way he touched her, the way he held her. There was a tenderness, a certain softness, to Logan that he revealed only when they were alone. It was the Logan that belonged only to her.

Face it Veronica, when you question what isn’t important anymore, you want to know if he still wants to marry you.

In her last conversation with Piz over breakfast burritos and recriminations, she told him, I don’t want the life you want. He wanted marriage and kids with a house in the suburbs and a family dog. But did she really not want that life at all, or did she not want that life with Piz. There was a big
difference between the two.

If she was truthful, she’d been thinking about marriage ever since Dottie first called her Logan’s fiancée. It was the constant nagging thought in the back of her brain; did she want to marry Logan? The weeks they spent together before he shipped out weren’t about her falling in love with him again, they were recognizing that she was still in love with him, had always been in love with him. If their countless fights, numerous breakups, and nine year separation weren’t enough to change her feelings, nothing was ever going to change them. *I will love you for the rest of mine. Ditto, Logan, ditto.*

Did she want to marry Logan Echolls? *Yes. You know the answer is, yes.* There was no chalk ing the answer up to pregnancy hormones or how much she missed him. It was what she wanted. *Well if you plan on living that mostly-happily-ever-after in a house by the beach instead of from behind bars maybe you should get out of bed, Veronica.*

It was still dark when she left the house. The stars were just beginning to fade as the sky turned from midnight to sapphire. By the time she ordered a “California Sunrise,” a fresh crepe stuffed with egg, bacon, cheddar, and avocado, it was actually sunrise.

Veronica ate her breakfast in front of Manny’s Flower Hut while waiting for them to open. Without the Kane billions there were going to be no orchids, monkey-faced, or otherwise. She ordered a large non-exotic bouquet of multicolored tulips and purple irises, no card. Once outside, she double-checked the flowers to ensure there were no clues to the location of the florist. She laid them on the back seat and drove to the office.

The closet was reorganized, but she eventually found what she wanted, a pink uniform shirt and matching pink ball cap with the name “Zuzu’s Petals” in script across the front. Veronica pinned up her hair and tugged on her black wig before donning the uniform. She used the basic word processing software to create delivery receipts with the florist name at the top and a background picture of rose petals. Using her left hand she signed for the first two floral deliveries, Mary Hatch and Sam Wainwright, and then tacked the receipts on her clipboard. Back in Logan’s car, she checked the rearview mirror, made a few minor adjustments to the wig and added a pair of slim-framed, black camera glasses.

If she was going to follow the man around Neptune, she needed to get a look at him first. She parked at an oblique angle to the hotel with a good view of the front entrance and then circled around the block on foot to approach from a different direction. This time there was no pausing in the lobby. Veronica went directly to the elevator and headed for the twelfth floor. Room 1210 was a corner suite. She knocked on the door and waited. When there was no response, she knocked a little louder. A muffled --“Coming”-- was barely audible. The door swung open. “What?”

Channeling Cher from Clueless, Veronica launched into her best ‘Valleyspeak.’ “Like, I’ve got a delivery for, like, Lev, um”--she glanced at the clipboard--“Sorokin.” She intentionally mangled his last name. Receding hair line, sunken eyes, and prison pallor, he reminded her of the actor who played porn director, Dino Velvet in the Nic Cage film, 8MM.

Lev made no move to take the bouquet. Veronica thrust the flowers at him and he grabbed them before they hit his chest. With her hand free, she readjusted her glasses and hit the button on the side of the frames. “You like, need to like sign for them, duh.” She held out the clipboard.

While he was scrawling his name, Veronica hit the button on the frames again. He shoved the clipboard at her. She held out her hand, palm up, and waited for her tip. Lev Sorokin slammed the door in her face. *Kills people and he’s rude.*
When she returned to the car she found her father sitting in the passenger seat. “That’s the trouble with convertibles; they don’t keep out the riff raff.” She slid in behind the wheel. “How did you find me?”

“How did you find me, she asks the best private investigator in Neptune.”

“Best?” She waggled her hand. “Eh, maybe second best.”

“I taught you everything you know.”

Veronica grinned. “And the student has now become the master.”

Keith patted the dashboard. “She’s a really fine automobile, but she’s a real easy to spot.” He dropped the cheesy Italian accent. “I saw you pull up, but I didn’t want to interrupt the subterfuge, figured you could use the practice, since your skills are a little rusty.”

“As if. But seriously folks, what are you doing here?”

“See? Rusty. This is what you call a stakeout.” Veronica tilted her head and waited for him to continue. “Lev Sorokin, room 1210. I’ve been tailing him since yesterday afternoon.”

She frowned at him. “You are supposed to be home resting.”

“Put my feet up, have a beer and watch the game while my daughter stands accused of murder?”

“Exactly.”

He considered it. “Well, maybe if the Padres had made the playoffs.”

Veronica shook her head. “Flower delivery?”

“Pizza and he was both, rude and a bad tipper.”

“You got a tip? Now I’m offended.” She handed him the glasses, tossed the wig and the hat in the backseat and pulled the pins from her hair. “Has he been anyplace interesting?”

“Around ten last night he drove to this house in the sticks. Whoever he was meeting was already there and inside. I was too far away to get a clear shot of the car and license plate.”

“What about the house?”

“Mac ran the address, but it’s a vacant foreclosure.”

It was possible his late night rendezvous was with Nico Benedetti, but Veronica didn’t think so. Nico was the type to conduct his meetings on home turf where he could play master of his domain. “Have you been here all night?”

“Lev got back to the hotel around midnight and I packed it in an hour later.”

“So it’s possible he paid a late night visit to someone else?”

Now it was Keith’s turn to frown. “Give me a little credit Veronica. I put a tracker on his rental car. He hasn’t moved from the hotel since I tucked him in.”

Her phone chimed alerting her to an incoming text. It was a number she didn’t recognize, but the message read: *California Love Truck at one*. Still three hours away. “Looks like I have a lunch date.
Do you want to go home for awhile and come back around twelve thirty?”

“I think I’ll stretch out right here and keep you company.”

Veronica suspected his reluctance to leave was her proximity to Lev Sorokin, but she didn’t call him on it. “Just keep your snoring to a minimum.”

“I make no promises.” He reclined the seat, made himself comfortable and closed his eyes. Veronica figured it was only a matter of minutes before he fell asleep. Instead he surprised her with, “So tell me about Logan saving your life…more than once.”

Of course he wouldn’t let that detail escape his attention. He couldn’t focus on the ‘I love him and he makes me happy’ part, no, he had to focus on the saving me from death part of the conversation. “Aren’t you a little old for bedtime stories?”

“You have what? Seven, eight years of bedtime stories in your future? Might as well start now.”

A picture of Logan snuggled in bed with a towheaded toddler reading her Dr. Seuss made Veronica smile. Of their own volition, her eyes traveled to the roof of the Neptune Grand and her smile withered. If Logan hadn’t come to her rescue that night on the roof… “Let’s concentrate on one life threatening situation at a time, shall we?”

“You’re the one that brought it up.”

“Yesterday. Sorry you missed the Q&A portion of my speech, but the floor is now closed.” Veronica softened her refusal. “At least for now, okay?”

Keith nodded and closed his eyes again. Logan was right; stakeouts in the movies were sexier than this. In a movie there would have been at least one gunfight and car chase by now possibly even a gunfight during the high speed chase. She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. Time was moving so slowly she could practically hear each second tick by, plus she was hungry and she needed a bathroom break. Someone needed to add 'stakeout Russian mobster' to the list of things not to do when pregnant.

Lev Sorokin remained ensconced in his suite for every tedious and boring second of the three hours. Probably eating cold pizza and tiptoeing through the tulips. Veronica woke up Keith who returned to his car with a promise to let her know when he was on the move. On her way to the beach, she stopped at the first gas station with a bathroom. One problem solved, now only a million more to go.

Norris was already waiting on the park bench. Veronica decided to try the Love burger with guacamole and cheddar on a toasted bun, plus the carnita fries. Once she had her food, she settled on the bench next to him. “The eagle flies at midnight.”

“Cute.”

“You suck at this spy stuff. The answer is, but only if it’s Thursday. Should I go back and we can try again?”

Norris shook his head. “Do you take anything seriously?”

“Lunch, I take lunch very seriously.” She adopted a stern expression as she bit into her burger. Norris sighed and slid a manila clasp envelope across the bench to her. “That was pretty good, very covert. Next time you might try hiding it inside a newspaper first.”

“I hope the inmates appreciate your sense of humor.”
“I’m sure I’ll have my fans.”

“Yeah, you’ll probably be real popular.”

“Oh good, it’ll be just like high school.” She finished her burger and started on the fries. “Uh, Norris? Thanks for helping me with this.”

“You’re welcome.” They fell silent while she finished her fries and he ate his taco. When he was done eating, he tossed his garbage and said, “The ballistics test was inconclusive. It could be the murder weapon, but they can’t say with any certainty. Worn barrel, misshapen bullets.”

Veronica imagined their deformity was due to the impact with the stainless steel refrigerator. It didn’t matter to her. Inconclusive, or not, she knew the gun found at Dick’s was the murder weapon. Why bother to plant a gun if it wasn’t the one used to shoot Piz? She supposed it might help at trial in the ‘reasonable doubt’ department, but she was hoping things never got that far. “Any luck tracing the gun?”

“Not yet. A routine trace can take five days. If the shop that sold the gun is out of business, it could take weeks, or longer.”

“You know if this was CSI: Neptune they’d already know exactly where and when it was sold and who purchased it.”

“Yeah, but it wouldn’t be necessary ‘cause you would have offered a tearful confession once Lamb confronted you with the evidence.”

“In this scenario is Lamb Gary Sinise or David Caruso?”

“Why insult either of them?” She smiled. “I have to be getting back, take care of yourself, Veronica.”

Once he was gone, she opened the envelope and slid out the single sheet of paper. A photocopy of the letter Piz included in her boxes.

Dear Veronica,

You asked me if I was from Brigadoon, but it’s more like you are. Well I’m coming to Neptune before both it and you disappear for a hundred years. In case you were wondering that makes me Tommy and you Fiona. I have a new job as an investigative journalist for a radio station out there so the next few weeks will be all work and no play. I’m shipping your stuff like your dad asked, but mine won’t be too far behind it. When you get this letter Veronica please come see me so we can talk. You’ll know how to find me; it won’t be as hard as cramming for exams. Besides, I know how much you love the chase.

Love, Piz.

Nice. Veronica smiled. Well done, Piz. It would take Lamb a hundred years to conclude the letter meant anything more than it said. She used her phone to search for the nearest place to obtain passport photos. A place called Fast Foto was the closest. She had them take two sets of photos and then went shopping for the additional supplies she would need.
A few years back, California changed the look of their driver’s license in an effort to make counterfeiting harder; they added additional security measures. A company back east now manufactured them with a raised birth date, hidden images revealed by ultraviolet light, and a perforated outline of the California brown bear visible when a flashlight was pressed to the back of the card. Veronica didn’t have the time to perfect such an intricate fake, but she doubted a hotel clerk was going to run all those security checks just to turn over a left behind suitcase.

It took her several stops to collect everything she needed and, even with all the fancy new gadgets at the office, several hours before she was satisfied with the results. She put the new license in her wallet and folded the death certificate into a business envelope.

It was way past dinner and way past time to relieve Dad. She stopped for meatball subs and plenty of snacks on her way back to the Neptune Grand. There was a spot a few cars beyond his. She put up the top and locked the car before joining Keith. “Dinner.”

“Do you know how hard it is to get a pizza delivered to your car?”

“From the lack of sauce on your shirt, I’m guessing impossible?”

He peered into the paper sack. “I only see one hero, where’s yours?”

“That’s just for you and you’re taking it to go. You need to go home and get some rest.”

“Oh, am I pregnant too?”

She bit back the quip about it being possible considering his appetite since he wasn’t trying to be funny and was genuinely concerned. “I promise. If mister night owl doesn’t go anywhere by midnight, I will go directly home and to bed.”

“I know you too well to believe that, but I’ll pretend ignorance and let you have your way.” Keith unplugged the tablet from the cigarette lighter and handed both it and the charger to Veronica. A blinking red light indicated Lev’s car was still parked in the hotel garage. “Its boundaries are set for just the hotel; it will give you an alert as soon as the car leaves.”

The boundary settings on the new GPS trackers came in handy for following family and friends. If you knew where they were supposed to be, like their usual route from home to work, you could set those as a safe parameter, and then you would only be alerted if they crossed out of that area. It was like a virtual playpen. Briefly, Veronica wondered if she could sew tracking devices into all the baby clothes she just bought. The words overprotective mom flashed in her head like a bright neon sign.

Back in Logan’s car she got comfortable, but not too comfortable. This falling asleep at inconvenient times needed to stop. She made a mental note to ask the doctor if it was normal for her to be so tired all the time. She was trying to take Dottie’s advice and stay away from Google. Her last search about weight gain and what size her stomach should be left her feeling alternately too fat and too small.

As Keith predicted, midnight came and went and Veronica told herself, one more hour. At a quarter to two, she was ready to give up when the alert sounded and the red dot started to move. At this hour there wasn’t enough traffic for her to blend, but the tracker had a long range. She let Lev have a four block head start before she followed. The red dot moved at a nice steady pace and when it turned on Camino, Veronica knew where he was heading.

Nico’s jazz lounge closed at two. The lights were off, but there were a few people lingering in the front of the bar. Most noticeably this one guy, who was more than a little drunk, and still trying to get lucky with this girl he must have met inside. Her friend was rolling her eyes and trying to pull her
away, but she seemed reluctant to leave. Veronica thought there was a good chance a walk of shame featured prominently in her future plans.

Lev’s car circled around back and Veronica stayed put. She called the bug in Nico’s office while watching the desperate end of night scene unfold on the sidewalk. The friend finally quit tugging on the girl’s arm and made the universal call me signal with her thumb and pinkie. Drunk guy and lonely girl half-walked, half-stumbled down the street to his car. Veronica sighed. “I’m sorry kid, but your father is never going to allow you to date.”

Through her phone, she heard the door to Nico’s office open.

“Nico.”

“Lev.” The curt greetings spoke volumes about their relationship. Definitely not an employee, employer situation and there was no love lost between the two.

“Our mutual friend sends his regards.”

“Regards won’t pay the bills.” There was no response from Lev. “Did you take care of our problem?”

“I sheared your sheep.” Now that was how code speak was done, she’d have to make a note of it for Norris. “He won’t be taking matters, or anything else, into his own hands again for a long time.” The possibilities were endless. Killing Sacks, shooting Piz, framing Veronica, being an all-around idiot.

“He’s a necessary evil.”

“He’s a putz. Too bad Van Lowe wouldn’t play ball.” Hmm, that could explain his short tenure as sheriff. Good for you, Vinnie.

Silence. “Are you leaving?”

“Tomorrow. Unless there’s something else you need me to take care of?” The, because you’re incapable of doing anything on your own, was implied. Ouch.

“Have a nice flight.” Veronica silently tacked on the unspoken expletive apparent in Nico’s comment. Tomorrow was suddenly looking bright, Lev Sorokin would be gone and she would be stopping at the station for a glimpse of Sheriff Lamb. It might be her own personal TwitPic of the day.
Lamb was in bad shape. His left eye was swollen shut. Three stitches held together his torn bottom lip. His right arm was in a full cast past his elbow and encased in a sling. The left hand fared a little better, but it was still wrapped in a blue splint. Each time he moved, his face pinched in pain and his breathing was slow and labored, which Veronica was sure meant a few cracked ribs. Couldn’t have happened to a nicer guy. She smiled and took another picture. With Logan’s Christmas present taken care of, she put the camera on the passenger seat and headed for the motel.

All work and no play makes Wallace psychotic. Freshman year finals, Piz and Wallace rented a motel room out of town to study in solitude à la The Paper Chase. It ended when Wallace turned into Jack Nicholson and Piz returned to the dorms. She’d called Wallace this morning to confirm the location of said room. She took the 15 inland toward Black Mountain Ranch.

The Comfort Stay was a small motel with no view to speak of save for other buildings and one lone palm tree in its courtyard. Veronica eschewed the lot in favor of street parking and entered the lobby. It was definitely not the Neptune Grand. A pleasant, round-faced woman in a puce uniform was behind the front desk. She smiled when she saw Veronica approach. “Welcome to comfort. Are you checking in?”

“No.” Veronica schooled her features into an appropriately somber expression. “You had a guest staying with you a month or so ago and he left behind his things, Tommy Albright. I’m here to claim them.”

“Mr. Albright would have to claim them himself.”

“I’m afraid he can’t, there was this accident.” Veronica pulled the death certificate from her purse and slid it across the counter. The clerk barely glanced at it.

“I’m sorry, was he your husband?”

“Brother. Our parents passed a few years ago and it was just us, I guess it’s just me now.” The clerk looked so sad for her; Veronica felt a twinge of guilt for the lie. “I’m his next of kin.” She pointed to the spot on the death certificate where they included the name of next-of-kin/informant, Fiona Albright, sister was written in the correct box.

“I’ll just need to see some identification?”

“Of course.” Veronica opened her wallet and slipped out the driver license.

