We Were All Affected

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We Were All Affected

by [Omnicycle](http://archiveofourown.org/users/Omnicycle)

Summary

Max and Chloe were not the only ones who were touched by First Light of Christ.
Kate: Know Thyself

Chapter Notes

DO NOT READ THIS STORY UNLESS YOU HAVE READ ESCAPING THE LIGHT!!

This story runs in the "Escaping the Light" AU, and contains lots of spoilers from my original work. It will also have lots of references that you won't understand unless you read the first work in this series.

You all have been warned!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Looking back, she simply couldn’t remember a time when she didn’t like girls.

When she was little, the Ken dolls her parents gave her sat in the bottom of her toy chest, collecting dust. Barbie only played house with her female friends, which raised some eyebrows from her mother but begged no questions. She was only eight years old, after all, and the intricacies of relationships were often lost on children that age.

As her age progressed, some of the comments she made seemed to upset her mother, though she didn’t understand why. “Kate Marsh, I don’t want to hear you say things like that,” she would snip at her.

“Why?” Eleven-year-old Kate was confused, as she looked at her mom while they walked through the mall. “She is pretty.”

“You don’t talk about other women like that,” her mother insisted. She shifted Kate’s baby sister, Jessica, in her arms as she squirmed. “Now, let’s go. And keep hold of your sister’s hand.”

Kate sighed as she turned to look at her other sister. “Come on, Lynn, let’s go find Dad.”

“Okay.” Lynn smiled widely as they kept moving. “Ice cream!”

“Yes, we’re getting ice cream.” Kate took one last look at the large poster of Christina Aguilera outside the clothing store as they walked away. She still didn’t know what was wrong with what she said. I really like her hair, she thought to herself.

Other comments like that followed, as she got older, but she leaned rather quickly not to make them in front of her mother. She stayed silent as she started noticing, more and more, how pretty the other girls in school were. There were even a few she didn’t talk to, because she found herself blushing every time she thought about them.

Perhaps if her mother had paid more attention, she would have seen some more of the signs. None of the posters Kate hung on her wall had the popular boy bands or the latest teenage heartthrob; only the female pop stars, like Taylor Swift or Madonna, graced her walls. She wasn’t as excited as the other girls, when the Twilight movies came out, and didn’t beg her mother to go see the movie purely to watch Taylor Lautner take his shirt off. And she certainly never asked her parents if she could let a boy take her on a date.
Not that her mother cared. There was only one boy she wanted her daughter to focus on.

“Mom, I REALLY don’t want to go,” sixteen-year-old Kate said crossly as she stood in the kitchen, her arms crossed over her chest.

“I don’t care,” her mother shot back, as she packed her purse. “We’re all going, and so are you.”

“I have a research paper I have to finish,” Kate argued. “It’s due in three days.”

“Then you can work on it when you get home.” Her mother closed her purse. “Chris is leaving next week for Berkeley, and we’re all going to say goodbye. This will be the last chance for you to see him for a while, so you’re going, too.”

“But I-”

Her mother silenced her with a glare. “There will be no more arguing. Get in the car.”

Kate slumped her shoulders as she made her way out the door, past her father. “It’s going to be fun, Kate,” he assured her as they walked to the car. “The Hills rented out a pavilion at the park, and Uncle Gerry is working the barbeque. Remember his burgers?”

“Yea.” Kate sighed. “I still would rather work on my paper. I still have a lot to do.”

That was a lie. She’d finished the paper two days prior. She just didn’t want to be in the same area as her mother and Chris. I wonder how not-so-subtly she’ll try to force us to sit together, she thought morosely as she got in the back seat.

“Maybe when you get there, you can ask him about the admissions process for Berkeley,” her mother said as her father drove the car.

“What’s a Berkeley?” Lynn piped up from the other side of the back seat, Jessica quietly sitting between them in her booster.

“It’s a college near San Francisco,” Kate answered patiently. “That’s where Chris is going this fall.”

“And it’s a very prestigious college,” her mother added. “Have you asked your guidance counselor about applying yet?”

“He said I don’t have to worry about it yet,” Kate replied. “I don’t have to get serious until next year.”

“You should still talk to him about what you need to do to make your application stand out,” her mother scolded. “Admission to Berkeley is very difficult.”

“I’ll speak to him later, Mom.”

The ease at which the lies rolled off her tongue worried her a little bit. She knew very well that she had absolutely NO intention of following Chris to any college. I appreciate it, Mom, but I’ll pick my own school, thank you very much, she thought snidely as she smoothed the minuscule wrinkles in her jeans.

God. If any other parent found out their daughter was chasing a boy to college, they’d be mortified. Kate fought to keep a smirk off her face. I really hope Stella will be there. At least then it’ll be bearable.
They arrived at the park half an hour later. After helping Jessica out of her seat, Kate reluctantly exited the car behind her parents, walking behind them as the family made their way towards the large gathering of people.

“Richard!” A big man wearing a Hawaiian shirt smiled as he saw them. Kate watched him set the barbeque utensils down as he turned and shook her father’s hand. “Thank you so much for coming!”