Like most people, the clerk confirmed the names matched and then spent a few extra seconds comparing the picture to Veronica. She handed it back and Veronica returned it to her wallet. “Usually we only keep things for thirty days, but you might still be in…” She chose to stop talking instead of uttering the word luck. Nothing lucky about having your last surviving family member killed in an accident. She patted the pocket of her uniform, confirming the location of her keys and then disappeared through the door behind her.

It was a short wait. When she returned it was with a large wheeled upright suitcase that matched the small version Piz had when he came to Keith’s to see her. There was also a duffel bag, boarding tote and laptop case. “Do I need to sign anything?”

The clerk turned to her computer and a few keystrokes later the printer behind the counter started to whir. Veronica signed the claim receipt. “Would you like some help with the bags?”
“That would be great, thank you for everything.”

She used the phone to summon Brian to her assistance. “I’m very sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you.” Veronica kept a tight hold on Piz’s laptop case and let Brian take charge of everything else. He not only carried them to the car, but loaded them in the trunk for her. She gave him a generous tip.

It was another beautiful California afternoon and as such it required eating outside. She was getting tired of restaurant food and takeout and the baby probably didn’t appreciate it much either. Veronica drove to Tender Greens for a healthy alternative and took the laptop to the open-air table with her. She ordered grilled veggies with parmesan and lemon vinaigrette along with their rustic chicken soup. The battery life on Piz’s laptop wouldn’t allow her to snoop through it, but she didn’t want to let it out of her sight until she delivered it to Mac.

When she was done with her soup and veggies, she was still hungry. She ordered the chipotle barbecue chicken and the harvest salad. The model-thin waitress with perfect hair and fake smile would’ve given her a disapproving glare if the Botox injections allowed for any facial expressions. Veronica just smiled at her and asked for another bowl of soup too. Her phone rang and her smile turned genuine when she saw the caller ID. “Hey you. Two days in a row, I’m feeling very special.”

“You should. Do you have any idea what I had to do in exchange for last night’s Skype time?”

“Whatever it was, I’s worth it.” He gave her an “mmm,” like he wasn’t so sure it was a fair exchange. Veronica kept her voice light. “FYI, if you’re trying to get me to marry you without an official proposal, it’s not going to work.” Absolute silence. Well, that was very successful, Veronica, good job. Her smile faded.

“So did you rip open the letter the instant we hung up, or did you give it a minute?” There was a slight edge to the teasing.

She tried again. “I think there’s supposed to be flowers and candlelight— you, down on one knee. I’m still a woman you know.”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed.” Droll, less of an edge.

“There’s also the matter of a ring and maybe a grand romantic gesture or two.”

“Hmm, does sex count as a romantic gesture?” The edge was completely gone and he was back in full Logan-tease mode. Veronica grinned.

“No, but the cuddling might.”

“Uh, should I be taking notes? This list is getting rather long.”

“You could just try paying attention.”

“Believe me Veronica; I’ve committed every word to memory.” His answer wasn’t in what he said, but in the soft way he said it. It was her Logan. The sincere and vulnerable one. “Do you have any idea what you’re doing to me?”

Veronica bit her lip. “Making you happy?”

“You don’t have to do this to make me happy, just being with you is enough for me Veronica.” She could almost see the furrowed lines of worry in his face. She wanted to smooth them away and kiss
him.

“But it’s not enough for me. I want this Logan.”

He expelled the breath he was holding. “I love you.”

“Me too.”

“If all our conversations are going to be like this, I will wash pots and pans for the rest of my life.”

“Good to know, can you cook too?”

“My cooking skills aren’t what you want me for.”

“Well, I don’t know. Lately food seems to be my top priority.”

“Only because I’m not there.”

Veronica looked around at the crowded restaurant. “Why do always choose to get frisky when I’m in a public place?”

“Frisky? I’m not a cat Veronica.”

“No? I seem to recall if I pet you in a certain spot…no, wait that’s me.”

“I love that spot.” His voice was raspy. Her face flushed and the heat spread across her skin. “Don’t be shy now Veronica, tell me what you want me to do to you.” She actually sputtered, which made him laugh. “You’re just lucky I don’t want my future wife to make a spectacle of herself in front of anyone else, but me.”

Her cheeks were burning. “Not nice, Logan.”

“I’ve been accused of a lot of things and nice has never been one of them.”

“You know two can play this game. Just wait until you see what I’m doing the next time you decide to Skype with me.”

“Tomorrow night then?”

“In your dreams.”

“Yep, every night for the past twelve years and in the mornings too. Oh and sometimes in the shower, and—”

“I get the picture.” Her second half of lunch was now cold and Veronica was no longer in the mood for food. At times like this, missing him, was an actual physical ache. “So is this going to be a regular thing, you calling me every day?”

“If only.” There was a slight hesitation. “Uh, the reason I was calling you now was to tell you it will be a few days and I didn’t want you to worry.” Days? Not good. “In fact, I should leave now. I love you, Veronica.”

“I love you too.” His parting news tamped down her happiness. She paid the check and drove to the office. Mac was at her desk and the computers were once again tracking through Caltrans footage. “Any luck?”
“I’ve found the right camera, so any day now.” Veronica put the laptop case on her desk. “A present for me?”

“It’s Piz’s.”

Mac studied her for a moment. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m just a little tired. I have the rest of his stuff in the car; will you help me get it?”

“You stay, I’ll get it.”

“It’s a lot of stuff.”

“I think I can manage it.”

Veronica didn’t argue. She sat on the sofa. Either her father or Mac had covered the damage with a blanket, Mac probably. It was not a very professional look; she’d have to see about getting a new couch soon and some plants and a new rug. She smiled, maybe her nesting instincts were kicking in early. Veronica pulled the blanket from the back of the sofa and wrapped it around herself. She would just lie down and treat herself to a small nap. Yeah and that’s really professional. Finding you sleeping on the reception couch is sure to inspire great confidence in all the prospective clients who are bound to come in.

When she woke, it was dark and she was in bed. Not on the sofa at Mars Investigations, but in Logan’s bed. It was disorienting and she was confused. She remembered going to get Piz’s stuff at the motel and her lunch conversation with Logan- was she dreaming? God, I hope not. She climbed out of bed and padded toward the bright light in the kitchen. Mac was at the table working on Piz’s laptop. At least that part wasn’t a dream.

“A little tired? I tried waking you, but…how do you feel?”

“Hungry.”

“Dick cooked dinner. There’s a plate for you in the oven.” Plate was more like platter with a huge slab of lasagna and a half loaf of garlic bread. “Salad is in the fridge along with a peach and almond tart.”

“Dick cooked dinner for you huh? You know that’s his signature move right?”

Mac frowned at her. “He cooked dinner for YOU. I was just your plus one. I think he’s taking this watch out for Veronica thing to the extreme. Either he is really terrified of Logan or he might actually like you.”

“I vote for the terrified of Logan option.” She took a bite of the lasagna, which was amazing. “Where is he anyway?”

“Restaurant. One of the chefs called in sick.” Mac glanced up from the laptop. “You know he’s actually not so bad.”

“He has his moments.”

“He came to get you the second I called him, no complaints.”

“Hmm.” Veronica studied her friend. “Why did you call him? I mean, why not call my dad or Wallace?”
“Dick is easy to bend to my will. Your dad would’ve had you in a hospital bed and Wallace just would’ve called your dad.”

“Smart move.”

“I thought so. I also called your doctor and scheduled an appointment for you for tomorrow. The Internet says you might be anemic. Can’t take any chances with my niece.”

“Are you terrified of Logan too?”

“No, I think I might actually like you.”

When she was done eating most of the lasagna, she got the peach tart from the fridge and sat at the table with Mac. “The man certainly can cook.”

“He told me, in the kitchen and the bedroom.”

Veronica’s fork clattered on the floor. “The bedroom?”

“Now who’s the perv? We were both here, in the kitchen and he told me that he can cook in both rooms.”

“That’s a relief.” Veronica picked up her fork and went back to eating the tart. “How is your love life anyway?”

“I’m sure I’m getting more action than you.”

“Not by choice.” She skewered a peach with her fork.

“Aw, missing Logan?”

“A little.”

“Is that the same little as in, I’m a little tired?”

“Maybe.” She didn’t want to talk about Logan anymore. The problem with sleeping most of the day was now she was wide awake. Not much investigating to be done at… “What time is it?”

“A little after nine.”

Not bad, only a six hour nap. “Piz was no slouch when it came to computers, but surely it can’t be taking you this long to crack his password.”

“I did that hours ago and don’t call me Shirley.”

“Then what are you working on?”

“I’m watching kitten videos on You Tube.” Veronica shook her head and smiled. Either she was rubbing off on everyone or everyone in her life was a natural at snarky charm. She chose to believe the former. “I found the Caltrans footage you wanted and emailed you the stills. Then I started on Piz’s emails. Apparently, he had another account we didn’t know about. He started it right after arriving in Neptune. He used the name Tommy Albright.”

“Gene Kelly’s character from Brigadoon.” Veronica left the table. “Where’s my purse?”

“Probably still in the car.”
“Which is?”

“Out front. Dick brought you here and I followed in Logan’s car. If he ever wants to get me a present, I’ll take one of those please.”

“Stand in line.” Veronica retrieved her purse and camera from the car and then started bringing in Piz’s suitcases. It took her three trips to get everything inside. She found the copy of the letter from evidence lockup and brought it to Mac.

Mac’s face clouded. “This was good. Maybe Piz would’ve done okay as an investigative journalist.” They both fell silent thinking about the future that Piz would never have. The Internet may have said anemia, but it could just be how exhausting it was for her emotions to be so high one minute and depressingly low the next. Thank God for Logan and the baby because without them this would just be one abysmal nightmare.

“What time is my doctor’s appointment tomorrow?”

“Ten.”

“Then maybe I should take you back to the office to get your car.”

“Nope, I’m staying right here. I’ll go with you to your appointment and we can go to the office after. Dick said it was fine.”

“I bet he offered you space in his bed?”

“It might’ve come up.” And she didn’t look very offended by the suggestion either. Curious.

“Well in that case, I’m going to take a quick shower.” Veronica did as she said, but quick turned into long. It could’ve been the relaxing hot water or an avoidance of the unpleasant task awaiting her of going through Piz’s things, but she decided not to quibble. She put on a tank top and her new favorite comfortable item of clothing – Logan’s boxer shorts.

“That’s a great look.”

“Talk to me again when you’re pregnant. They’re comfy.” She pulled on a pair of fuzzy socks.

“I take it back, that’s the look right there.” Mac used her cell phone to take a picture.

“You did not.”

“Logan has spies everywhere and for this photo I just might get my very own BMW.” She tucked the phone safely back in her bag.

“Everyone’s a comedienne,” she muttered under her breath as she left the room. The large suitcase revealed nothing but clothing. It all smelled like Piz and each piece conjured up a memory of him in it. You don’t miss New York at all? He was so sad standing there in her father’s living room; she wished she could go back and tell him she did miss him. It was their last conversation and she’d lost the opportunity to tell him anything important, anything real. That she loved him as a friend and wanted him to be happy. That he deserved to find somebody who would love him the way she loved Logan with an all-consuming need just to be close to him.

She checked all the pockets and felt the seams of the fabric lining before returning all the clothes. Veronica zipped it up and put it to the side. Once she went through everything she’d have to make arrangements to send it to his parents. For a minute she wondered what they thought about her now.
Did they believe she’d killed their son?

The duffel bag held his toiletries, a pair of shoes, his running shoes and a garbage bag full of dirty clothes. She would wash those before sending the stuff to Oregon. The boarding tote was filled with books. She shook them all out and flipped through the pages. Nothing. There was a bag with snacks, which she threw away. His iPod and in the side pocket his iPad with no charge. She used her phone charger to plug it in.

She booted up her computer and went to her emails. There was one from Logan. He must have sent it right after they got off the phone this afternoon. *I didn’t want you to read the letter because I was afraid it would change things and I guess in a way it did, but the outcome was better than I could have ever hoped. I love you Veronica Mars...Echolls?* She touched the words on the screen. “I love you too.”

Veronica saved the email and opened the ones from Mac. The very first photo was a full shot of the rear of the car and a nice clear image of the license plate. The letters DLR were written vertically down the left side of the tag. Veronica opened up her super sleuth search engine and ran the license plate. The dealer tags came back to a BMW dealership with a very familiar address. They were on the same block as Mr. Thrifty car rental.
CHAPTER TWENTY

Veronica woke to the smell of bacon frying. She waited, but the only effect it had on her was to make her hungry. *All you have to do is be awake to be hungry, Veronica.* As she got closer to the kitchen, she could hear Mac and Dick’s conversation.

“I’m a vegetarian. I don’t eat meat.”

“But you still eat like chicken, right?”

“Uh, no.”

“I have some meat that might change your mind.”

She rushed into the kitchen before he could continue. “Dick.”

He opened his mouth and Veronica frowned at him. “Bacon, Ronnie, I was going to say bacon.”

Under her breath, Veronica muttered, “Sure you were.”

Without asking if she was hungry, Dick set a tall stack of pancakes on the counter in front of her. “These are yours.” He put a plate of bacon next to it along with a pitcher of warm syrup and a bowl of melted butter. Veronica chewed on a piece of bacon while pouring the butter and syrup over her pancakes. She wasn’t the slightest bit offended by the amount of food Dick laid out for her, after all, he’d seen her eat.

Veronica glanced over at Mac. “Aren’t you eating?”

“Just waiting for Dick.”

A wide grin spread across his face. *Uh-oh.* Veronica pointed her fork at him. “One word and I swear I will buy you a muzzle.”

“Come on Ronnie, I think Mac can handle me.” He gave Mac a plate of pancakes sans bacon and then poured them both glasses of fresh-squeezed orange juice. “This time, leave the mess. You’ve gotta go see the Doc and Rosa is on her way.”

Veronica ate another piece of bacon and considered not going to her appointment. Her regular monthly checkup was next week and a few days wait couldn’t hurt. Being exhausted yesterday could be chalked up to two nights of lost sleep, not anemia. What she really wanted to do was find the BMW with the dealer plates and look through Piz’s laptop. Mac teased her with the information of new emails and story drafts and then wouldn’t let her read any of it last night. Instead she gave her some nonsense about tomorrow being another day. Well it was tomorrow and she was ready to work.

She picked up one of the navel oranges Dick left on the counter. According to the week by week chart, the baby was just a little bigger, almost five inches long and weighing over three ounces. Soon Veronica would be able to feel her moving. She sighed and put the orange down. There really wasn’t a choice; she knew it would have to wait. Mac was already dressed and Veronica excused herself to do the same leaving behind her half eaten pancakes.

When she returned to the kitchen, Mac had the dishwasher loaded and the kitchen tidy. She shrugged. “I’m not the leave it for the help type. When I was born my spoon was plastic, not silver.”
“You had a spoon? Lucky you.” Veronica grabbed her bag. “If we leave now, there’s time for me to drop you off at the office first.” Mac frowned at her. “Hey someone has to be there to control the stampede of new clients, and by that I mean you, Preeminent People Greeter.”

“I think I liked Grand Poobah better.”

“I’ll have the business cards printed first thing.” They drove to the office. Veronica asked her to print everything from Piz’s laptop and reminded her about the financial information for the other Balboa County Deputies. “And don’t forget to check Parker’s phone records for possible calls and texts to Piz. I need to know if he was using a disposable phone.” And if he did, where was it? According to the evidence log, the sheriff’s office didn’t have it and it wasn’t in his things. Did his killer take it?

Mac disappeared inside and Veronica turned the car around. Dealer tags were only allowed on cars that were held for resale and the only people allowed to operate those cars were employees, owners, and officers of the dealership or customers taking a test drive. She seriously doubted someone was taking a test drive at eight-thirty in the morning and decided to stop by to kill Piz in the middle of it. The search of the plate didn’t turn up any reports of it being lost or stolen so there was a good chance Piz’s killer could be at the dealership. Then maybe you shouldn’t go alone, Veronica. What did you promise Logan? No unnecessary risks. Veronica weighed her options as she pulled into the parking lot.

The doctor’s office was packed. She grabbed a few issues of Pregnancy & Newborn, Fit Pregnancy, and Family Circle before settling in for a long wait. The nurse called her name in the middle of an interesting and alarming article on cord blood banking. In no way at all did she feel in the least bit prepared for motherhood. Now she had to think about leukemia and aplastic anemia when she couldn’t even decide on breastfeeding versus formula.

Since it was so close to her regular visit, Dr. Villella treated it like one. She went through Veronica’s chart and asked her routine questions about how she was feeling. They discussed her being tired all the time, which was normal, but she took a blood sample anyway. “I will call you in a few days with the test results, but in the meantime try eating more iron rich foods” --she handed her a list-- “and slow down a little.”

Easier said than done. They checked her weight and Veronica cringed at the twelve pound gain. Forget Madison Sinclair, the scale was her new nemesis. “Too much?”

She smiled and shook her head. “Perfectly in range, but if it will make you feel better, next time you can stand on the scale backwards and I won’t tell you the number.”

Veronica shrugged. As long as the baby was healthy, she didn’t care about the weight.

“Are you ready to hear your baby?” Hearing the heartbeat had a calming effect on her. It was perfect. The only way it could be better is if Logan was here to share it with her. The doctor echoed the sentiment. “You know you can bring the daddy with you to your next visit.”

“He’s on deployment, but once he’s home, he’ll be coming with me.” Short of tying him to the bed, Veronica couldn’t imagine keeping him from any of her appointments. Although tying him to the bed did sound appealing. Veronica put it on her to do list. “Um, my hormones seem to be in a… overdrive.”

Dr. Villella chuckled. “You’re right on schedule for that too. Is your husband coming home soon?”

“Not soon enough.”
She told Veronica to schedule her next visit in another four weeks and left her alone to get dressed. While she waited for the receptionist to make the appointment, Veronica picked up a booklet on the benefits of breastfeeding and tucked it in her purse before retrieving her cell phone.

She’d contemplated her options and narrowed it down to Dick. “Hey Ronnie how’s the little two percent?”

“Huh?”

“Did you learn nothing in Sex Ed? Condoms only work like ninety eight percent of the time, no wonder you got knocked up.”

Veronica actually grinned. She couldn’t wait to tell Logan that his best friend was calling his daughter ‘two percent.’ “She’s fine. I however need a favor.”

“No can do Ronnie, you’ll just have to wait for Logan to get home to satisfy those urges.” Dick being Dick, what a surprise. She ignored him.

“Can you meet me at Dunn BMW in Encinitas in about an hour?” She was regretting not finishing her pancakes this morning, but an hour would give her enough time to get something to eat first.

“His and hers Bimmers? Nice.” She explained the purpose of her trip. “And you want me to go with you? You sure you don’t want to call your dad?”

“I’m sure.” Dick agreed to meet her in front of Mr. Thrifty so they could arrive at the dealership together. Even after having lunch and making the drive, she got there before him. The dealership was a mile past Mr. Thrifty on the same side of the street, but what a difference the mile made. There was nothing cheap or rundown about this stretch of road. A berm of perfectly manicured grass and evenly spaced palm trees separated the dealership from the road.

Dunn BMW was its own city block, which allowed Veronica to drive a slow complete circle around the lot. Lampposts with flags reading Dunn on one side and BMW on the other ringed the blacktop. There weren’t any salesmen outside, but who needed them? The highly-polished cars beckoned in the sunlight luring you in with a suggestive ‘come buy me.’

She drove back to meet Dick and they took his Hummer. He was the perfect partner for this excursion. His wealth and sense of entitlement lent him the right attitude for wandering around an expensive car showroom. He could easily afford any of these models and he was waiting for something to impress him. The salesmen didn’t hover, but they were paying close attention to their walking commission. They were sharks and Dick was chum in the water. With their attention focused on the money of this operation, they paid little attention to Veronica, which gave her the freedom to study them and her surroundings.

All the salesmen were exactly that, men- no women and no Marjorie. A sign on the back wall proclaimed- ‘when you shop here, it’s a Dunn deal.’ Veronica rolled her eyes at the bad pun. None of the cars in the showroom matched Logan’s and none of them carried dealer plates. She wandered back outside. These were all newer models and none of them were the one she wanted. What did you expect Veronica? A circle around it with a big black X across its hood? She finally found the dealer plate, right plate, but wrong car. Instead of a dark blue convertible, this tag was attached to a silver 650i sedan.

“Can I interest you in a test drive?” The salesman materialized out of nowhere. He towered over her and invaded her personal space. Veronica took a step back and shook her head.
Dick was by her side in an instant. “Everything okay here, Ronnie?” He was better than a personal attack dog.

She lightly touched his arm. “Everything’s perfect. This kind gentleman was just about to introduce me to Mr. Dunn.”

The salesman took a few steps back and considered them. “He’s in his office.” Veronica waited expectantly until resignation settled over his features. “Follow me.”

Philip Dunn’s office was three walls of floor-to-ceiling glass, which allowed him unobstructed views of both the showroom and the outside lot. It also allowed him to see their approach to his office. He circled around to stand in front of his desk before they crossed through the door. Tall, in his early forties, Philip Dunn was an attractive man. His ruddy complexion said he was happier outdoors, but his smile seemed genuine and there was a sparkle in his blue eyes.

He gave the salesman a dismissive nod and he left the room. Philip shook Dick’s hand first and then Veronica’s; a firm handshake, not too soft, with just the right amount of confidence. *Did they offer The Art of the Handshake in business school?* “Philip Dunn, it’s nice to meet you…”

“Dick Casablancas and this is Veronica…” Dick stopped talking unsure if he should continue or if he’d already said too much.

Dunn didn’t seem to notice the abrupt halt to the introductions, or if he did, he was too smooth to comment. “How can I help you today?” He waved toward his visitors’ chairs and then returned to his position behind the desk. The wall behind him held various pictures of Philip Dunn glad-handing varying degrees of celebrities and politicians, most of them taken in front of gleaming, new BMW’s. It was a not-so-subtle; you too can live like the rich and famous if you drive one of my cars.

This was a man who made his livelihood on reading people and as the old adage said, *you can’t bullshit a bullshitter,* Veronica decided to play it straight. “We are trying to locate a witness who was driving one of your cars.”

Not exactly straight, but close enough. She handed him a print out of the Caltrans image. There were no telltale signs of where and when the image was taken since she’d cropped out all surrounding details until only the car and license plate remained.

“A witness? Are you with the police?”

He knew very well she wasn’t because she would’ve had to identify herself as one. “A private investigator.” Veronica showed him her license. Unlike the clerk at the Comfort Stay, he took his time reading the information before returning it to her.

“I’m not sure I should help you.” She noted his word choice, not *can,* but *should.* He knew it was his car, but what else did he know?

“I saw the plate on your lot. It’s on the silver sedan.” Veronica backed off. “Can you tell me how dealer plates work?” He visibly relaxed and launched in to a detailed explanation, most of which, she already knew from her research. She feigned interest until he was done. “So was this car sold?”

“It was.”

He would be great on the witness stand; short, direct answers to her questions with no elaborating and no volunteering additional details. Cross examination was hard, maybe it was a good thing she decided to give up a career as an attorney. “When it was here were you or one of your employees driving it?”

“No.”
“Where do you keep the keys?”

“In a lockbox on the showroom floor.”

“Could you show me? Maybe it’s been tampered with? Someone took the car and returned it to the lot?”

“Without me noticing? I don’t think that’s likely.”

“It didn’t drive itself there.” No one ever accused Logan of being nice, and no one ever accused her of being patient.

“And where is there exactly?”

“A friend of mine was murdered and your car, this car, was seen at the crime scene. If you weren’t driving it, you need to tell me who was, or at least, who had access to it.” He blanched at the words.

“All the employees have access to the lockbox from the receptionist up…”

It was a sexist assumption, but her ears perked up at the mention. “Receptionist?”

“My sister, Marjorie, works” --his face screwed up on the word works-- “here when she’s in need of some fast cash, which is usually in between boyfriends.”

Veronica managed to remain calm and casually asked, “Is she here now? Your sister? Maybe she saw something?”

“No she’s back home with our parents in D…why this interest in my sister?”

A nonchalant shrug. “No interest. Can I ask your other employees if they saw anything? Noticed any keys missing?”

“I would prefer it if you didn’t.” He stood up to signal the end to their meeting. Veronica didn’t bother to thank him for his time. She hustled Dick out of the office and back to his car.

“Talk about boring. Is this what you do all day? Maybe it’s time for a career change, Ronnie.”

“That my friend was one the most interesting conversations I’ve had in weeks.”

He stared as if she’d lost her mind. “Your idea of a good time and mine are radically different.”

“And we all know what your idea of a good time is Dick.”

“Yeah well, Two Percent says you know how to have some fun.”

An interesting conversation was going to be explaining to her five-year-old why Uncle Dick kept calling her Two Percent. “I wouldn’t let Logan hear you call the baby that.”

“Why? Unlike you, he has a sense of humor.” He dropped her at her car and with a wave he took off. Veronica couldn’t wait to get back to the office. Here’s to the inventor of smartphones and 4G wireless. She accessed her search engine and plugged in the name Marjorie Dunn. There were just as many Marjorie Dunn’s in the state of California as there were hotels in and around Neptune. She would have to find Marjorie through Philip.

She searched for him using the address of the dealership and then with his social security number found his home address. Hopefully there was a Mrs. Dunn and she was a stay-at-home mom.
Veronica took the 5 South toward Del Mar and then traveled inland. His dealership must do well, but not well enough, to afford waterfront. It was an average size house of the familiar California tan stucco and terracotta tile roof variety. Veronica rang the bell. Philip Dunn’s wife had the same ruddy, outdoor complexion as her husband. Athletic and toned with sun-kissed brown hair and wide doe eyes, she smiled at Veronica. “Can I help you?”

“Is Marjorie home?”

Her brows knitted together. “Marjorie doesn’t live here.”

“Oh. You must be her sister-in-law, Karen right?” Thank you search engine.

“I am.”

Great she was just as chatty as her husband. “When I talked to her last night, she said she was back in town and we made plans. Told me to meet her here.”

Karen’s gaze wandered past Veronica and down the street as if looking for her errant sister-in-law. From her unhappy expression, it was clear she was hoping to avoid finding her.

“Would you mind if I waited for her?” Veronica asked at the same time Karen said, “Why don’t you try her apartment?”

“I thought she lost that apartment when she broke up with whats-his-name.”

“Hard to keep track of them isn’t it? No, if she’s back in town, she’s there.”

Veronica bit her lip. “Uh, you don’t have the address do you? For my GPS? I’m not so good with directions. I tend to get lost.”

“Hang on a sec.” She left the front door open and Veronica peeked inside. A cramped foyer cluttered with kid debris; shoes, sneakers, bookbags, a skateboard and a soccer ball. She backed out before Karen caught her snooping. When she returned, she was holding a small address book. “It’s 1031 Cliff Drive in Neptune.”
CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

With Marjorie’s real name and address, Veronica was able to call Mac and get her started on a complete search. She wanted everything: phone records, background check, credit card statements, financials and access to all her social media. While Mac was working on that, Veronica needed to decide what to do first. Talk to the only people in contact with Piz during his six weeks in Neptune? Go back to the office and read through Piz’s emails and story notes? Search Marjorie’s apartment while it was, hopefully, still empty? Decisions, decisions.

Distance dictated her destination. Veronica parked in the underground garage and took the elevator to the temporary offices of Reveal. No one was at the receptionist desk so she bypassed it and went directly for Cara Murphy’s office. She knocked first, but it too was empty. Maybe the temporary was just that and they’d all moved back to Sacramento. “Are you looking for me?”

Wish for one willowy brunette and she magically appears. Now if only I could wish for one hot sailor in uniform and have him magically appear my day would be complete. “I am. I was hoping you had a few minutes to talk about Piz?”

Cara waved her hand toward the office indicating Veronica should go first. Once they were settled in the same positions as their first meeting, Cara said, “I read the newspapers.”

Veronica remained silent. There were too many stories to pick just one. If Cara wanted to talk about what she read, she was going to have to narrow it down. “Of course, I don’t believe you killed him.”

Gee that’s a relief, so glad you believe I’m innocent. “Uh, thanks?”

“Are you really pregnant?” Again Veronica remained silent. “I’m sorry was that too blunt? I thought you appreciated…forthrightness.”

“I do and I am, pregnant.” This was not how she saw this conversation going.

“Is it Logan’s?”

Maybe I should take out an ad? Veronica Mars pregnant with… Too wordy, how about: Logan Echolls you are the father. Jerry Springer here we come. “Are you writing a story about little ol’ me?”

“No, it’s just…” Cara shook her head. “What can I do for you Veronica?”

You can finish your sentence. “I think I’ve found the new woman in Piz’s life.” She held back the name and passed her the photo.

Cara stared at the picture and frowned. “Do you know who she is?”

“That’s what I was hoping you could tell me.”

“Sorry.” She stared at the picture a fraction of a second longer and then handed it back. “Was there something else?”

Cara Murphy would make a bad poker player. “No, I think that’s it.”

Relief spread across her face. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be more help and congratulations on the baby.”

“Thanks.” Back in the elevator, Veronica called Mac. “You’re not busy, right?”
“Nope, just painting my nails and thinking about going for a massage after my long lunch.”

“That’s what I thought. Here’s another name for your ‘expose all their hidden secrets’ list, Cara Murphy.”

“I’ll get right on it…after my facial.”

“I’m glad you’ve got your priorities straight.” Veronica’s priorities said it was time to get to Marjorie’s apartment. The address Karen gave her wasn’t too far from where she lived with her dad right after he was ousted from his job as sheriff and Lianne left. This apartment complex was seedier, just another barnacle on the side of the beautiful yacht known as Neptune.

It was hot today. A perfect day for a swim, but not in this pool. Half the water was missing and what little remained was a thick, murky soup of green algae. Shades were drawn on the windows of the surrounding apartments and the cacophonous hum of air conditioners blended with the random bursts from a very loud television. No one was hanging around outside, but from the general feeling of apathy enveloping the building; Veronica doubted anyone would care if she streaked through the courtyard naked.

Her search said Marjorie’s apartment was on the ground floor. Veronica double checked the mailboxes to be sure. Most of them were missing names, but the one for unit 16 had a worn white label reading Dunn. Veronica skirted around the broken lawn furniture to the apartment. It used to be that only professional locksmiths and law enforcement agencies could get their hands on lock pick tools. Now, thanks to the Internet and overnight shipping, they were available to anyone with a credit card. It took her precisely five minutes to work the flimsy lock on Marjorie’s door.

The apartment smelled stale. Dust motes floated in the air and their buddies created a thick layer on the furniture. Not much of a housekeeper, Marjorie Dunn. It was a small space. A living room with a threadbare sofa and bulky television was separated from the galley kitchen by an island. Two bar stools were shoved under said island and there were dirty dishes loaded in the sink. Not much of a housekeeper and not much of a decorator either. There were no photos, no artwork, and no knickknacks anywhere in these rooms. If I lived here, I might pretend to be someone else too.

Veronica went through the cabinets first and then the drawers; dishes, glasses, and silverware. In the small drawer near the stove, she found a collection of matchbooks. To test her theory, she tried one of the burners on the range top. There was the distinctive hiss of gas, but no flame. She turned it off. The matchbook covers bore names like Marjorie was collecting them as souvenirs. Veronica poked through them recognizing both the Sandpiper Lounge and The Comfort Stay. She scooped up the entire batch and dumped them in her bag before moving toward the back of the apartment.

A small square of hallway off the living room held two doors. The Lady or the Tiger? She picked the one on her right, which was the bathroom. A toilet, shower stall and sink were shoved into the tight space and Veronica was able to search the entire room without having to leave the doorway. There wasn’t even a medicine cabinet to hunt through.

She turned her attention to the bedroom. This room was where Marjorie spent her time. The bed was neatly made. A pile of books sat on the nightstand and an overstuffed chair was wedged cater-cornered between the nightstand and the wall. There were plants along the windowsill, withered now, but at one time, they appeared to have been full and vibrant.

Framed photos lined the dresser. Veronica’s gaze zeroed in on the one frame that was empty. Someone, maybe Marjorie herself, went to the trouble of removing the picture, but why not get rid of the frame? It stood there like a beacon shouting notice me. Veronica picked up one of the other photos. The woman she knew as Marjorie Kincaid smiled up at her from the glass albeit a younger
version of the woman who came into her office. She was wearing a sweatshirt that read “Go Pioneers!” The other pictures were of Marjorie either alone or with a man. There were no pictures of Piz. Her eyes wandered back to the empty frame. *Maybe.*

There were still clothes in the dresser drawers, all very fashionable and very expensive. The same for her closet. If Marjorie was visiting her parents, she didn’t expect to be gone forever. Veronica sat on the edge of the bed and picked up the phone. She dialed star 69. The call was answered after two rings. “Welcome to comfort. How may I help you?” Veronica replaced the receiver without saying anything.

A cursory inspection was all that was needed to make sure everything was as she found it. Veronica locked the door behind her and, on her way from the apartment complex, stopped at the mailbox again. It took less time to open the mailbox than it did the front door. She shoved the stack in her purse. They could tack another five years onto her sentence for mail theft.

The drive to the office was a short one. Mac was still at her desk and the printer was churning out pages. “Does your boss ever let you leave?”

“Sadly no. She’d be lucky to find her way to her own office without me.”

“Why do you stay then?”

Mac pointed at the large latte Veronica was carrying. “The fringe benefits.”

She handed over the cup. “Any luck on Cara Murphy?”

“One boring life coming right up.” She gave Veronica the file. “Graduated Hearst, interned at a local radio station before becoming an on-air personality. Gave that up to work behind the scenes where she’s been ever since. She’s never been married and has no kids. Pays all her bills on time, including a small mortgage on a condo in San Diego. Never broken any laws, no jail time or murder accusations. Nary a parking ticket.”

“So what are you saying- that we could never be friends? Nothing in common?”

“There’s always your mutual love of Parker to build from.” Veronica grimaced. “Or maybe not.”

“No connection between her and Marjorie?”