“Of course, Gerry!” Her dad grinned back. “You know we wouldn’t miss your son’s send-off. Good to see you!”

“Where is the handsome young man?” her mother asked. Kate managed to keep the eye-roll to herself.

“Let’s see...” Chris’s father scanned the area. “Oh, there he is. He’s helping his mother set up the tables.”

“What a nice boy.” Kate’s mom smiled as she turned to her. “Why don’t you go congratulate him, Kate. We’ll be along in a few minutes.”

Of course you will. Kate sighed internally, though she projected a small smile. “Sure thing, Mom.”

She slowly made her way across the pavilion towards Chris. She would admit that he was very handsome; he stood a little over six feet, with wavy dark brown hair and a brilliant smile. He was very lean, and his arms were toned from his time on the high school swim team. She watched him carry a large cooler with ease from the back of a pickup truck.

“Hi, Chris,” she greeted him as he set it down.

“Oh, hey, Kate.” He stood and smiled as he wiped his forearm across his brow. “I didn’t know your family was coming.”

“Well, my parents heard you were going to Berkeley, and insisted we come send you off.” Kate smiled back. “Congratulations, by the way.”

“Thanks!” He grinned as he opened the cooler, retrieving a bottle of water. “How have you been? Still two more years until you graduate, right?”

“Yep.” Kate nodded as he took a drink. “Not soon enough.”

Chris looked over her shoulder. “Your mother?” he asked, lowering his voice.

Kate rolled her eyes.

“Yea.” Chris sighed. “What’s she digging at now?”

“Where I’m going to college,” Kate answered, lowering her voice as well. “Wouldn’t you know, I hear Berkeley is very prestigious.”

Chris snorted in amusement. “Sorry.”

“Not your fault.” Kate sat down on the table behind her. “How’s Wendy?”

“We broke up last month.” He shook his head. “We just weren’t feeling it, and I’m leaving next week anyway...”

“Mm.” Kate shrugged. “So, no marrying your high school sweetheart?”
Chris laughed at that. “Not so much.”

“Are you at least excited to leave?” Kate asked.

“Eh...” Chris held his hand out and rocked it back and forth. “A little. I mean, yea, next stage of my life and all that. But, you know, not really sure how the whole ‘living on my own’ is going to go.”

Kate snorted. “Yea, you’ll have to learn to be a full-fledged adult.”

“Well, maybe not full-fledged.” He smirked as he patted his pocket. “My dad is going to pay for my cell phone until I get a job.”

“You got a cell phone?!” Kate’s eyes got wide as she leaned forward. “Cool! What kind?”

“Oh, yea, my dad brought it for me as a graduation gift!” He pulled the phone from his pocket. “Check this out!”

Kate’s eyes got wide as she admired the smart phone in his hand. “Is that the iPhone 3G?”

“The 3GS,” he replied, smirking. “This thing is awesome.”

“Oh, you are so LUCKY,” Kate grumbled. “My mother won’t let me get one until I graduate.”

Chris frowned as he put the phone away. “Isn’t that, like, two months after you turn 18?”

Kate snorted. “Yea. I don’t think I’m getting a phone as a gift.”

“That’s... dumb.” Chris grimaced. “Maybe you can-“ his eyes flicked over her shoulder. “Incoming.”

“Christopher!”

Kate winced. Whenever her mother talked to Chris, her voice took on a grating quality that ground her eardrums like sandpaper.

“How are you?” her mother continued. “We haven’t seen you in ages.”

“I’m good, Mrs. Marsh.” He flashed her his bright smile. “How have you been?”

“Wonderful. Oh, I missed your politeness.” She flashed her wide smile between him and Kate. “What are you two talking about?”

“I was congratulating him on going to Berkeley,” Kate reminded her.

“Oh, yes.” Her mother turned back to Chris. “Did she ask you about the admissions process yet? She was thinking about applying, too.”

Kate’s eyelid twitched involuntarily.

An uncomfortable look came over Chris’s face. “Um, we-”

“There you are!”

*Oh, thank God.* Kate turned just as Stella materialized next to her, smiling widely. “Oh my God, I was hoping to see you here!” She grabbed Kate’s arm, practically dragging her out of her seat. “Come on, I have GOT to show you this!”

Not looking at her mother, Kate allowed herself to be dragged across the pavilion, back to the
parking lot, and behind Stella’s mom’s car. “Show me what?” Kate finally asked, as they stopped.


Kate grinned. “Stella, you’re a lifesaver.”

“Remember that, when it comes time to name your firstborn.” Stella opened the back of her mother’s hatchback and sat down. Kate joined her, their feet kicking above the gravel as they leaned back. “I figure we get ten minutes, before your mom starts asking mine where we went.”

“I’ll take what I can get.” Kate sighed as she closed her eyes. “God, I can’t wait to graduate and leave.”

“How are you doing?” Stella adopted a voice of concern. “Is your mom...”

“Still being my mom.” Kate cracked her eyes open and peeked at Stella. “Two more years.”

Stella shot her a look. “That wasn’t what I meant. And you know it.”

Kate did know. She just didn’t want to talk about it. Especially when her mother might appear with no warning.

“She’s...” Kate sighed. “Like I said. Still being my mother.”

Stella bit her lip as she glanced down. “I’m sorry.” She looked back up. “What about your dad?”

Kate scoffed. “Yea, like I’m gonna ask one parent to keep a secret from the other. Especially when it’s my mother.” She sighed. “Like I said, two more years. Then I graduate, and go off to college, and not worry about it anymore.”

“Have you thought about where you want to go?” Stella scratched her ear. “Aside from Berkeley, obviously.”

Kate finally cracked a smile. “It actually was on my list, before my mom found out that Chris was going there. Now...” she shrugged. “I’ve thought a bit, about San Diego State, but I think I’d rather go to UCLA.”

“Really?” Stella raised her eyebrows. “That’s a couple of hours away.”

“Exactly.” Kate leaned back forward, peering around the car towards the pavilion. “Close enough to come visit, but far enough where my mother can’t just drop in unnoticed.”

“Mm.” Stella pursed her lips. “Good point.”

“Yea.” Kate looked back at her friend. “What about you?”

Stella smiled. “SDSU, for sure. You remember Eddie, from last year?”

“Of course.” Kate nodded as she recalled their friend from the debate team, who’d graduated the year before. “What about him?”

“Well, he was telling me all about the engineering program. And all the really cool shit they’re-” Stella paused as Kate winced. “Sorry.”

“You really shouldn’t swear,” Kate pointed out. “It’s not dignified.”
Stella rolled her eyes. “Yes, Mrs. Marsh.”

Kate shot her friend a glare. “You take that back right now.”

“Or what?” Stella smirked.

“Or I’ll tell your mom that you smoked marijuana with Rick and Lara after class last month.”

Stella’s eyes got wide. “You wouldn’t.” Kate scooted forward to get up before Stella’s arm shot out and grabbed her shoulder. “Wait! Okay, I take it back!”

Kate smirked as she settled back. “Dang right.”

“No fair.” Stella folded her arms. “I don’t have any dirt on you.”

Kate’s smile evaporated as she looked into her lap, fidgeting with her hands.

“That I would ever tell your mother,” Stella quickly added.

“... thanks,” Kate muttered. “Um... sorry.”

Stella didn’t reply as she wrapped her arm around Kate’s back, gripping her shoulder as she gave her a side hug. “Don’t worry about it.”

“I...” Kate bit her lip. “Stella, I really wish I could talk to my parents about this.”

“I know.” Stella rubbed her shoulder. “You know you can always call me.”

“From the house phone, in the kitchen?” Kate shook her head. “Not likely.”

“Then ask your mom to drive you over,” Stella offered. “Or ask if I can come visit. I’ve got my learner’s permit now. And, you know, once school starts up in August, we’ll see each other every day.”

“True.” Kate sighed as she scratched her arm. “Thanks.”

“Yea. Come on, let’s go back before your mom gets mad at us for running off.” Stella hesitated. “Hey, you’re not, like, worried your mom will try to kill you or anything, right? If she ever found out you like girls, I mean.”

Kate had to snort at that. “Come on. My mother isn’t THAT crazy.”

Chapter End Notes

So, I'm back.

Okay, this story might seem a little confusing. I'll break down how it works quickly. This isn't one story; it's actually three, each running in it's own linear timeline concurrent to Escaping the Light. This work will cover:

1) Kate and Victoria, how they met, and how they deal with Kate's family.

2) Rachel and Steph, and what they went through after Max ran away from Arcadia
Bay.

3) Brooke Scott, and how she ran away from First Light and came to meet the others.

I'll start off each chapter with the character that it focuses on, so you know which timeline you're reading. And I'll provide chapter references from Escaping the Light, so you guys know when in the story each chapter takes place.

I hope you all enjoy reading; it was a lot of fun to write.
2011. After Max ran away from home.

Something was wrong.

Steph knew it as soon as the school bus closed its doors that morning. She’d waited for Max’s bus to pull up to the entrance, trying to catch her friend. She’d rehearsed what she wanted to say in her head for hours, the night before, trying to make things right.

But Max didn’t step off the bus. The doors closed in front of Steph, and the bus lumbered away, leaving her to stare at the tail lights as a cold spot formed in her gut.

Okay, calm down, Steph assured herself. Maybe she’s sick. Maybe she overslept. Or it could be more stuff about her Dad, since he’s still in jail.

So she waited through her first two classes until she got to Chemistry, the class she shared with Max. Her friend still wasn’t there. Mrs. Grant marked her as absent, before she moved on to the lesson.

Steph couldn’t stop glancing between Max’s seat and the door to the classroom.

“Are you okay, Steph?”

She started. “Huh?”

Mrs. Grant stood over her, and Steph realized that the period was up. The other students had started filing out of the room. “You were distracted all class,” Mrs. Grant continued. “Is everything okay?”

“Yea.” Steph ran her hand down her face. “Sorry. I have a lot on my mind.”

“Anything you want to share?”