“Not yet. Different schools, different zip codes, different states.” Mac rested her hand on another pile of papers. “These are the things from Piz’s laptop.”

“You’re better than Madame Sophie.”

“Thanks and I’m glad the boob cream is finally paying off for you.”

Veronica rolled her eyes. “Want to join me for dinner?”

“Sorry, I’ve got plans.”

Veronica considered her friend’s appearance. “Hair done, makeup on”—she sniffed the air—“a hint of perfume.” She peered over the desk; Mac was wearing a tight black skirt and a pair of heels that hurt Veronica’s feet just looking at them. “Is this the more action you alluded to yesterday?”

“You might just be good at this P.I. stuff after all.” Mac shut down the computer. “I will get you more on Marjorie tomorrow, but you can start with this.” She put a file on top of the Piz pile. “Night
Veronica and…don’t follow me.”

Veronica pursed her lips. “You know that just makes me want to, right?”

“Resist the temptation.”

She sighed and patted her tummy. “I guess it’s just you and me and paperwork for dinner. Where should we go?”

The baby decided she was in the mood for French onion soup, so Veronica headed for The Cat. They used fresh-baked baguettes in the center of their soup and topped it with a generous portion of aged Gruyere. Once she was seated at a table for two on their outdoor patio she ordered the soup and the Portobello mushroom ravioli topped with corn salsa and poblano chili aioli as a starter. For dinner she got the filet mignon with applewood smoked bacon sauce and a side of crushed red pepper and garlic green beans.

Piz’s story notes kept her company. His investigation didn’t start with Sacks. Instead he’d started with the top of the food chain. He’d compiled a list of the wealthiest citizens of Neptune: Celeste Kane, John Enbom, Paul Mann, Pomroy, Casablancas, Echolls. It read like a who’s who of the elite power players or a page from her high school yearbook. Veronica suspected Logan’s inclusion on the list was a bit of wish fulfillment on Piz’s part. Maybe a desire to prove he was guilty of something Veronica couldn’t or wouldn’t forgive. But it was like the Sesame Street song, *One of These Things is Not Like the Others.*

Logan was definitely rich, she’d seen the portfolio, but in the past five years he hadn’t really touched any of his money. A few expenditures, his car, her first-class plane ticket to Neptune, a retainer for Jackson Frederick and the check to her for Mars Investigations, but nothing else. He was living entirely on what he made in the Navy while the bulk of his inheritance from Aaron just sat there accumulating interest. *Sorry to disappoint you Piz, Navy pilots do not make enough to buy sheriffs and bribe county officials.*

Without a Mac in his life, his research into the power-players’ finances was sorely limited. In some cases he’d found the names of their investment advisors, brokerage houses, and banking establishments, but nothing earth shattering or interesting. There was a list of Dick’s restaurants and a side note about Big Dick being back in the REIT business. *What schmuck would invest in that?*

There was an article about “dark money” and how the wealthy were creating 501(c)4 charity organizations to donate huge amounts of money to political campaigns. According to the article, loopholes in the campaign fund disclosure laws allowed these donations to be made without revealing its source. An anti-abortion group could funnel enough funds to the candidate of their choice, one who would support their beliefs, without anyone questioning where the cash came from. *I’ll take one conservative congressman to go, please.*

Veronica could see the possibilities. All the positions in the Balboa County government were elected from the Board of Supervisors down. Put together a charity organization with some innocuous name, fund it with tons of inherited wealth, and pick the puppet you want in power. Unfortunately Piz’s story was high on conjecture and low on facts. There was no proof and no money trail; there wasn’t even a name for this hypothetical charity. Nothing in these notes would make a story much less a motive for murder. The idea of Marjorie as killer was looking better and better.

She ordered a mascarpone whipped cheese cake with fresh berries and turned her attention to Piz’s emails. Most of them started, *I’m doing research on a story,* and they were sent to accountants and financial gurus. Some of them responded, but most didn’t. Veronica flipped through them with little interest. It was all still theories and supposition. Piz was about as close to writing a story as she was to being a Navy pilot.
to taking a ride in the space elevator.

At the bottom of the stack of emails was a bunch paper-clipped together. A note from Mac was tucked under the clip: *These were in his draft folder. None of them are addressed to anyone and they were never sent, but I think they’re all to the same person.* Veronica really needed to talk to her about this tendency to save the good stuff for the end.

The first email was only two lines. *I’m sorry that I ended things the way I did. We should probably have this conversation in person, but...* Veronica read it again. He could’ve meant this for her. She put them down and concentrated on finishing her dessert. If these were going to be Piz pouring out his feelings for her in an effort to apologize or win her back, she didn’t want to read them here. She settled the check and took the long way home, which wasn’t the same without Logan at her side.

Dick wasn’t home so she had the house to herself. After dawdling through a shower and cleaning out her purse, she organized all the information into nice, neat piles. She grabbed a pen from the kitchen and started copying the names and addresses from the matchbooks.

If Marjorie was dating Piz, matchbook from The Comfort Stay, and then later following him, The Sandpiper, then these could create a timeline of Piz’s movements through Neptune. *Or they could just be a colossal waste of your time, Veronica.* She almost gave up until one caught her eye. It was black with a gold saxophone in between the words Nico’s and Lounge. She flipped through the rest until she found one from The Neptune Grand and one from Trulucks. *Hmm, not only following Piz, but keeping an eye on me?* She finished her list and tossed the matches.

She was avoiding the emails. Veronica sighed, picked them up and reread the first one: *I’m sorry that I ended things the way I did. We should probably have this conversation in person, but...*

The second email was shorter: *We shouldn’t have slept together.*

By the third draft, she didn’t want to read anymore, but not for the same reason as earlier. They were just too awkward and uncomfortable. *These past few weeks have been great. I have really appreciated being with you...* Appreciated sounded like a business letter, not something you want to hear from your lover about the sex you’ve been having. *I really appreciate you sleeping with me, please come back real soon.*

The fourth draft completely disabused her of the notion that they were meant for her. It was slightly better until he got to the final word. *Not only have these past few weeks been great, you’ve been great. I am sorry for spending so much time talking about Veronica and the end of our relationship, but I guess that’s what happens on the rebound...* Rebound? She was glad Piz didn’t continue with this email.

Fifth draft: *We should really be having this conversation in person, but you won’t take my calls and I don’t know another way to do this. You’ve been a great friend to me...* The word friend must have given him pause.

The sixth draft clued her in to what it must have been like dating Piz for the past few weeks, endless conversation about their breakup. *This is a hard letter for me to write. While I don’t want our relationship to continue as it has been, I don’t want to lose you from my life. As you know by now, I’m not over Veronica. I guess I should be. I know that she will never love me like she loves Logan. I’ve always known how she feels about him. Even when she denies it to herself, it’s obvious to everyone else around her. There are some relationships that not only survive, they grow, even with space and distance...* At least Piz had the good sense to realize this email needed to be about the new person in his life and not more about his past.
I’m sorry I hurt you. I would really like the chance to apologize to you in person and beg your forgiveness. You have been nothing short of wonderful and I don’t want to lose you from my life. If you would just answer my calls, I could say all this to you in person. When you told me about the…

Veronica spread all the emails on the floor. *Come on Piz, when you told me about the, what?* That was it. All the other emails were about his story. No more unsent drafts, no answer to her question, and no concrete proof he was talking to Marjorie Dunn.
Dick in a suit. Veronica spit out her cereal before she choked. “Late night?”

“Early morning- meeting.”

“On a Saturday?”

Dick shrugged. “What are you eating? That’s not good for Two Percent.” He took the bowl from her and dumped it in the sink. Veronica glumly listened to the garbage disposal munch her Froot Loops. Dick tossed his suit jacket on the table and rolled up his sleeves. He cut thick slices of sourdough bread and put them in a baking dish. In a bowl he beat together eggs, milk, vanilla, cinnamon, maple syrup and sea salt before pouring the entire mixture over the bread. “I’ll fry that up in a few minutes.”

A few minutes felt like an eternity, she was starving. “Uh, Dick, I think they’re ready.”

“Slow your roll Ronnie, I’m coming.” He fried the French toast in clarified butter then topped it with powdered sugar, walnuts and bananas.

In between bites she said, “I think I am actually going to miss you.”

“Going somewhere?”

“Wow, hopeful much? I meant when Logan gets home.” She stopped eating. “I know I said a few days, but you know…life. If you want me to go, I can move back to my dad’s.”

“It’s all good Ronnie.” He poured a glass of milk and set it in front of her. “Can I ask you a question?”

This was the most serious she’d ever seen Dick. She delivered a wary, “Okay.”

“Are you gonna break Logan’s heart again?” He gave a small shake of his head. “He was a real mess. I thought I was bad when Beaver… but man, Ronnie. When you left, it was even worse than the second? Third?” He nodded to himself. “Third time you broke up.”

“Is that why you went to South America?”

“Yeah, desperate times. I didn’t think he was going to make it. Careless and stupid and that’s coming from me.”

“I’m not going to leave him.”

“Okay Ronnie, ‘cause trust me, if you do, that’s it man. Bye, bye Logan Echolls, it will be over for him.” With that parting shot, he left the kitchen. Veronica didn’t want any more breakfast. She washed the dishes by hand and scrubbed the counters. Then she cleaned the stovetop and reorganized the pantry. When that room was done, she moved through the rest of the house. Her mind kept replaying the stupid and careless and bye bye Logan Echolls with the it will be a few days and I didn’t want you to worry.

She needed to do something. There was Marjorie’s mail and the start of the background check, but Veronica didn’t think she would be able to concentrate. She’d already wasted the morning cleaning a clean house; she needed a project. Dick was passed out from his late night or early morning meeting depending on who you believed, but she felt relatively safe. Just in case, she called Dottie.
"Veronica, are you ready for round two of baby shopping?"

"Um, maybe, but first I need to apply a little pressure."

"That sounds intriguing, I’m in. Should I get you in say half an hour?"

"Perfect." Veronica didn’t want to dwell on why she chose Dottie to spend the day with, but she knew it went deeper than liking her company. She showered and dressed and was outside waiting by the time Dottie pulled up in a 1966 Candy Apple Red Mustang. “I have a friend who would love this car.”

Dottie laughed. “Not as much as I do. Tommy picked me up for our first date in this car.”

"Thanks for coming with me.” Veronica gave her directions to Dunn BMW. “I was going a little stir crazy in the house.”

“How are you feeling? Have you felt her move yet?”

Another one convinced it was a girl. Did Logan make an announcement? “I think so. It feels like this little flutter and I’m positive it’s the baby, and then I think it’s just gas.”

“You’ll know soon enough when the kicking starts.”

“Can’t wait.” Not one ounce of sarcasm, she literally couldn’t wait. She turned her head to stare out the window.

“What’s on your mind Veronica?”

“Logan.” Dick said he was a mess when she left end of freshman year. She knew he was at Hearst for another year before transferring to Brown. Two more years there to get the college degree he needed to attend OCS, which meant it was a full three years before he met Dottie. Yet when Dottie met him he was still, what were her exact words, lost and forlorn. Three years and he’d only managed to recover enough to move from mess to forlorn. “I don’t think I can make it up to him.”

“I don’t think he cares. Well, that didn’t come out right.” Dottie pulled the car over and put it in park. “What I mean is, he loves you. He’s not looking for you to jump through hoops and spend the rest of your life apologizing to him. He just wants to be with you, he wants to be the one who makes you happy.”

“He does make me happy.”

“Then let it go. He will, he has. Dwelling on the past will only cause you both a lot of unnecessary grief. Especially because once you get this little murder indictment thingy cleared up, you have a bright future ahead of you.”

Veronica laughed. “Okay then, let’s take care of this little murder indictment thingy.”

Philip Dunn saw them coming and rushed from his glass fortress to intercept them in the showroom. “Uh-uh, no, you went to my home, my home. You lied to my wife. I know who you are Veronica Mars and you need to leave right now before I call the police.”

“Call the police,” she bluff. “I’m sure they would love to hear all about your sister.”

Rage turned into uncertainty. “My sister?”

“Mail theft, bank fraud, stalking, murder,” Veronica ticked off the items on Marjorie’s ever-growing
list of crimes. “And what about you? Accomplice, accessory after the fact, obstruction- it was your car she used and you’re the one hiding her now. Go ahead call the police; you can explain yourself to them.”

His eyes darted around the showroom. It was crowded on a Saturday and all eyes were on them. “Maybe we should do this in my office.”

Veronica shook her head. “Just tell me where to find Marjorie.”

“I don’t know,” it was a plaintive whine. “She was at my parents, but she was leaving. I don’t know where she is now.”

“That’s too bad Philip; I was really hoping I could help you.” Veronica turned to leave and glanced back. “When you do talk to her, tell her I’m looking for her and you both better hope I find her before the police do.”

Philip stood rooted to the spot as Veronica casually strolled from the dealership. Outside, she turned to Dottie with a smile. “Mission… what’s wrong?”

Dottie was visibly shaken. “The way that man came charging at you. He was three times your size and you just went at him, completely fearless. I…does that happen often?”

A litany of names ran through her mind; Aaron, Beaver, Moe, Mercer, Cobb. It would not be helpful to tell her this was like dealing with a cuddly puppy in comparison. Instead of answering, Veronica aimed for a diversion. “Still up for baby shopping and maybe some lunch?”

Dottie seemed to recover. “Food first?”

“It’s like you’re reading my mind.” They found a restaurant not far from the baby store. Keeping in mind her need for iron, Veronica ordered a spinach salad with grilled chicken and sunflower seeds topped with raspberry vinaigrette. She added an order of clam chowder served in a bread bowl. “So the Navy, how often does he deploy?”

“It depends. He has two more years…”

“Years?”

“His original commitment is eight years, Veronica. Didn’t you two discuss this?” No, but we’re going to in our next phone call. “You look more scared now than you did back at the dealership. Two years will go by faster than you think when you’re busy chasing around a toddler.”

Chasing around a toddler by myself. “One more deployment, two?”

Dottie shrugged. “Ships deploy every eighteen to twenty-four months for extended operations, but they go out to sea for training and he has to do carrier qual landings at different airfields.”

“Qual?”

“Qualification landings. Landing a fighter jet on a moving aircraft carrier takes skill and a lot of practice.” Dottie seemed to choose her next words very carefully. “Did Logan discuss his plans for when his enlistment is up?”

Veronica’s gaze narrowed. “Logan has plans?”

“He does, did, but that was before you and the baby, they may have changed.”
Which all sounded very ominous to her. “He’s going to reenlist.” Reenlistment would mean more months without him. Months of worrying that he wouldn’t come home to her. It could mean moving. Two weeks was definitely enough time to make a baby, but not enough time to discuss how they were going to raise one. Why did I think this was a good conversation to start?

“It’s not just a job for him,” Dottie admitted. “But you understand the importance of doing something you love, something you’re good at.”

Veronica felt like she’d been slapped. She’d been sitting here thinking about herself. Trying to make Logan give up something he wanted was the same as everyone trying to make her be the Veronica they expected. Everyone except for Logan; he never tried to make her into something she wasn’t. He accepted all of her. Even when telling her ‘this is a bad idea,’ he let her do what she needed to do. It was time for her to walk the walk. “Can we go to a different store? For the baby shopping? I’m not really in the mood for you-can-call-me-Becky.”

“She was a twit, wasn’t she?” Dottie paid for lunch and took her to a nice generic Babies R’Us with no personal shoppers and no hovering sales help. It was all about feeding, which was apropos since Veronica was positive that, if the way she was consuming food was any indication, the baby was going to be a big eater. They stocked up on bottles, nipples, and milk storage bags. The Medela breast pump, number one choice of hospitals, Dottie convinced her to buy cost more than her old Le Baron. Eating meant pooping so diapers were added to the cart, along with wipes and Desitin. “You don’t need to buy all this stuff now.”

“Just call me Veronica Mars, Boy Scout.” She held up a package and turned to Dottie. “Nasal aspirator?”

“Babies don’t blow their own nose.”

Veronica made a face. “Okay on a scale of one to ten, ten being you have serious concerns about my parenting, where do I fall if I say, that’s gross?”

“Just wait. You will be peed, pooped, vomited and spit up on countless times and that’s just in your first week.”

“Good times, good times.” She grinned, “I’m glad Logan will be home to experience it all with me.”

Her phone started to ring. Veronica tossed the aspirator in her cart and rummaged through her bag. A few days weren’t over, but she was hoping it would be him. Speak of the devil and he will appear. The number was a Los Angeles area code. “Hello?”

“Veronica it’s Marjorie Kinc…Dunn. My brother called me in a panic.”

“How did you…” Her business card. She gave it to all clients and it had both the office and her cell number on it.

“I didn’t kill him, Piz. It wasn’t me.”

“It was your car at the scene.”

“Yes, but I wasn’t driving. It was never about…look, I don’t want to do this over the phone, can you come to me?” Never going to happen.

“Just tell me what you know.”

“I’ll come to you.”
She needed to talk to Marjorie. What did Dick say earlier, desperate times? “Fine, you meet me.” Veronica gave her Dick’s address.

“It will take me some time. I need to make a stop first. Give me two hours and I’ll be there.” Marjorie had the answers she needed. She was close, she could feel it. This was the end. She could get the answers and the evidence. She would finally know who killed Piz and why.

Veronica looked down at the cart. While she was on the phone, Dottie continued to add items and it was now overflowing. How could one tiny baby require so much stuff? “I think we’re going to need a bigger house.”

Dottie turned down the aisle with another cart. “I was looking at the swings. What do you think of this one?” Box containing said swing was standing upright in the cart. There were also teething toys and a stuffed octopus. Veronica picked it up. “If you press his tentacles he plays music.”

“Very cute.” She tossed it back in the cart. “I think I’m done for today, Dottie.”

“Tired?” Veronica gave her a non-committal, mmm. It took them longer to pack everything in the car than it took them at checkout. Dottie probably thought it was due to her being “tired,” but really she was rethinking her decision to meet Marjorie. Public places didn’t always mean safety, but what if Dick wasn’t home? Why didn’t she pick her dad’s house? She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw Dick’s Hummer still parked in the drive.

Once they carried everything inside, Veronica said her goodbyes to Dottie and went in search of Dick. He was out on the beach. “Nice view.”

“Are you checking me out again?”

She blew out an exasperated puff of air. “Are you going to be here for a while?”

“For however long it takes me to drink this bad boy.” He tapped the six pack of beer. Veronica looked back at the house; a clear line of sight and not too far away. Location, location, location. “Drink them slowly okay? Someone is coming to meet me and I want you to, umm, keep watch?”

“What am I now, your guardian angel?”

She started walking away. “Forget it Dick, I’ll just call--”

“Ronnie, don’t go away mad.”

“Just go away right? Isn’t that what you were going to say?”

“Whoa, what bug crawled up your ass?”

Veronica walked back to him. “I’m sorry; I’m just a little tense.”

“Intense is more like it. Don’t worry Ronnie; I’ve got your back.” He popped open a beer. “I’d offer you one, but you know,” he toasted her tummy.

“Where’s the party pig? On vacation?”

“Every day is a vacation at Chez Dick.” Veronica left him on the beach and returned to the house. She wandered through the rooms looking for something to occupy the wait and settled for eating. With Dick on the beach doing his I Drink Alone, George Thorogood impersonation, she could sneak in a quick bowl of Froot Loops. Bowl, box, why split hairs.
When Marjorie finally arrived at the door, she was not the same woman Veronica remembered. This was not the well put-together, dressed to the nines, wife of a possible philanderer; this was unwashed, jittery, and scared woman on the run. Veronica gestured toward the backyard. It took a second for comprehension to dawn on her face. Marjorie left the steps and made her way toward the side of the house.

Veronica waited until she could see her on the beach before joining her. “I’m sorry Veronica, I never meant for this to happen.”

“Why don’t you start at the beginning.”

“We were friends.”

“You and Piz?”

“Ronnie!” As she turned toward the beach, Veronica heard the first gunshot. Wet, warm liquid splashed across her face. She touched her cheek and looked down at her blood soaked fingers. “Get down, Ronnie!” Dick’s warning was punctuated by the sound of the second shot. Veronica felt a burning in her chest and she was falling, the sand rising up to meet her.

On the ground, she turned her head back toward Marjorie. Her blonde hair was caked with blood and half her face was missing. Veronica’s vision swam and she started to lose focus, I’m so sorry, Logan.
“How is she?” She stirred, *Logan? No, Veronica, Logan is on an aircraft carrier in the Gulf remember?*

“How is she?” She stirred, *Logan? No, Veronica, Logan is on an aircraft carrier in the Gulf remember?*

“She was very lucky.” Veronica chuckled to herself. *Why did doctors always say that? Lucky would mean not getting shot, right?*

She started to drift off when she heard her dream Logan ask, “What about the baby?” Veronica tried to focus, tried to stay awake, but her body insisted on falling asleep.

When she woke the room was dark except for the shaft of light from the open door. It cut a path across her bed and the man sitting next to her. Dressed in his green flight suit, he was slumped in the chair. He looked worse than she felt, haggard and worn out and in need of sleep, but he was awake. His bloodshot gaze was focused on her face and in the second she opened her eyes, he leaned forward. “Veronica?”

“She was very lucky.” Veronica chuckled to herself. *Why did doctors always say that? Lucky would mean not getting shot, right?*

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“Are you real?”

He caressed her cheek with the back of his hand. “You scared the…how do you feel? Should I call the doctor?”

“What was his answer?” Confusion darkened his eyes. “When you asked about the baby, what did he say?” Veronica felt her throat close as the panic choked her.

“She’s fine. They said…Dick.” Logan closed his eyes and turned his face away from her. He rested his forehead against her stomach. His body shook and she could feel each of his ragged breaths as he tried to compose himself. Still unable to look at her, he continued, “Dick was able to tell the paramedics you were pregnant. They said it made the difference.”

He didn’t need to add made the difference on whether the baby survived or not. Veronica buried her fingers in his hair and cupped the back of his head. “I’m sorry Logan; please don’t be mad at me.”

He placed a gentle kiss on her belly and lifted his head to look at her. “I’m not mad Veronica, I’m terrified. I can’t stop thinking about how close I came to losing you, both of you.”

She placed her palm against his cheek. She’d wanted to touch him for months and now… “How are you here?”

He sighed. “We’re back to that? Are you going to forget this conversation too?”

“We’ve had others?”

“Not really conversations, more like you look at me and say, nope still dreaming, then go back to sleep.” He gave her a shaky smile. “Nice to know I’m a regular feature in your dreams.” Logan lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed her fingers.

“Maybe I should pinch you just to be sure?”

“You’re supposed to pinch yourself.”
“Well, that would be dumb, I know I’m here. My question is, how are you here?”

“Family emergency leave and a serious amount of money paying for transport, but you’re worth it.” His fingertips grazed her lips, trailed along her face and tucked an errant strand of her hair behind her ear.

“Your XO must love you.”

“I am pretty lovable.” Veronica became aware of his hands. He kept reaching out to touch her, reassuring himself that she was here. She laced her fingers through his and squeezed.

“Is Dick okay?”

“He didn’t get shot,” he blanched at the word, “if that’s what you’re asking.”

“When he came running up the beach…did he see the shooter?”

He flinched like her question caused him physical pain. “Veronica,” her name was a plea for her to stop. “I just can’t…” He bowed his head. Veronica tried to reach for him with her free hand. Pain exploded through her shoulder and she fell back against the pillows. His head jerked up. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She bit her bottom lip.

“Veronica you’re whiter than the sheets. Let me call the doctor and they will give you something.”

“No! The baby…”

“Will be fine.” His hand slid under her hospital gown and molded itself around the curve of her belly. Veronica’s breath caught and it had nothing to do with the pain and everything to do with the look on his face, stunned amazement. It was beautiful. He met her gaze. “I love you Veronica.”

“I love you.”

A sexy, half smile lifted the corner of his mouth. “Can you say that again?” She complied. “One more time, please.” Veronica did as he asked. He moved his hand away and she felt bereft at the loss of contact. Logan leaned forward, pressed their mouths together and whispered against her lips, “You can fight me on this, but you won’t win.” He pushed the nurse call button.

The nurse came prepared with a painkiller, like they’d rehearsed this scene a few times. “Relax Miss Mars. It’s a low dose and it won’t have any affect on your baby.” She checked her vitals, asked if she needed anything, and then left the room with the assurance that she would be back to check on her in a little while.

“You should go home and get some sleep.”

“Not going to happen.”

She glanced down at the bed. “I could slide over and make some room for you here with me.”

“Tempting, but I believe that’s frowned upon in this establishment, something about rules.” Veronica reached over and pinched his arm. “Hey.”

“When you started talking about rules, I needed to be sure. My Logan wouldn’t let some pesky rules keep him from my bed.”
“Hmm, that’s why you’re the smart one in this relationship.” Gingerly he moved her over and slid in next to her.

“You’re still too far away.” She snuggled closer.

“Uh, Veronica, if you keep wiggling your cute little ass against me, it’s going to take more than morphine to, uh, relieve my discomfort.”

She fell asleep with a smug smile on her face and woke hours later still nestled in his arms. From his deep, even breathing she could tell he was still sleeping and she loathed waking him. “Logan?” A soft ‘mmm.’ “Logan?” His eyes popped open. “Don’t panic, I’m okay, I’m just hungry.” A slow smile.

“Good thing I brought food.” At the sound of her dad’s voice, Logan rolled out of bed like they were caught teenagers. “Behold, the curative powers of chicken noodle soup.” Keith pulled the plastic container from the bag with a flourish.

“I hope for your sake there’s more in that bag than soup.”

He peered into the bag. “Nope that’s it. Wait, what’s this?” A chicken pot pie with a golden crust was added to her bedside tray, along with a fresh fruit salad and a berry smoothie. “The food is actually courtesy of Richard.”

Veronica smiled. “That explains the size of the pie.”

“I think he meant for you to share it with Logan, honey.”

“I’ll consider it.”

“Word on the street is there’s a certain gentleman caller who won’t leave your room?” Logan had that look, the one that said a sarcastic retort was on its way, but instead he just gave her father a sheepish grin and shrugged. “I brought you a change of clothes son, thought you might want to use Veronica’s shower.”

“Oh, thanks Mr. Mars.”

“It’s Keith.”

Logan took the proffered bag of clothes. “Thanks Keith.” He hesitated. Veronica knew his reluctance to go was not wanting to leave her. Logan brushed her hair away from her face and kissed her forehead. “I’ll leave the door open.”

She gave him her most reassuring smile, but it still took him a long time to walk the twelve feet to the bathroom. True to his word, he left the door open. “That might be a problem.”

Keith nodded. “Maybe I should mention the giant hamster ball to him?”

“Don’t do that, he might not realize you’re joking.”

“Who’s joking?”

Veronica scowled. “Maybe it’s not such a great idea for the two of you to get along- I’ll never be able to leave the house.”

“I hear you can do everything on the Internet these days.”
“I’m okay.” She tried the reassuring smile again with about the same measure of success. “Dad, how did Logan know?”

“Richard called me and I called Dottie.” Keith squeezed her hand. “I felt he needed to be here. It was the right decision.”

“Thank you.”

“You never have to thank me for doing what’s best for you, that’s my job. I don’t care how old you are.”

“I love you too.”

Keith kissed the top of her head. “There are other people outside waiting to see you.” He stood to go, hesitated, and frowned at her. “Maybe I should just wait until Logan is back.”

“Not you too.” Veronica sighed, “I’ll be fine. Logan left the door open, I have the call button.” She held it up for him to see. Keith remained firmly fixed in his spot by the door. “What? It’s not like I can go anywhere.” She waved toward the monitors and wires. “I’m hooked up like Frankenstein’s monster.”

He relented. “I’ll be back.”

“Your Schwarzenegger needs a little work,” she called after Keith’s retreating back.

The door barely closed and Mac was pushing it open. “I knew you were desperate for Logan to come home, but really, you couldn’t come up with a better plan?”

“I’m sorry, did someone say my name?” A freshly showered and shaved Logan reemerged from the bathroom momentarily distracting Veronica.

She smiled at him and then turned back to Mac. “What no flowers?”

“I brought something better, reading material.” Mac held up the redrope expansion file, which was stretched to capacity. The complete case file.

There was a gleam in Veronica’s eyes. “You’re right. That is better.”

On her way across the room, Logan intercepted her. “I’ll take that, thank you very much.” He took the file from Mac’s hands and put it on the windowsill, far out of Veronica’s reach.

Before she could complain, Dick strolled in. Mac glared at him. “Only two visitors at a time.”

“What like it’s the ark?” Dick ogled her. “Does that mean it’s up to us to repopulate the planet?” Mac rolled her eyes. “Hey Ronnie, how’s Two Percent?”

It took no time at all for the comment to register with Logan; a cocky smile spread across his face. At Veronica’s baleful stare, the smile widened.

Dick caught their exchange. “See? He gets it.”

“Oh, he’s going to get it all right.”

“Uh, I think the point of this conversation is that I already got it –multiple times, if memory serves.”

“Nice, dude.” Dick held up his hand and the two of them high fived.
Veronica’s grin faded and a pensive expression stole across her face. She titled her head and studied Dick.


She paid him no attention. “You called my name and started racing up the beach before the first gunshot, did you see the shooter?”

“No, I saw who you were talking to.”

Her brows furrowed. “You know…” An image of blood and Marjorie’s missing face made Veronica shudder. Logan touched her shoulder and she knew he wanted her to stop, but she couldn’t. “You knew Marjorie?”

“She was at my open house beach party.” Dick’s eyes darted to Mac and he quickly looked away. “She sorta spent the night.”

That fit with Philip’s assessment of his sister’s love life. A constant new man and from the designer labels in her closet, a constant new rich man. Unlike Piz, Dick would’ve been an ideal candidate. It was also an ideal time for her to either plant the gun or act as a distraction for whoever did.

Veronica’s gaze wandered to the out-of-reach case file. “I don’t suppose any of you saved my notes before Lamb descended on Dick’s house?”

“I was a little busy, Ronnie.”

A little busy saving you and the baby, Veronica. “You really are my new guardian angel.”

“Yeah well I don’t really like the job description and the pay sucks so how ‘bout you just stay out of trouble?”

Wallace chimed in from the doorway. “That’s an excellent idea.”

“Hey look who it is, Webster.” Dick’s relief at the interruption was palatable. It took him a second to realize everyone, except Logan, was frowning at him. “What? Was it something I said?”

Mac shook her head. “I’ll be back when there’s less testosterone in the room and in the meantime, Dick will let me search through his house for anything Lamb missed.” She bent to kiss Veronica goodbye, her face solemn. “I’m really glad you’re okay.”

“Thanks Mac.”

She straightened and turned to Dick. “Come on. I’ll let you help me search.”

Logan watched them leave and turned to Veronica with eyebrows raised; she shrugged her shoulder and winced. His arm moved his intent clear. Veronica wrapped her hand around the call button preventing him from using it and turned her attention to Wallace. “Hey buddy.”

“Hey yourself.” He took a seat on the edge of Veronica’s bed and nodded toward Logan. “Logan.”

“Wallace.” It was awkward and strained. She was half tempted to squeeze the call button herself and beg for some more morphine. Logan glanced at her, and then back to Wallace. “I’m really sorry about Piz, man.” The double meaning in his apology was clear and the tension in the room eased. “Uh, I’ll leave you guys alone to talk.” Veronica was surprised, but she didn’t object. “I won’t be far.” He leaned over the bed and kissed her.
Once the door closed behind him, Wallace turned to her. “He hasn’t left your side since he got here.”

“He’s worried.”

“Like the rest of us. Who would want to shoot you?”

Veronica was about to protest that the shooter wasn’t aiming for her and this was about Marjorie when she stopped. The event played through her mind. The blood splashing over her face was obviously from Marjorie’s head wound, which meant that if the killer was only interested in Marjorie that first shot was a success. There was no reason for the second shot unless it was meant for her. If she hadn’t turned toward Dick…

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry Wallace. I’m just really tired. Come back tomorrow?” Her smile was strained. “You can tell me all about your new point guard.”

“Sure V, do you need anything?”

“Logan. Can you send Logan back in?”
CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

The screams woke her. It took a minute to realize they were her own. “I’m right here, Veronica, I’m right here.” Logan was cradling her against him, rocking. “You’re safe.” She buried her face in his chest while he stroked her hair. “I’ve got you,” he murmured against her temple. “You’re okay.”

Her breathing slowed. Being in his arms always made her feel safe. It was soothing to be so completely loved, cherished, that she could be secure knowing there was nothing he wouldn’t do to protect her and keep her from harm.

Veronica didn’t know they weren’t alone, until the nurse spoke and the overhead lights clicked on. She blinked against the brightness. “Okay let’s just fix these monitors and give you something to help you sleep.” Her brusque attitude made her instantly unlikeable.

“I don’t want to go back to sleep.” Veronica’s protest fell on deaf ears. Nurse Ratched was already injecting the morphine into her IV.

Logan settled her back on the bed, but he didn’t release her. The nurse frowned at him, but his stony expression kept her silent on the subject. Her lips thinned into a line of disapproval and she fixed the monitor leads without making him move.

“Turn off the lights when you go.” His cold gaze followed her from the room. When he turned back to Veronica the transformation from icy to tender was instantaneous.

“She was only doing her job.” Veronica laid her fingers against his cheek. He wasn’t the only one with an overwhelming need for contact. She loved having him near enough to touch.

Logan turned his face and kissed her hand. “And I’m doing mine. Taking care of my family is the only job that matters to me.”

The word ‘reenlistment’ popped into her head. “What about the Navy?”

“I would give that up right now if you wanted me to. You have to know by now; I would do anything for you.”

Walk the walk, Veronica. She met his eyes. “I will never make you change for me Logan.”

He smiled. “Veronica Mars are you saying I’m perfect just the way I am?”

“Perfect, not so much.” She closed her eyes and laid her head on his chest. “But I love you enough to keep you around for, hmm, I don’t know fifty, sixty years?”

Logan kissed the top of her head and rested his face against her hair. “That might not be long enough. I was thinking forever would work for me.”