“No.” Steph shook her head. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Grant. I won’t let it happen again.”

By the time she got to her study hall, the cold spot had gotten bigger and more intense. She got permission to go to the library and walked down the hall quickly. Rachel was already waiting, seated at a table.

“Max wasn’t in Chemistry,” Steph said as she slid into the chair across from her.

“She wasn’t in English, either.” Rachel scratched her arm. “She’s probably sick, Steph, that’s all. Or there’s some church stuff, with her father, or whatever.”

“There are other students from First Light here today,” Steph countered. “There’s no ‘church stuff’. Whatever it is, it’s Max.”

“Like I said, Steph, she’s probably sick.” Rachel sighed. “Or maybe she just didn’t want to come to school today. Maybe she’s spending time with her dad.”

Steph blinked. “What, she’s visiting him in jail?”

“No.” Rachel shook her head. “My dad said he was released on bail yesterday morning.”
Her pulse skyrocketed. “Rachel-”

“She’s FINE,” Rachel emphasized. “I printed the emails from my computer and left them in a folder under my dad’s windshield wiper. The definition of ‘anonymous’. There’s no way her dad knows how mine got them.”

“There aren’t a lot of places those emails could have come from, Rachel!” Steph’s voice took a high pitch. “There aren’t a lot of people who could have gotten to them! And her father’s not stupid!”

A look of uncertainty finally crossed Rachel’s face. “Her dad still wouldn’t have any proof, even if he did suspect-”

“Are you kidding me?” Steph leaned forward. “Do you think he’ll take Max to court or something? Those assholes almost killed that kid, Rachel!”

Rachel bit her lip and didn’t answer.

“I think Max is in trouble,” Steph finally said. “We need to-”

“Do what?” Rachel interrupted. “She doesn’t have a phone. We can’t call her. And we’re not driving to see her; I’m sure her dad knows who I am. We wouldn’t even make it through the front door.”

“Then we...” Steph’s voice trailed off. “Fuck. I don’t... fuck!” she rubbed her face, trying to think. “There must be something we can do. Some way to see if she’s sick, or whatever.”

“Okay, Steph, calm down.” Rachel leaned forward. “Look, there’s probably a good reason Max isn’t here today. Let’s take a breath. You have a class with her this afternoon, right?”

Steph reluctantly nodded. “Algebra.”

“Okay. Maybe she just missed the morning classes.” Rachel nodded. “Let’s wait until after lunch, before we do something drastic.”

The cold spot didn’t go away as the day progressed.

Steph raced through her lunch and towards her sixth period class, getting there first and taking her seat. Her eyes were glued on the door, watching the other students file in, looking for a familiar head of brown hair and blue eyes.

But Max was a no-show. Their math teacher marked her as absent from that class, as well, and Steph felt the bottom drop from under her stomach.

“We have to do something,” she said as she caught Rachel after classes. They huddled in a stairwell, trying to avoid looking suspicious.

Rachel was finally starting to look as worried as Steph. “I don’t know what. Like I said, there really isn’t a good way to get ahold of her when she’s not here.”

“There must be something!”

Neither of them spoke for a few seconds. “I...” Rachel hesitated. “Okay. I might have an idea.”

“What?”

Rachel pulled out her cell phone and dialed one of her contacts. “This better not blow up in my
face,” she muttered.

Steph looked at her. “What are you doing?”

“Don’t talk.”

Rachel put her phone on speaker as it rang. After a few seconds, the call connected. “Hello?”

“Yes, is this Mrs. Caulfield?” Rachel changed her voice, adopting a higher pitch and sounding more official.

“It is. May I ask who’s calling?”

“Of course, ma’am. This is Miss Reynolds, from Arcadia Bay High School,” Rachel continued. “I’m calling in regard to your daughter, Maxine, and her absence from classes today. We just wanted to check and-”

Max’s mother interrupted her before she could finish. “We’ve decided to withdraw Maxine from your school,” she said snippily. “She won’t be attending any more classes.”

Steph glanced at Rachel with wide eyes.

“Um... I’m sorry, may I ask why?” Rachel continued after a second.

“We’ve made the decision to home-school her for the rest of the year,” her mother replied. “We’ll be filling out the withdrawal paperwork shortly, and you’ll have a copy within a week or so.”

“Mrs. Caulfield, this is-”

“I’m afraid I don’t have time to discuss this further,” her mother said. “Have a good day.”

The call disconnected.

Neither of the girls spoke for several seconds.

“Oh, fuck,” Rachel finally whispered.

“Rachel...” Steph looked at her. “We...”

Rachel didn’t hear her. She leaned against the wall and slid all the way to the floor. “Max is okay,” she whispered. “Max is okay. Max is fine. She has to be.”

“Rachel, what do we do?” Steph asked quietly.

“She’s their daughter.” Rachel looked up at Steph. “They wouldn’t hurt her. She’s their kid. There’s no way they’d hurt their only child. She’s just going to be home-schooled, she’s...” her voice trailed off, her knuckles white as she clutched her cell phone.

“Rachel.” Steph knelt in front of her. “Rachel.”

Rachel finally looked Steph in the eye.