“Sounds nice.” The gentle rise and fall of his chest coupled with the steady beat of his heart lulled her to sleep, but when she woke up, she was alone. The curtain around her bed was closed, cutting her off from the rest of the room. “Logan?”

“I’m here.” He tugged the curtain back. The contents of her case file were spread around the room. There were neat stacks lined across the windowsill, floor, and rolling table. A thick pile of pages was balanced on his lap.
“What are doing?”

“You’re the one who said I should read more.”

“I meant books.”

“We’re a team remember? Bonnie and Clyde, the dynamic duo.”

“I think you’ve got that wrong. The Dynamic Duo was Batman and Robin.”

“You don’t look like a Robin.” Whatever he was thinking turned the temperature of his gaze from smolder to simmer to boil. “Now, Catwoman on the other hand, skintight leather, thigh high boots, a whip.”

Veronica fanned herself. “Did someone turn up the heat in here?”

“Ssh... you’re interrupting my fantasy.”

“If you play nice and share maybe next Halloween it won’t have to be just a fantasy.”

“You’re right, it is hot in here.” Logan glanced down at the pile in his lap. “What do you want to start with? Boring emails from his mom? Equally boring emails from Wallace? Or--”

She cut him off. “Why are you being so agreeable?”

“You know me, easygoing Logan Echolls.” When she didn’t respond, he sighed. “I love you Veronica, all of you and this...this is what you do. I’m not going to stop you from being who you are. Besides, don’t you think I want to find the person who shot you just as much as you do?”

There was something in the way he said the words, don’t you think I want to find the person who shot you, which made Veronica nervous.

He might be safer back on his aircraft carrier. “Have you read through all of it?”

“This is my last pile.” He yawned. “These emails are like warm milk and tranquilizers.”

“So nothing interesting then?” Logan just stared at her. Veronica sighed and looked around the room. The sight of all this work with no leads was just depressing and she was afraid her best chance at solving who killed Piz, died with Marjorie. “Hey, I don’t suppose while you were doing all this work you thought about food?”

He’d gone back to reading. Without looking up, he responded, “I ate.”

“Oh, I meant for me.”

Logan grinned. “I knew what you meant.”

“Wyatt is hungry.” His grin intensified. “What?”

“You called her Wyatt.”

“It means nothing except my brain is obviously impaired by hunger.” She tried and failed to contain her own grin.

“Buzz the nurse.”

Veronica wrinkled her nose in distaste. “Hospital food?” Dick was totally spoiling her.
“No, I’m taking you out to eat and you need to get ready.” He called for the nurse. “There’s a very strict dress code in the cafeteria.”

“Oh good you’re awake.” Unlike last night’s nurse, this one seemed overly perky. “Time to get you up and out of that bed.” All she needs is a pep squad uniform and some pom-poms. Logan gathered the case file together, while the nurse changed her dressing and got her ready for her ‘date.’

“You clean up pretty good Mars.”

She batted her eyes at him. “That’s what all the boys tell me.”

“Hmm maybe you should wait for one of them to take you to dinner.” Logan slowed his pace to match her shuffle step. “They’re talking about discharging you.” He sounded skeptical.

“The rising costs of health care, what can you do?” They reached the elevator and she leaned against him. “Does that mean you’ll have to go back?”

“Why don’t you let me worry about that?”

That didn’t sound good. “You’re not planning to do something Logan-ish are you?”

“Logan-ish?”

“You know something that involves military police, court-martial, and the brig.”

“We can be prison pen pals. I hear sex by mail is really hot.” He smirked. “I think it has to do with all the licking.”

“They use self-seal envelopes now.” The cafeteria was on the ground floor in an open space with tall glass windows and ceiling. It even had a name, Atrium Dining. There were individual hot and cold stations, a salad bar, a dessert cart and an area where you could build your own ice cream called the Sundae Spot. Maybe Logan wasn’t kidding about the very strict dress code. Even when sick, the wealthy in Neptune dine better than you do, Veronica. “What no maitre d?”

“He was fired last week for letting in the huddled masses and wretched refuse.” He steered her toward one of the tables. “Just tell me what you want and I’ll get it.”

“And pass up on the chance to impulse eat? I don’t think so.” Logan shook his head, but he did her bidding and circled her around each of the stations. They both got the macaroni and cheese with pancetta and cups of tomato soup. She added a spinach salad, two chocolate milks, a sliced mango and a piece of lemon cake. “That should be good for now.” Not one snappy quip about her food consumption, she was impressed.

He left their tray with the cashier, settled her at a table and went back for the food. As soon as the tray was down, she dug into the rich and creamy macaroni. After each bite she sucked the cheese off her spoon. Logan was staring at her, his food untouched. His hand was curled around the edge of the table and the side of his thumb was drumming out a steady beat on its wood surface. “Are you jealous of a plastic spoon?”

“It is where I would like to be.” Only Logan could make her feel sexy in a hospital gown with an IV in her arm. “You turn the most delightful shade of pink when you’re turned on.”

“This,” she pointed to her face, “this is embarrassment.”

A slow smile. “Sure it is.” His gaze wandered away. “What is it about us and cafeterias?”
“We both belong in institutions?”

“Ah, there’s that quick wit I love so much.”

He still wasn’t eating. Something was on his mind and it wasn’t flirting or food sex. “Is this about my discharge?”

“How long do you think they’d keep you if I donated a new wing?”

“Until the baby was in college?”

“Perfect.” He pushed the food around his plate. “An hour? Two? I’m trying to figure out the wait between your release and the start of your detecting.”

“Start? I’m detecting right now and what I deduce is sarcasm. What happened to I love all of you and this is what you do?”

“I meant every word, but it’s easier to say when I can see you and as much as I may want to engage in mail sex with you, I do have to go back.”

She softened. “Do you know the odds of someone getting shot twice? They’re probably really high, like being struck by lightning.”

“That’s not funny, Veronica.”

“I’m sorry.” She finished her macaroni with less enthusiasm than before and moved on to her soup; studiously trying to avoid looking at him. There was nothing she could say anyway. It didn’t matter if she promised to be careful; it wouldn’t alleviate his fears. New subject to the white courtesy phone, paging new subject to the white courtesy phone. “Do you remember Cara Murphy from Hearst?” At his blank stare she elaborated. “Tall, beautiful, brunette in your Sociology class?”

“The class I attended so regularly? Must have missed her; all my attention was focused on this cute, little blonde number I was sleeping with at the time. Worked in the library, was always trying to get me to expand my horizons.” He poked at his food. “Do you think she’s the one Piz wrote those unfortunate emails to?”

“Maybe.” There was another candidate for that role, one with a better motive. She just didn’t know how it all tied together. Cara Murphy was her first logical stop, but she wanted to talk to Philip Dunn too. The words fat chance instantly followed the thought. Philip Dunn was not going to be very receptive to helping her after the murder of his sister. She might have more luck trying to talk to Karen Dunn. The frosty attitude at the house when Veronica mentioned Marjorie hinted at a strained relationship between the two, which meant Karen Dunn might not be above speaking ill of the dead.

Clearly Logan is right Veronica; you’re going to be investigating the second you walk out of the hospital. She watched him. There was still more pushing and prodding at his plate than there was eating and he was too quiet. “Not all women find the strong, silent brooding sexy on a man.”

“Lucky for me you’re not one of those women.” He abandoned the pretense of eating. “Piz’s story, my name is on his list.”

“Better than your kiss being on it.” The joke was a reflex. The unevenness of their conversations was sometimes disconcerting. It amazed her how other people couldn’t see how alike they were; avoiding confrontation with barbed jokes, deflecting anything too personal with humorous sarcasm. It was their own unique dance: joke, joke, jab, very real moment, tenderness, flirt, and repeat. Her next joke was cued and ready to go: you get arrested too often for me to think you’re paying off the Sheriff’s
Instead she said, “Logan, I know you better than that. Piz wanted something to be true that just wasn’t.” Her words applied to both Logan’s guilt and her feelings.

“He loved you.” Logan smoothed down her hair and tucked it behind her ear. “It’s something I can understand since I suffer from the same affliction.”

Her head tilted and she gave him a coy smile. “Suffer?”

“When you look at me like that there is definitely some suffering involved.”

Man, he was good. Her mind rooted around for a new subject, a safer one, and she frowned. Piz’s unfortunate emails and story notes were at Dick’s house. Nice to know Lamb is doing such a thorough investigation into who shot me. Did he even bother searching? “I take it Mac dropped by to see me?”

He nodded. “Along with your Dad, Wallace, Dick, Dottie and that Norris guy. What’s the deal with him?”

She frowned. “Remember? He was the kid the ATF suspected of planning to blow up Neptune High?”

“Veronica, my memory is only fuzzy on things that aren’t important to me. I know exactly who Norris is and how you got involved with that case. What I’m asking is what’s his deal now? He showed up in uniform and I was expecting to be arrested for loitering in your room.”

“He’s been helping me with the case. Speaking of which, did he bring me anything?”

“Just flowers, which I promptly threw away.” He shrugged. “You wouldn’t have liked them anyway, they were hideous. Weeds, really.”

“First a spoon, now Norris, you need to get this jealousy in check.”

Instead of answering, he leaned over the table and kissed her. Not a soft, you’re so cute, kiss, but a real, if only this table wasn’t between us, kiss. Aching sweet, almost reverent at first, its intensity grew until it was white-hot with need and dizzying in its effect on her. It was a long time, before remembering where they were, he pulled back. She gave him a shaky smile. “Wow if that’s a hint of things to come, can I leave the hospital now?”

He grinned. “Eat up; you’ll need your strength.”

She pushed his bowl toward him. “Same goes for you.” They couldn’t stop smiling while they finished dinner. As soon as she swallowed her last bite, her eyes flicked to the Sundae Spot and back to him. “Ice cream?”

He dutifully went and got her a chocolate cone with sprinkles. Veronica held on to him with her free hand and he pushed the IV stand along. She could feel him watching her and took a long, slow, deliberate lick of her cone. “If you’re trying to change my mind about them releasing you, it’s working.”

Veronica stopped eating. “Ooh.”

Logan’s steps faltered. “What?”

She let go of him and touched her belly. “She’s moving.”
Logan just stared at her for a minute, his expression unreadable and then he looked away. “Maybe you should pinch me again.” He shook his head. “I can’t explain it. I know in my head, Veronica’s pregnant, but to see you, to touch you.” He placed his hand over her belly. “It’s just so…unreal that we’re here. You and me, having a baby. You’re having my baby. The idea of it just blows me away.”

Veronica put her hand over his. “I love you Logan.” It was as simple and as complicated as that.

“Hearing you say that? It’s even better in person.”

She laced their fingers together and they resumed their walk. “Want to go look at the babies?”

The doors opened on the waiting elevator. “None of them will be as cute as Wyatt.”

“Probably not.” She smiled. “We really can’t name her that.” He made a noise that sounded like ‘hmph.’ “I do like Charlotte and…Jillian.”

“Jillian Echolls. It has potential.” He turned and leaned his back against the wall of the elevator so he could look at her. “Jillian Wyatt Echolls. She can be my little Jillybean.”

“Still not letting go of that Wyatt are you?”

“I’m never going to let go of either of you.” He enveloped her in his arms and kissed the top of her head.
Right before her release, Logan managed to extract a promise of one day from her. One complete day of resting in bed with no distractions. She was quick to point out that he was a very big distraction, but she didn’t expect him to take her seriously. Now she found herself alone in an empty house with nothing to do. No rose on his pillow with a note, but he did leave a tray of food on the table, which he’d shoved next to the bed. There were also books, magazines, and Sunday’s crossword puzzle. *Clearly, he was serious about the all day in bed thing.* She picked up an issue of Modern Bride and smiled. *Okay, leaving me food, could count as a romantic gesture.*

Veronica plumped up the pillows and tried to get comfortable. Now that she was no longer attached to monitors and under close supervision by the trauma surgeon and her ob/gyn, the strongest medication she was allowed to take was Tylenol. It was not working. *Next time you get shot, do it when you’re not pregnant then you can have all the painkillers you want.* Logan’s, that’s not funny, Veronica, resounded in her head. But, hey, *it only hurts when I cry.* Actually, it hurt consistently. Her entire body felt like it went the full twelve rounds with Ali.

Lifting the food tray was problematic and hurt like a bitch. She left it where it was and grazed. *Graze, like a cow, Veronica.* Sometimes she wished she could turn off her own head. There were thick slices of Dick’s famous French toast, a carafe of fresh squeezed orange juice, apples with peanut butter, zucchini walnut muffins, and a bacon and avocado sandwich. *How long does he expect to be gone?* She munched her food and flipped through the pages of the magazine.

An interminable amount of time later, or fifteen minutes according to her cell phone, she was done. Relaxing was for other people. In her head she compromised with Logan, she would stay in bed, but only if she could do something more interesting than the crossword puzzle. She found the case file and her laptop within easy reach on the floor next to his side. Veronica took this as his tacit agreement to her proposed compromise.

She grinned when she found his note was taped to the top of her computer. *Sometimes I know you too well, Mars. Just stay in bed and I’ll be home as soon as I can. I may even bring lunch.* Love, L.

Her first call was to Norris. “Hey, it’s Veronica.”

“How are you feeling?”

*Like a punching bag.* “Good. Um, Logan told me you came to see me, thank you for the flowers.”

“You’re welcome.” He laughed. “So how torturous is this for you? Exchanging pleasantries when all you really want to do is ask me if I have any information?”

“What’s the phrase? Cruel and unusual punishment? That about sums it up.”

He laughed again. “I thought so.”

“Well, are you going to put me out of my misery?”

“The gun used to shoot Piznarski was traced back to Philip Dunn. He claims he no longer had it, gave it to his sister sometime last year when she was having problems with an ex.”

That was nice and neat. Marjorie was the direct link from Veronica’s sweater to the San Diego convention center. Then it was her car at the scene and now her gun as the murder weapon. All the clues were nicely laid out for Veronica to find. It was like a double bluff. Someone not only framed
Veronica, but left a trail of bread crumbs to a convenient scapegoat. Two frame jobs for the price of one. When Marjorie Dunn came to Dick’s house she was a wreck. She didn’t look like a cold blooded killer, she looked terrified. We were friends, those were her last words, we were friends.

“How does that mean I’m off the hook for killing Piz?”

“You’d think so, but no. This is Neptune, Veronica. Lamb’s theory is that she was your accomplice. He knows she was in your office a few days before the shooting.”

“And I suppose I shot her and then myself to make it look good? What did I do with the gun? Take the time to bury it in the sand and build a sandcastle or two while I waited for the ambulance?”

“Either that or Dick Casablancas helped you.”

“How exactly did I get all these people to help me on my killing spree?”

“It certainly wasn’t your charm and personality.”

Veronica sighed. “I’m sorry Norris; I didn’t mean to take out my frustration on you. I really do appreciate your help.”

“I’m just sorry I didn’t have better news for you.”

Veronica thanked him again and ended the call. Accomplice, Marjorie wasn’t terrified of something, but of someone. She thumbed through the case files and pulled out the one labeled Marjorie Dunn. The financial information was sparse. Not because Mac wasn’t thorough, but because Marjorie didn’t own much. There was a small savings account with a thousand dollars and an equally small checking account. Sporadic deposits, the largest sums usually around the end of the month, which she then sent right to the landlord for her crummy apartment. The other checks were for her insurance and cell phone.

Her employment history was just as spotty. Marjorie and she were the same age so these early jobs at fast food restaurants were as a teenager. They lasted on average two months and then there was a long gap in between. Her next job wasn’t until college at the Neptune Women’s Clinic, which she managed to hold on to for almost a year. Then there was nothing until she turned up at Dunn BMW. The tax returns were all one page easy files and held no new information. Veronica tossed the file aside and picked up her phone.

“Smart Start.”

“Lucy, right? This is Veronica Mars; I was in a few weeks ago and met with Jimmy. I was wondering if I might talk to him for a minute.”

“I’m sorry hon; he’s out at a show.”

“Could you tell me where? I’m perfectly happy to go meet him and have this discussion in person.” Except for the fact that Logan would lose his mind if he came home and found you gone.

“I’m sorry I’m not allowed to give out that information. Hold on, please.” The refusal to hand out Jimmy’s whereabouts answered Veronica’s first question. “Was there something else Miss Mars?”

With an added boost of cheer, she said, “Please, call me Veronica,” like they were destined to become fast friends. “Jimmy was working a conference on,” she quickly dug her calendar from her purse and supplied the date. “Can you tell me who hired him for that job?”
“No, I’m sorry I can’t. You’re going to have to talk to Jimmy.” Veronica was just about to disconnect the call when Lucy added, “Do you want his cell number?”

“I would love his cell number.” She stuck her hand back in her bag and groped around the bottom for a pen. “Go ahead, give it to me.” Veronica wrote it on the front of Marjorie’s file, thanked Lucy for her help and hung up. She dialed Jimmy’s cell.

“Kincaid.”

“Jimmy, this is Veronica Mars, we met…”

“Of course, Veronica. How are you? Any luck tracking down my spouse Marjorie?”

*If by tracking down you mean watching her die, then yes, I was really lucky.* “No, not yet. I was wondering if you could tell me who hired you for that job at the San Diego convention center.”