“Rachel, what do we do?” Steph repeated. “We have to do something. We should call-”

“We have to tell my dad.”

Steph blinked as Rachel whispered. “What?”
“We have to tell my dad what happened,” Rachel repeated quietly, shooting back to her feet. “He’s the DA. He can do something. He can... fuck, I don’t know. Did you drive your mom’s car today?”

“Yea.” Steph nodded.

“Come on.” Rachel grabbed her arm and dragged her upright. “My dad’s probably home by now. We have to go.”

Rachel was opening the passenger door before Steph could even finish parking the car.

Steph had to rush to keep up with her friend, as she led the way inside her house and made a beeline for her father’s office. James Amber was sitting in his chair, studying a file. He picked his head up as they walked inside.

“Afternoon, girls.” He smiled. “How was school?”

Rachel didn’t answer. Steph could see her wrestling to find words. “It was good,” she answered for them. “Are you busy?”

“A little.” James nodded towards the files in front of him. “Legal stuff, to get those emails I got last week entered into evidence for the trial.”

“The First Light case?”

“Yes.” James nodded. “It’s mostly-”

“I left the emails on your car.”

James blinked, as he looked up at his daughter slowly. He didn’t say a word as he stared at Rachel.

“I printed them out after you and mom went to bed,” she said, her breathing getting faster. “I stuck them in the folder and left them under the wiper of your car.”

“... what?” James whispered. “Rachel... but, wait, how could you have possibly-”

“I got them from Max Caulfield.”

James’ face froze at Rachel’s admission.

She took a deep breath and everything tumbled out at once. “Max is gay,” she started breathlessly. “She joined our LGBT group, and she came to school last week with a bruise on her face, from where her dad hit her. And... I remembered you said you were having trouble with the trial...”

Her father slowly stood as Rachel spoke.

“I gave her a flash drive,” Rachel got out. “I told her how to download her dad’s emails. We had a big argument, yesterday, because of her dad getting arrested...”

Rachel choked, quickly catching herself. “She didn’t come to school today,” she finally got out, her voice getting high pitched. “She wasn’t in any of her classes, and I called her house, and her mom said-” Rachel’s voice died, and she struggled to find it again.

“Her mom said they were withdrawing her from school,” Steph finished. “And then she hung up on us.” Her lip started quivering.
James didn’t move for several seconds.

“... go wait in the other room,” he said quietly.

“Dad-”

James ignored his daughter, turning and snatching a phone from the cradle on his desk. His fingers raced across the pad as he dialed a number, and he stared at the phone intently as he waited for the call to connect. “Chief? It’s James. Do you have officers on patrol near the First Light community?”

Steph and Rachel stood, frozen, as he swept a pile of papers off his desk and searched frantically for something.

“Perfect. You need to send them to do a welfare check, right now.” He shoved more papers around, still searching. “They need to find Maxine Caulfield, and make sure- yes, that’s right, Ryan Caulfield’s daughter. I just got information that she may be in danger.”

He finally found what he was looking for, grabbing a piece of paper. “They need to find her. Call those officers right now. They need to get Maxine away from her parents, and tell her that I know what she did, and she needs to go with them immediately. She’ll know what it means. I have their address right here, it’s-”

He finally stopped, as he noticed Rachel and Steph still standing in his office, and covered the receiver. “Out,” he ordered both of them. “Now.”
2011. After Max ran away from home.

James Amber didn’t come out of his office for another ten minutes.

The twenty minutes after that, he mostly spent screaming at the two girls. Rachel had never seen her father so furious.

When he finally did leave, to go to his office, Rachel didn’t go to her room like she’d been told. She sat on the couch, hands clasped together, eyes closed as she leaned on her elbows. The last words her father had said before he left stuck with her, playing over and over in her head.

“And both of you had better pray that your actions didn’t just get your friend killed.”

Tears streamed unabated from the corner’s of Rachel’s eyes as she rested her forehead against her thumbs.

I’m sorry. She sniffed deeply. I’m sorry, God, I’m so sorry. Please let her be okay. I will do literally anything if she’s still okay, God, PLEASE...

That was how her mother found her. Rose had been at a friend’s house, and was unaware of the drama that had transpired over the past two hours. She wasn’t expecting to see her daughter crying her eyes out on the couch in the living room.

“Rachel?” Rose dropped her purse and rushed over to the couch, sitting next to her daughter.

“Rachel, what happened? What’s wrong?”

Rachel sniffed deeply as she looked at her mom with tears in her eyes. She tried to open her mouth, but nothing came out as she broke down, crying, sagging limply into her mother’s lap.

James didn’t come home until almost midnight. Rose and Rachel were still on the couch when he walked through the door.

“What happened?” Rose asked him quietly.

Rachel tightened her grip on her mother, desperately hoping for good news.

“The police are still looking for Max,” he said morosely as he took off his jacket, dropping it carelessly on the back of his chair. “They can’t find her, Or her father and his car.” He sighed. “Her mother has been in an interrogation room for six hours, but she refuses to speak.”