“You’re going to have to be more specific. I do a lot of jobs there.” Veronica gave him the date and waited. “I’m not good with dates, names and faces, only. This was the day your father was following me, right?” His amusement told Veronica it was his new favorite story to tell around the water cooler.

“Right, he mentioned a private investigator’s symposium.”

“Hmm, I think it was a fashion show. If I remember, we had a lot of trouble doing the wiring for the big screens. Had to make sure none of it touched the stage or the runway, couldn’t have any of the models tripping over them in their heels. Can’t tell you the company name because it was *French,* an embarrassed chuckle, “and I literally can’t say it, but I can tell you it meant something like head to toe. I know because I asked someone.”

“Are you going to be back in the office later? Maybe you could check your records for me and get their contact information?”

“I’m going to be here late, what if I call you in the morning, say around nine, nine-thirty?”

“Perfect. Do you need my cell?”

“Nope. I’ll save it in my phone as soon as we hang up.”

Something was gnawing at her, but the harder she tried to focus on it, the more it eluded her. She picked up her laptop and started to type in French and fashion and then laughed at the ridiculousness of that search. She tried translate ‘head to toe’ into French and got ‘la tête aux pieds.’ No such company name. She was about to try another variation when Logan walked in carrying shopping bags. Veronica shut the laptop, “Where have you been all day?”

He grinned. “Nag, nag, nag- those aren’t the wifely duties you should be practicing.” *Teasing flirt? Okay, I can play this game.*

“Well, maybe if you didn’t leave me alone in bed, we could’ve worked on my other duties.”

“Hmm if I knew that was an option.” Logan dropped the bags. He put one knee on the bed and leaned over her. The instant his mouth met hers, Veronica buried her fingers in his hair and drew him closer. Logan broke off the kiss. “I see,” he put a soft kiss on her nose, “you have been hard at work, resting.”

She shrugged. “I was bored.” Her gaze moved over the black Henley shirt hugging his chest, down
to the worn jeans. “And now I’m not.”

“Veronica, stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like we’re stranded on a deserted island and you haven’t eaten in weeks and suddenly I’m food.”

“ Entirely your fault for being tempting.” He backed off the bed. “Don’t leave. I promise not to behave.”

“Veronica Mars are you trying to seduce me?”

“Is it working?”

“You may have to buy me dinner first.” He picked up one of the bags and stretched out on the bed next to her. “I was helping your dad move your boxes into the house.”

“And that took all day?”

“Three hours is not all day.”

“Wait a minute, you were with my dad and you were moving boxes where?”

“Are you having a hard time following the conversation? Should I talk slower? Draw pictures perhaps?” She lightly punched his arm. “Your dad and I moved your stuff from his house to our house. He mentioned something about you taking it easy for the next few weeks, you know, buying furniture and decorating, being all domestic. Then we both had a good long laugh.”

She made a face. “Our house?”

‘Is a very, very, very fine house.” He kissed her nose. “And then we went shopping.” He pulled out several boxes. They were all labeled the same, something called Drop Cam; Wi-Fi indoor video monitoring.

“You bought surveillance equipment?”

“It’s a baby monitor.”

Veronica grinned. “I don’t think so. Baby monitors are these little plastic things that look like walkie-talkies from which you can hear if the baby is crying.”

Logan frowned at her. “For other babies maybe, but not for Wyatt. These have sound and high-def video with motion detectors and night vision. They upload video to the cloud and you can check them from all your mobile devices. You can even get alerts when there’s motion that shouldn’t be there.”

And you were worried that he’d be overprotective. “Uh, don’t you think that’s a little extreme?”

“This is us Veronica.” Good point. “Where’s your phone?” She handed it to him. He got out of bed and disappeared from the room with her cell and laptop. When he finally returned, the laptop was open and he was tapping on the keys. He tossed her the phone; a clear view of Dick’s kitchen was on the screen.

“The kitchen might not be the best place to put the camera. Do you know Dick keeps his porn in there?”
Logan nodded. “He gets hungry afterward. Says it saves him time.”

“Do I even want to know how you know this?”

“Dick is pretty much an open book, Veronica. You know, the kind that’s easy to read with big pictures and small words, but not intended for children.” He looked up from the computer. “Speaking of Dick, what’s up with him and Mac?”

“You noticed that too? I’m pretty sure they had an actual date the other night, an all night, stumble home early in the morning, date.”

“Do tell.”

Veronica shrugged. “That’s all I know.”

“Really? No surveillance photos and bugged phone conversations? You’re slipping Mars.” He tapped one of the boxes. “We can always put one in Dick’s room. They plug right in to an outlet, twenty second installation.”

“Eww, no. Now that you’ve completely turned me off, what are we going to do with the rest of our day?”

“Completely?” The one word was enough. You’re like a light switch, Veronica. Logan slowly removed each of the Drop Cam boxes from the bed and stacked them on the table, his eyes never wavering from her.

“Now who’s food,” she murmured. He stripped off his shirt and tossed it over the boxes before undoing the snap on his jeans. Veronica swallowed. “Uh, Logan.” Her eyes were riveted to his hands as he lowered the zipper. He shucked his jeans and joined her on the bed, stretching out on his side facing her. Her eyes devoured every inch of him and her fingers longed to do the same, but if she touched him she wouldn’t be able to stop.

Logan didn’t have the same reserve. His hand skimmed over the curve of her hip and drew her closer. He nuzzled his face into her neck and kissed her throat. “I was reading,” his mouth moved lower, “that during pregnancy,” he pressed his lips against the base of her neck. Veronica wondered if he could feel the staccato beat of her pulse. “Some women are insatiable.” Did he have a direct pipeline into her thoughts?

“Logan we can’t, I can’t…”

He lifted his face to look at her. “Veronica as much as I want to, and believe me I want to, I’m not going to take advantage of you in your weakened condition, but,” he lowered his head, “that doesn’t mean I can’t help you with your frustration.”

His words elicited the desired response and her belly clenched in anticipation. The instant his mouth moved over her, all coherent thought fled and Veronica gave herself up to the sensations. Her fingers dug into the mattress, clutching the sheets and her hips arched toward him. She caught her bottom lip between her teeth, but not before a soft moan escaped. So close. When it came, the release rippled through her body in waves and she fell back against the mattress. Woof.

Logan kissed his way up her body, and spooned her. Veronica closed her eyes and relaxed against him. “I feel like I should return the favor.”

“This was all about you.” He brushed back a stray strand of her hair and kissed her temple. “Besides you can always return the favor when you’re dressed in your Catwoman suit.”
She smiled. “I don’t really want to wait that long.” Logan wrapped his leg around her, slid his hand over her belly and kissed her neck. She wiggled closer and he groaned.

“I’m going to take a shower.” He rolled away and climbed out of bed. “Do you want lunch first?”

“A shower?”

“Yes, a very cold one.”

She inched toward the edge of the bed. “I’d like a shower.”

“Veronica you’re killing me. I’m going to shower and you’re going to stay here.”

“Spoilsport.” She watched him go, enjoying the view. Her phone chimed with an alert that sounded like a breaking news bulletin. This just in, Logan Echolls is sexy. Veronica grinned and patted the sheets in search of her cell. An image of Logan standing naked in Dick’s kitchen chugging down orange juice was on her screen. All hail the new baby monitor. She watched until he left the room. Voyeur much, Veronica.

She really did want a shower and more Tylenol, not necessarily in that order. Using the table for support, she pulled herself out of bed and padded into the kitchen with her Tylenol in hand. She took two pills and downed a glass of water. A late lunch wasn’t a bad idea. There was a platter of hummus, crackers, and cheese in the fridge. She set it on the counter and munched while she perused her food choices, picking as she went. A foil wrapped bowl looked interesting.

“I would’ve gotten you…” Veronica jumped and dropped the bowl. It shattered against the tile. Its contents splashed against her legs and she froze. “It’s okay Veronica, you’re okay.” Her eyes found his. Logan uttered a soft, “fuck.” He circled around the island, avoiding the glass, and slowly slipped his arms around her. He picked her up and carried her to the couch. “I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“I was hungry.” Logan rubbed her back. This was not good. If she was going to jump at every noise or every time someone entered a room, she was going to be a basket case. It was too much; Dad’s accident, Gia, Piz, and now this, she needed a break. “I’m going to take the Bar exam.” His hand stilled. “In February. I’ve already registered and signed myself up for a prep course.”

“Okay.”

“That’s it? Just, okay?” Her words were harsh.

“What do you want me to say Veronica? You spent years in law school; I’m thinking it wasn’t just for something to do. Oh hey law school, that sounds like a fun way to pass the time.”

She shifted in his lap to face him. “Are you mad?”

“No, worried.” He cupped her face. “You’re not exactly in the best place to be making life altering decisions.”

“Life altering decisions like you reenlisting?” Logan frowned at her. “Dottie told me. She said in two years when your initial commitment is up, you’re going to reenlist.”

“If you’re spoiling for a fight, you’re going to be disappointed. Fighting with me is not going to make you feel better, more like your old self. I was going to reenlist, but things are different now. I wouldn’t make that decision without you.”
Her anger dissipated. She buried her face against his chest and started to cry. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“Nothing is wrong with you” --he stroked her hair-- “you’re perfect.”

“A perfect mess.” Her words were muffled.

“My perfect mess.” He carried her to the bathroom and helped her shower. His jaw clenched when he removed her bandages and saw the stitches, but he remained silent. Veronica sat on the bench while he washed her hair.

She was capable of showering on her own, but she found his tender ministrations soothing and she suspected it was the same for him. It was always something she withheld from him, denied him; the right to take care of her. This was a very new feeling for her. She didn’t hate it, but it felt strange to be this exposed without her wisecracks as a shield.

Logan wrapped her in a towel and kissed her. “Thank you.” She stepped in closer and rested her head on his chest. His arms slipped around her waist. “You need to put a new bandage on.”

“Let’s just stay like this a little longer.”

“It would be more comfortable if we were lying down.”

Veronica smiled. “Laying down gets us into trouble.”

“You underestimate me. I could get us into a lot of trouble right here.” His hands slid lower. “Should I demonstrate?”

“You have no idea how much I want to say yes.”

“You’re wrong.” Simultaneously, they both took a step back. Logan patted the stitches dry with the edge of her towel, then smoothed on the antibiotic cream and reapplied a fresh bandage. “Now let’s get you something to eat.”

“I should get dressed first.”

He grinned. “I think you should stick with the towel. I’m into it.” She started to walk away. At the door, she turned back to him and dropped the towel. He lunged for her and she skittered away. A wide grin spread across her face when she heard the shower start. That’s just mean, Veronica.

She got dressed and sat on the edge of the bed. The shopping bags called to her. Her dad and Logan baby shopping. Forget bugging Dick and Mac, I should’ve placed full time video surveillance on the two men in my life. The first bag contained something called an Ergobaby carrier. An image of Logan with the baby nestled against his chest made her mushy. Veronica Mars you are a marshmallow. A musical play mat, educational toys, and the entire DVD collection of the Baby Einstein videos were in the next bag. The handle of a baseball bat was sticking up from the last bag. She pulled out the bat and peeked in the bag, a baseball and a child’s size catcher’s mitt. Veronica grinned.

Logan’s laughter made her look up. “You like?” She’d covered herself from head-to-toe, socks, sweatpants, a long-sleeved t-shirt, gloves and a hat. “Will this help? If not, tell me now, because I’m hot.”

His eyes darkened. “Yes, you are.”
“No help at all then.” Veronica tugged off the hat and gloves. She shed the sweatpants to reveal another pair of his boxers. Then she gingerly peeled off the layer of t-shirt to the tank top underneath. Logan was leaning on the wall intently watching. If she didn’t want the man to suffer through yet another cold shower, she needed a distraction. Her hands closed around the bat. “A baseball bat? I thought you were convinced she’s a girl?”

He frowned at her. “Little girls play baseball too Veronica.”

“I know, but it seems unlike you.”

“You know me so well; your dad bought it. Me? I know nothing about baseball; I’m going to buy her a surfboard.” He grinned. “But I can see it now. Wyatt Echolls, pitching for…uh, the Yankees? Dodgers? Those are teams right?”

Veronica chuckled. “It might break her grandfather’s heart if she doesn’t sign with the Padres.”

“She’ll be a pioneer; first woman in professional baseball.”

“She’s not even here yet and you have her off playing baseball and surfing.” Veronica shook her head. “Next you’ll have her going to medical school in her spare time.”

“Hmm, Doctor Echolls, that’s pretty good, I like it.”

Veronica put everything back on the floor and burrowed herself under the covers. “You know what I would like? Food.”

“Was that a hint for me to get you something?”

“Too subtle?”

“We can watch movies while we eat.”

Veronica groaned. “Please tell me you’re not going to make me watch Easy Rider again?”

Logan started to walk away. “Freedom: That’s what it’s all about. But talkin’ about it and bein’ it, that’s two different things.”
CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

She woke up early. Extracting herself from Logan without waking him took effort, but she managed it. Gathering everything she needed in the dark however was a little more difficult. She tripped over the baseball bat and bit back a curse. She waited, but Logan didn’t stir. She scooped up the bat and leaned it against Dick’s surfboard rack, pioneer in sports.

Veronica dressed quickly and scrawled a hasty note for Logan. Just a few hours, I’ll be back before you miss me. Love, Veronica.

As soon as she was settled behind the wheel, she used her cell to call Wallace and got his voice mail. “Hey buddy. Start thinking college sports. Now I say, go Pioneers, and you say? Call me back with your answer, it’s important.”

Her first stop was the Hash House for breakfast. She got the original Farm Benedict; two basted eggs with smoked bacon, tomato, spinach, roasted red pepper cream and griddled mashed potatoes on a fresh baked biscuit. Eating it in the car while trying to drive was a nonstarter, she wolfed down her sandwich in the parking lot and drove to Kinney Broadcasting. She walked in with the employees on their way to work, but there was no sign of Cara Murphy. When she arrived at her office, the receptionist was already at her desk, coffee in hand. “Is Cara in yet?”

The receptionist shook her head. “She’s not coming in.”

Veronica swallowed her disappointment. “Sick day?”

“She took a leave of absence.” A graceful lift of one shoulder. “I’m not so sure she’s coming back.”

“Do you know when she put in for the leave?”

She opened the day planner on her desk and flipped through the pages. Replacement for Cara was written in block letters on the Monday after Veronica came to see her, two days after the shooting. The receptionist turned back a page to the week before and there on the Friday of Veronica’s actual visit was the note: Cara, leave. She thanked her and returned to the elevator.

Veronica replayed her last conversation with Cara. Are you really pregnant? Is it Logan’s? No, it’s just...

Now Veronica wished she’d made her finish that sentence instead of being so focused on whether she knew Marjorie.

This time she traversed the roads in the opposite direction, from Reveal to the Dunns. Two cars were parked in the drive. She drove past the house and parked midway down the street and then angled the rearview mirror for a view of the Dunn’s front door. Hopefully, Philip wasn’t also taking a leave of absence after the death of his sister. The front door opened at precisely eight-thirty. Veronica waited for him to drive off and gave it an extra fifteen minutes, before approaching the house.

In the same instant she saw recognition dawn on Karen’s face, the other woman started to close the door. Veronica wedged her foot under it and started talking. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have lied to you, but it was really important that I find Marjorie before something bad happened.”

“That worked out real well.”

Veronica cringed. “Please, it won’t take long. I need to find the person responsible for Marjorie’s…” She shied away from the word murder, “…death. Just a few questions, I promise.”
“You were shot too, right?” Karen’s gaze softened as she glanced at Veronica’s belly and the rigid set of her shoulders relaxed. “Is the baby okay?”

Instinctively, Veronica’s hand cradled her stomach. “She’s fine.”

“A girl? Lucky you. I wanted a girl, but needless to say, five boys later, and I was done trying.”

“Five?” Veronica croaked. She was panicked at the thought of one baby and this woman was raising five. Her estimation of Karen Dunn notched up a few degrees.

“I guess it would be okay if you came in.” She opened the door wider and couched her invitation with the words, “For a few minutes.” Karen led her past the kid debris in the hall and down a step into the living room filled with more kid detritus. “Do you have any names picked out?”

Logan did in fact make her watch Easy Rider again last night and the name popped out, “Wyatt.”

“For a girl?” Veronica sighed. She supposed she was just going to have to get used to people asking that question.

“My…husband.” The word, which fell so easily from her mouth when she was lying to Mr. Misanthrope, felt weird on her tongue now when it was a real possibility. “Big Easy Rider fan.”

Karen made a face, but she withheld her comments. “I’m sorry for the mess.” She busied herself picking up a stray sock, a soccer uniform, a windbreaker, and a pair of cleats. “Boys tend to shed as they go.”

“Men too.”

Karen gave her a slight laugh. She looked down at the pile of clothes she’d collected, now unsure what to do with them, and dumped them on the sofa before sitting down. “What do you want to know?”

Veronica eyed the matching sofa opposite Karen. It was a formidable, industrial strength sized couch. It has to be with five boys climbing all over it. She sat on the edge. “What can you tell me about Marjorie’s friends?”