Rachel sniffed, her eyes welling with fresh tears as she squeezed them shut.

“We’ll know more in the morning.” James shook his head. “Rachel, you need to go to bed. You have school tomorrow.”

“No arguing.” James gestured upstairs. “Go.”
“You’re sure you haven’t seen her?”

The woman behind the counter at the shelter shook her head. “Sorry, sugar. We see a lot of homeless come through this shelter. They all blend together, after a little while.”

“She’s not homeless. She ran away less than a week ago.” Rachel pushed the picture closer. “She’s only sixteen. Her parents were beating the crap out of her. You would probably remember her, from the bruises.”

“Miss, that’s not even the first time this month I’ve heard that story about a teenage runaway.” The woman had a look of genuine concern on her face, as she studied the picture. “I’m sorry, but she doesn’t look familiar.”

Rachel sighed her shoulders sagging. “Is there someplace I can leave this?” she asked quietly. “In case you do see her?”

The woman nodded at the wall opposite the desk. Rachel turned and noticed the corkboard that was crammed with dozens of pictures, men and women of all ages. “Not a lot of people look at it,” the woman said. “But that’s all we’ve got.”

Dejected, Rachel walked over to the board and took a pin, leaving Max’s photo up anyway. She turned and went further inside, walking into the small cafeteria.

Steph was there, holding Max’s picture up for a group of men at one of the tables. “You’ve never seen her before?” she asked them as Rachel approached.

The men all shook their heads. “How old is she?” one of them asked, as he scratched his beard.

“Sixteen.”

“Fuck.” He sighed. “She been on the streets long?”

“Less than a week,” Steph answered.

“You might get lucky. She’s probably still alive.” The man glanced at the exit. “Getting cold, though. If she doesn’t know how to work the shelters, she’s in for a rough night.”

Steph shoulders slumped. “Okay,” she sighed. “If you do, just... please let her know people are looking for her.”

She glanced at Rachel, who shook her head. The two of them walked out together. “You text Dana yet?” Steph asked quietly.

“No.” Rachel pulled her phone out as they made their way towards Steph’s car. “I’ll let her know we struck out.”

Steph glanced up at the dark sky. “Getting pretty late. People will probably be going home soon. Especially since we’ve got school tomorrow.”

“They already are,” Rachel remarked. “Looks like a bunch of people have already gone back to Arcadia Bay. Us, Victoria, and a few of the Vortex Club people are probably the only ones still here.”

“Great.” Steph sighed as she unlocked her mother’s car, and the two girls got inside. “We need to head back soon, too. Your parents are already going to give you enough shit for being here so late.”
Rachel didn’t reply as she tapped on her phone. Steph started the car, letting the heat flow through the vents as they sat for a second. After a few minutes, Rachel’s phone jingled again, a reply to her message.

“Dana said they’re going home.” Rachel sighed as she read her phone. “There’s a history test that they can’t miss during first period.”

“Fuck.” Steph leaned her head back on the seat. “I forgot about that. I haven’t even cracked my book.”

“Whatever.” Rachel put her phone away. “Come on. There’s another shelter on-”

“Huh?” Steph picked her head up. “Excuse me?”

Rachel looked at her. “I said, there’s another shelter a few blocks over, on the corner across from the-”

“Rachel, come on.” Steph sat up. “It’s nine o’clock at night. It’ll be close to eleven by the time we get back to Arcadia Bay. We have to go back.”

“No, we have to find Max.” Rachel shot Steph a look. “The shelters don’t close for another hour. We can hit up that one, and then-”

“The others came through here already,” Steph interrupted. “They didn’t find Max this morning. What makes you think we’ll find her now?”

“That guy said it was getting cold,” Rachel pointed out. “She probably went inside by now. We’ve got a better chance to find her now that it’s late; there’s only so many places she can go.”

Steph sighed. “Rachel-”

“It’s our fault, Steph.” Rachel turned back towards the front of the car. “We can’t leave yet.”

Steph fell silent. “Okay,” she muttered, as she shifted her mother’s car and pulled out of the lot.

It was close to one in the morning by the time Steph dropped Rachel back off at her house. And her father was waiting for her.

She thought he’d be angrier. But his face didn’t show it. He was sitting in his chair as she came through the door, a file in his hand. He put it aside as she took her jacket off. “You were supposed to be back three hours ago,” he said flatly. “Your mother was very worried.”

Rachel nodded meekly. She didn’t say anything as she pulled off her knit watch cap.

“Did you find any sign of Maxine?”

She shook her head. “Nobody saw her,” she said quietly, turning to face her father. She kept her eyes to the floor as she crossed her arms.

“The police in Portland didn’t find her either.” Her father stood. “They briefed all their shifts, checked the nearby hospitals, and reviewed the cameras near the bus station. They didn’t find any trace of her.”

Rachel didn’t reply as she avoided her father’s gaze.
“Look at me.”

She wasn’t sure what she expected to see in his eyes. Anger, she figured. Or maybe disappointment. But his eyes were empty. Completely devoid of emotion. She’d only seen him do that a few times, when she’d watched him in court.

Her father was prosecuting her in his mind.