Karen’s mouth twisted. “That she didn’t have any. She had men and I wouldn’t exactly call them friends.” A loud sigh. “Marjorie is, was, a…troubled. She liked men. I don’t know if that’s the right word, she liked them, but she didn’t like them. Does that make any sense?” Veronica nodded. “It might’ve helped if she picked guys with more depth than a kiddie swimming pool.”

“The trouble last year with her ex? Philip gave her a gun?”

A startled expression crossed Karen’s face. “I told him it was a mistake, but he’s always been over indulgent with her. Truth be told, I think she viewed him and their relationship the same as with other men. What’s in it for me? What can I get out of this?”

Veronica backed away from the subject before Karen started too far down the path of Marjorie’s doomed relationships. “She grew up here in California?”

“Born and raised. The only time she ever left was for college.”

“Go Pioneers.”

Karen frowned. Not at Veronica, but like she was remembering something. “I guess you could call
her Marjorie’s friend, maybe her only friend. Poor girl. I was pregnant with, let’s see end of 2007 right around Christmas, that would be my second son Cole.”

*She was hinting at us getting serious and asking me to come to Denver with her for the break and I was a dick to her…I’ve been using you as a distraction to get over Veronica.* “Poor girl?” Veronica prompted.

Karen nodded. “Marjorie brought her here a few times. They met at Marjorie’s job…”

“The Neptune Women’s Clinic.”

“That’s right.” Karen hesitated. Her expression said, if you know the story, why are you making me tell it to you?

“I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to interrupt you.”

She picked up the thread of her story. “She was obsessed with my pregnancy, like strangely so; always asking me questions, wanting to touch my belly. It creeped me out to the point I had to ask Marjorie to stop bringing her here. That’s when Marjorie confided in me that she’d just had an abortion.” *Your dad’s death is that the reason you left Hearst? One of them.* “I felt so bad, I told Marjorie to forget what I said and that her friend was welcome here any time.”

“Did she come back?”

“A few times. She opened up to me about the abortion and the boyfriend. I got the feeling…” Veronica was afraid she wasn’t going to continue. “He didn’t know. The boyfriend? He didn’t know about any of it, the baby or the abortion. She told me that point blank, but there was something about the way she told me. I don’t know, maybe I’m reading too much into it, her being friends with Marjorie and all.”

“Please, whatever you can tell me, this is all very helpful.”

A skeptical look, but she continued. “She seemed more disappointed in the failure of her plan. Like she got pregnant on purpose, hoping it would make the boyfriend commit to her.” *Sometimes I don’t think he ever actually saw me. He had this way of looking through me like I wasn’t even there.* “I think she envisioned this scenario where she would tell him about the baby and they would get married and live happily ever after.” *It was so long ago and it wasn’t like we were going to get married and have babies, right?*

Veronica was having trouble concentrating. She kept seeing that sad, faraway expression on Parker’s face. “She left for college?”

The change of topic threw Karen off and it took her a minute to readjust. “Yes. Parker, that was this girl’s name, when she left to go home, Marjorie, went with her. Marjorie was always flighty like that. You’re going to Denver? I’ll come with you. She went to college for what maybe half a semester before she was on the phone asking Philip for plane fare to come home. Not much follow-through with…”

Veronica stood up. “Thank you. This has been…”

“Are you okay? You don’t look good. Why don’t you sit back down and let me get you something, water?”

“No, thank you.” Veronica forced a smile. “I’m fine, really. Just tired I guess, this is my first day out and about since…” Her smile fractured. *We were friends.* Not her and Piz, her and Parker. Veronica
thought about their positions on the beach. When Dick called her name and she moved she put Marjorie between her and the shooter. No, Veronica not the shooter, when you moved you put Marjorie between you and Parker. Parker wasn’t aiming for her friend, she was aiming for you. You and the baby.

Her phone rang on the way back to the car, Wallace. She felt too exposed out in the open. The matchbooks from the kitchen, Trulucks, the Neptune Grand, Nico’s Lounge, was Marjorie following her or was Parker? Veronica picked up the pace to the car and answered her phone. “Hey.”

“Go Pioneers? Since when are you interested in basketball?”

“Since always.” Her attempt at levity didn’t fool him.

“Are you okay?”

“Peachy. What do you have for me faithful sidekick?”

“Vee,” he managed to communicate an entire sentiment in the one stretched out syllable: I know something’s wrong. You don’t have to make jokes, you can talk to me. This was why he was her best friend. When she didn’t offer a response, he gave an audible sigh. “The Pioneers are the men’s basketball team at the University of Denver and since I know you have no interest in basketball since ever, what gives?”

“Marjorie Dunn was wearing a Go Pioneers sweatshirt in one of the pictures at her apartment.”

“Marjorie Dunn?”

“Man, we really have not been spending enough time together. I’ll fill you in later, okay?” Veronica put the top up on the car. “I’ll have my people call your people and we’ll do lunch.”

“Be careful, Veronica.”

“Careful’s my middle name.” She disconnected the call and tossed the phone on the seat. Get it in gear Veronica; a moving target is better than a sitting one. She started the car and drove. A few times she’d suspected Parker was the one Piz was seeing; her casual attitude about their contact when a stack of emails told a different story. The, are you seeing anyone? I was and now I’m not, conversation and her staying with Piz’s parents for the funeral, but each time there was a reasonable explanation for it.

Piz, another man in Parker’s life that didn’t truly see her because he was too busy being focused on Veronica. She could just imagine Parker’s reaction if Piz finally met up with her and told her even half the things he’d been writing in those unfortunate emails. You don’t have to imagine her reaction, you know her reaction, she killed him.

Parker knew her. She knew that once she killed Piz, whether she framed Veronica or not, Veronica would investigate. Her planning was meticulous. Hand Lamb enough evidence to pin the crime on Veronica and give Veronica enough evidence to believe Marjorie was the guilty party. Then misdirect Veronica to Sacks.

Usually in a frame up the way to make it stick would be to kill the person being framed. Veronica could see the final move. Parker would kill Veronica and then Marjorie making their deaths look like a murder suicide, but something went wrong. It could be Marjorie disappearing, or Dick’s presence at the house, but Veronica suspected it was neither. What fell apart was Parker herself. When she saw the newspapers and learned Veronica was pregnant, she went off the deep end.
Cara Murphy put it together. When Veronica first met her, she really didn’t know who Piz was seeing. Until she saw Marjorie with Parker? Did one of the two of them confess to her? Or did she see Parker’s reaction to the news that Veronica was going to have Logan’s baby?

Veronica turned the car around and headed south. When Mac mentioned the small mortgage on a condo in San Diego, Veronica paid no attention to it. It wasn’t odd for Cara to own a condo, but it wasn’t the condo itself, it was the location. Reveal’s offices here were temporary. They were headquartered up near San Francisco. It still wasn’t strange for Cara to own real estate down here, but Veronica was hoping it was an investment property. She was hoping it was not a place she lived, but a place she would go to hide out.

Her phone rang and Veronica hit the hands free button. “Hello?”

“Veronica it’s Jimmy Kincaid. I’m sorry I’m late, things here got a little crazy this morning.” A crazy morning? Me too, Jimmy, me too. “The name of the company that hired me was Cap-à-pie.” The way he pronounced it, kappa pie, made it sound like a Greek fraternity. “Their offices are in La Jolla. Do you want the address?”

“No Jimmy, I’ve got it, but thanks.” The phone beeped, signaling another incoming call.

“Anytime and if you ever need any audio/visual equipment…”

“I know who to call.” Veronica hung up and hit the button again. “Hello?” Whoever was trying to reach her was gone.

She pulled on to the side of the freeway and waited ten minutes. If anyone was following her they would either have to pull in behind her or continue driving past her. She waited for a break in traffic and pulled out. To be on the safe side she took the next exit and coasted down the ramp, her eyes on the rearview mirror. No one followed her from the freeway. She took a lazy, circuitous route through the streets and doubled back. She pulled over one more time and watched the cars. Veronica found her phone and checked the missed calls, Dick Casablancas. Guess you didn’t make it home before he missed you. She dialed the office.

“Mars Investigations.”

“I need two things. First, can you give me the address for Cara Murphy’s condo in San Diego and second, I need everything you can find on a company called Cap-à-pie.” She used the correction pronunciation, ka-puh-pee and then spelled it for Mac. “They’re located in La Jolla.”

“Got it. Uh, Logan just called here looking for you. He tried you on your cell, but you weren’t picking up. FYI, he does not sound happy.”

Veronica sighed. “I’ll call him right now.” She programmed the address for Cara Murphy into the GPS as Mac read it to her. “Thanks, Mac.” Veronica stared at the phone.

Logan. He was going to blame himself, for Piz’s murder, for her getting shot. He was going to take the responsibility for Parker going crazy. Her heart broke. She didn’t want there to be any secrets between the two of them. Secrets were not a foundation for a good relationship, but she really wanted to keep this from him. It wasn’t his fault he didn’t love Parker, just like it wasn’t her fault she didn’t love Piz.

She called Dick’s house. Logan's, “Hey,” was subdued.

“Hey, you. I thought I’d be home before you woke up.”
“Um, Parker stopped by to see you.”

The panic was instant. “Parker? Is she there now?” Silence. “Logan?”

“I love you Veronica.” It sounded so final. She started driving before he finished saying her name.

“Logan? Logan?” She glanced at the phone; the call ended message mocked her. She wasn’t far, ten minutes max. Please let that be enough time. Now she knew why Parker wasn’t following her. She didn’t have to. She knew exactly where to go.

The news update alert sounded on her phone; the alert from the baby monitor. Veronica held up the phone; one eye on the road and the other on the screen. Logan was backing up into the kitchen, arms out. No, no, no, please God, not Logan. Veronica saw the gun first and then Parker. “—can’t have children now.”

“I’m sorry Parker, I didn’t know.” Logan backed up further into the kitchen, leading Parker in a strange dance.

“Does it matter? Even if you did know, would it have changed anything? No, you still would have loved her, wanted to be with her, wished I was her.”

**Lie to her Logan, please lie to her.** “You’re right; I would’ve still loved Veronica.”

“I hate you Logan Echolls, hate you.”

“Did you hate Piz too?” He took a step closer to her, closer to the gun. *No unnecessary risks, Logan.* He was going to do something crazy; she could see it on his face. It was the same look he had when he took on Gory in the cafeteria. Veronica had to get to him, save him.

“Don’t come any closer Logan or I will shoot you.”

He shrugged. “So do it already. I’m sure you’re busy, you know, things to do, places to be, people to kill.”

“I’m waiting for Veronica,” the color leech from his face, “and this time I won’t miss.”

It was the wrong thing to say. He took another step toward her and froze. His eyes darted toward the camera and quickly back to Parker. Veronica knew exactly why he stopped, the baby. Logan Echolls finally had something he wanted to live for. She pushed down harder on the gas pedal. Veronica was going too fast to watch the phone. She put it down, but she could hear them. The hands free synched with the app and the tense silence from the kitchen filled the car’s sound system.

“Why did you do it Parker?” He asked the question softly. “I’m not worth any of this.” Yes, keep her talking, buy time. I’m coming Logan.

“So full of yourself. It’s not you, it’s her. She doesn’t really care who she hurts does she? Assumed I was a whore and let Mercer rape me. Walked away from you because boo-hoo you slept with Madison when you weren’t even together. Left Piz in college without any real explanation and then went and broke his heart again. We could’ve been happy.”

Veronica wasn’t sure if she was talking about her and Piz or her and Logan. She wasn’t even sure if Parker knew anymore.

“Veronica isn’t like that Parker.” *No don’t defend me; you’re only going to make her mad.*

“And now she’s pregnant,” she spit the word at him. “It’s not fair. She doesn’t deserve to be happy
with you. She doesn’t deserve any of this.”

Veronica slowed down as she approached the house. She didn’t want Parker to hear her coming. She didn’t have a plan. She glanced at her phone. They were in the middle of the kitchen and Parker’s back was to the entrance. If she went in through the front door, Parker would definitely hear her.

Veronica called her dad; she cut him off before he could say anything. “It’s Parker and she’s at Dick’s house with a gun. Come quickly. I love you.” Veronica couldn’t wait for him, but in case the next few minutes went horribly wrong, she needed a backup.

Veronica got out of the car and left the door open. She took off her shoes and circled around the house to the back, staying low beneath the line of the windows. At the door, she checked to make sure Parker’s back was still to her. Silently she opened it just enough to slip through. The baseball bat for the baby was right where she left it by Dick’s surfboards. Veronica gripped it with both hands and inched toward the kitchen.

“I’m going to let her watch you die first. Let it really sink in that it’s her fault, that your death is her fault.”

When she was close enough to guarantee contact, Veronica raised the bat and brought it down on Parker’s head. Pain exploded through her shoulder. The gun skittered across the floor and Logan rushed at Parker, tackling her to the floor.
EPILOGUE

“Logan?” The deck was empty and Veronica glanced down at the baby. “Where did daddy go?” Wyatt stared at her with an intensity rivaled only by her daddy. Veronica couldn’t get enough of looking at her. She was perfect. She could see both her and Logan in each tiny feature. “Logan?”

“I’m back here.”

Veronica crossed the yard and found him lounging in the hammock. “I thought you were getting the grill ready.”

“I did.” She glanced back at the deck. His idea of ready was propping up the bag of charcoal next to it and setting a bottle of lighter fluid on top. “Let’s be honest Veronica, if I tried to light that thing, I would set the house on fire.”

She grinned. “Probably.”

“Definitely.”

“I’ll give you three guesses on who doesn’t want to take a nap.”

“Well it’s certainly not me. I was napping just fine until you started in with the nagging.” He opened his eyes and put one foot on the ground to stabilize the hammock. “Give her to me.” Veronica passed him the baby. He cradled her against his chest, his large hand splayed across her tiny back. Wyatt issued a soft contented sigh and a slow smile spread across Logan’s face. It was a mutual admiration society. “It’s entirely your fault that she doesn’t want to sleep.”

“Oh?”

“Mmm hmm, she gets her curiosity from her mommy.” He gently rocked the hammock and with each swing Wyatt’s eyes closed a little more. Veronica turned back toward the house and Logan grabbed her hand. “There’s plenty of room for you to nap with us.”

Veronica leaned down and kissed him. “I’ll be right back.” She disappeared into the house and returned with her camera. The two of them just looked so peaceful there together.

“Don’t you already have like five hundred of the same photo?” She ignored him and took another one before going back inside to get ready. Today was a combined celebration.

Her dad and Dottie were the first to arrive, together. Veronica grinned. In the past few weeks she couldn’t seem to see one without the other. “Where’s my granddaughter?”

“Uh hello?” She pointed to herself. “Beloved daughter, the apple of your eye.”

“I hate to tell ya kid, but you’ve been replaced by somebody younger. Them’s the breaks here in Hollywood, baby.” Keith pulled her into a hug and gently squeezed.

“Go, go, I see how it is. She’s outside napping with Logan.” Keith made a beeline for the patio doors. “Oh, and Logan left you in charge of the grill.”

“It’s good for a man to know his limitations.” Veronica rolled her eyes. As Dottie predicted, the more
time Dad and Logan spent together, the better they were getting along. It still wasn’t perfect and there were more than a few tense moments, but it was better.

Dottie hugged her. “What do you need help with?”

“Um, everything.”

Dottie laughed as she made her way into the kitchen.

Wallace arrived next. “Where’s Wyatt?”

“Seriously? Can I get no love here?” He hugged her. “A pity hug, I’ll take it.”

“You know we’re always going to love…what’s your name again?”

She pointed her finger at him. “You cannot hang out with Logan anymore.” Wallace laughed at her. “I don’t know why you’re laughing buddy, I mean it.” She made a slicing motion across her neck. “You two are done.”

Dick and Mac arrived within seconds of each other. Veronica didn’t know exactly who they were attempting to fool with their not-so-sly charade. Wyatt couldn’t even focus properly and even she knew what was going on, but Veronica let them keep up the pretense. For now. “Ronnie, you’re looking pretty good and can I say the boobs are fantastic. Any time you’re ready to kick Logan to the curb, Dick is available.”

“Dick. I’ll forgive you because you brought food.” She pointed him and his tray toward the kitchen.

Mac leaned in and gave her a hug. “Can you believe that Hallmark does not make a happy you’re not going to jail, congratulations on passing the Bar, welcome home to the new baby, housewarming card?”

“Impossible. Hallmark has cards for every occasion. It says so right in the commercials. Obviously you just didn’t care enough to send the very best.”

“I brought me.”

As she was closing the door, Weevil pulled up in the Impala with Jade and Valentina. “I was afraid to come up into this clean well-lit neighborhood all by myself.”

“I could lend you my street cred for the ride home.”

“I told you never say that again.”

When the doorbell rang, Veronica frowned. Everyone they knew was here already. She pulled it open. “Trina?”

Without any preamble, Trina said. “I’m in trouble and I need your help Veronica.”

**Author’s Note: Hope you enjoyed reading my first piece of fan fiction! Thank you for your great comments and reviews, I truly loved reading them all. If you want to continue the journey with me, I have started the sequel to this story - A CLOSED SET. The prologue of which will be posted on Saturday. Take care and keep reading!**
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!