“Do you understand the gravity of what you’ve done?”

Rachel bit her lip and didn’t answer.

“Maxine is missing,” he lectured. “It’s going to drop down to forty degrees tonight. And it’s only going to get colder, as winter progresses. Portland PD finds two or three dozen homeless that die of hypothermia every year.” He crossed his arms. “If Maxine is very lucky, she found some shelter. If she’s not, then she’ll-”

“I know,” Rachel interrupted. “I know it’s my fault.” She sniffed as she looked away. “We looked for hours, Dad. We checked all the shelters we could find, all the alleys, all-”

“I’m sure you did the best you could.” He folded his arms. “But it wasn’t good enough. And you never should have gotten her involved in the first place.”

Rachel closed her eyes. A lone tear carved a path down her face.

“If you’re not looking for Max, and you’re not at school, then you’re to be here at home,” her father continued. “That goes until you graduate. No going out, or staying with friends. Is that clear?”

She sighed as she wiped her eyes, looking back at him. “I don’t think Steph and I have any more friends.”

“Nevertheless.” He shook his head. “Now, go to bed.”
2018. After Max's mother is found Not Guilty.

“Come on... come on...”

Amy scoffed, as she watched her friend work the game on her phone. “Give it up. You’re not gonna beat my score.”

“I’m about to.” Brooke didn’t take her eyes off the phone, as she moved her thumb. She guided her fast-running adventurer through the ruins, leaping over obstacles. “I’m already at ten kilometers.”

“You are?” Amy looked over her shoulder. “Fuck.”

“Yep.” Brooke grinned, as she jumped her runner over another barricade. “Close one.”

“How the hell are you even doing that?” Joey asked, as he reclined on a chair behind them. “I know you’re not practicing at home.”

“It’s all mental,” Brooke said distractedly. “It’s all in your mind. Concentration of a champion, reflexes like- SHIT!!”

Her thumb slipped, and her runner missed a jump. He ran into the barrier, falling prey to the monsters chasing behind him. “Reflexes like shit is right,” Amy cackled, as the end screen came up on her phone. “Looks like my score reigns supreme.”

“Shut up.” Brooke set the phone down and pushed it across the desk towards her friend. “I’ll beat it tomorrow.”

“You said that yesterday.”

“You know, considering that I don’t get to practice at home, I’m not doing too bad at almost-whooping your ass,” Brooke reminded her.

Joey scoffed. “Why can’t you have a cell phone, exactly?” he asked. “I know you’ve said so before, but I forget.”

“Because they expose us to evilness, falsehoods, lies, and deceit,” Brooke quoted as she turned to face him. “Didn’t you know that?”

“Really?” Joey feigned surprise. “I just use mine to watch porn.”

Brooke and Amy both choked on laughter. “Shit like that is probably why I’m not supposed to hang out with the boys I meet here,” Brooke reminded him.

“Oh, please.” He gestured towards her outfit. “Wearing that, you should be lucky you’re hanging out with a boy at all.”

That much, Brooke couldn’t argue with. She glanced down, grimacing at her white dress with purple stitching. “Are you saying I have terrible taste in dresses?”

“I’m saying that the Amish wouldn’t be caught dead in that thing.”
“Big talk from the weird kid who likes anime,” Amy shot back.

Joey narrowed his eyes. “You watch more anime than I do.”

“Yea, but I’m a girl. When I do it, it’s cute.” Amy took a second to push her glasses back up her nose. “When you do it, you’re a fuckin’ weirdo.”

“You’re both fuckin’ weirdos,” Brooke reminded them. “Otherwise, I wouldn’t be here.”

Her two friends both snorted. “Can’t argue with that,” Joey agreed.

The after-school bell sounded over the speakers. “And thus ends another productive session of the Chess Club,” Brooke sighed, as the three of them stood and gathered their backpacks. “One of these days, my mother is going to actually come into the school and see that we’re not playing chess.”

“To be fair,” Amy objected, “it’s not our fault nobody else showed up. Did you ever tell your mom that we play chess?”

“Yes.” Brooke smirked. “All the time.”

“Well, more fool you, then.”

Brooke stared out the window silently, as her mother drove her home.

After the customary questions about how school had gone, her mom had fallen silent, which suited Brooke just fine. Truth be told, Brooke didn’t care to talk to her mother. Or anyone from her family, really. Everything somehow ended up being a lecture about religion and God.

_Because there could be no other reason for Mister Evans to get cancer_, Brooke thought to herself. _The two packs a day certainly didn’t contribute. He’s somehow being punished for not being as faithful as he could have been, despite going to services three times a week._

_Oh well._ Brooke mentally shrugged. She wasn’t going to be listen much to her parents talk; she had a rather lengthy essay she’d been putting off. _Four pages on To Kill A Mockingbird and it’s symbolism_, she remembered. _At least my history homework is done._

She frowned, when she blinked and realized that they were home. And saw that there was another, familiar car in her driveway. “Is Grandpa here?” she asked her mother.

“Yes.” Her mom nodded as she parked and turned the car off. “We have something important to talk about.”

“Huh?” Brooke gave her mother a confused look. “What did I do?”

“You’re not in trouble, Brooke,” Her mother gave her a small smile. “We’ll talk inside.”

Brooke was still very apprehensive as she got out of the car, shouldering her backpack. Just to be safe, she let her mother open the door to her house and walked in behind her.

Her father was sitting at the table, talking to her grandfather in low tones. They stopped, when Brooke and her mom came around the corner and into the kitchen. “Hey, pumpkin,” her father greeted her, using her nickname. “How was school?”

“Good,” Brooke said cautiously, still running through everything she could be in trouble for. _Using Amy’s phone, hanging out with Joey, swearing...“Hey, Grandpa.”_
“Hello, Brooke.” Her grandfather smiled. “How are you?”

“I’m okay.” Brooke shrugged, as she set her backpack down.

“I never realized that your mom picked you up from school,” he continued. “Why don’t you take the bus home?”

“The Chess Club meets on Tuesdays and Thursdays,” she told him. “We stay after the bell to practice.”

“Ah.” He smiled. “I guess I’ll have to play you sometime.”

“Definitely.” Brooke smiled, as she vowed to read up on chess strategies when she got a chance.

“Well.” Her grandfather leaned back into his seat. “I guess you’re wondering why I’m here?”

Brooke shrugged. “Just visiting?” she asked hopefully.

“No.” He shook his head. “I have some news for you, Brooke.”

“What?”

Her grandfather looked at her dad. “Do you want to tell her?”

“Sure. Well, Brooke...” her father hesitated, as he gathered his thought. “We’re going to be pulling you out of school at the end of the week,” he finally said.


“We’ve been talking to the Marshalls,” her grandfather said. “Do you remember them? And their son, Robert?”

“Yea, I remember Bobby. My ponytail certainly does.” Brooke could still feel the sharp pinch in her head, from when he pulled it at summer camp. “What does he have to do with my school?!”

“Nothing,” her father said. “Robert has already graduated, and he’s established himself at his job for the past year now. Which is why we’re pulling you out.”

“Wait, wait, what?!” Brooke exclaimed. “Why does that matter?!”

Her father looked at her, like he was confused at her responses. “Because he’s your husband,” he said simply. “It’s time for you to join him in matrimony.”

Brooke couldn’t make words, as she stared at her father. Her stomach felt like it had dropped out of the bottom of her feet, and into the floor.

“No he’s not,” she finally got out. “I’m only fifteen! I’m not married!”

Her grandfather exchanged glances with her dad. “She was pretty young,” he allowed. “She might not recall.” He reached into the briefcase on the table, producing a paper. “Do remember signing this, Brooke?”

She looked at the paper as he held it out, her eyes scanning the words “Marriage Certificate” in gothic script on top. It was dated about eight years prior. And then she got to the space for the Bride’s name.
Scrawled in pen, definitely written by a child, was her name; Brooke Scott.

“But... that’s...” her words failed her.

“Do you remember anything?” her father asked. “You were so excited, that you got to walk down the aisle and wear your mother’s makeup.”

Her memories flashed, as her father continued to talk. She did remember, just barely, sitting still and smiling while her mother dusted her face with a brush. Getting to wear the frilly white veil. Walking slowly, though taking big steps to match with her father, as he walked her down the aisle of the empty church towards Pastor Thompson.

“That was REAL?!” she exclaimed. “I thought it was pretend!”

“Brooke, calm yourself,” her grandfather stated. He used the tone he reserved for when her and her brother had done something wrong. Brooke immediately drew back, not wanting to draw his ire. “It was not pretend. Your marriage was arranged and performed years ago.”

“I don’t want to be married to Bobby Marshall!” Brooke objected. “I hated him at camp!”

“Robert had matured a lot since then,” her father assured her.

“And it’s already done,” her grandfather said shortly. “The dowry has been paid. You are legally married to him.” He held up the marriage certificate again. “See the notarization?”

Brooke noticed the raised paper, where his finger touched it, but her mind was racing too fast to comprehend it. “But I’m only fifteen!” she repeated. “I can’t be married yet!”

“You can, and you are.” Her grandfather crossed his arms. “Now, take a deep breath and collect yourself. This behavior is not becoming of a Scott.”

Brooke did what he said, and took a deep breath, but it didn’t help. “I can’t, I can’t-” she gulped. “No. No, this isn’t real. I don’t even know him.”

“Pumpkin, you’re going to see him this Saturday,” her father assured her. “He’s working all week, but his family has a very nice house that you’ll be living in-”

“Wait, WHAT?!” Brooke gasped. “I’m moving IN with him?! No, no way, I won’t do it, I won’t-”

“Brooke!” Her grandfather barked, as he stood.

She clamped her mouth shut and cringed backwards. Her grandfather rarely got up from a sitting position when he wasn’t ready to leave.

“That’s enough,” he said. “I know this is a shock, and a surprise. But I will not hear talk about you not doing what we say.” He folded his arms. “This marriage was arranged a long time ago, and not lightly. Robert will be a fine husband for you, and you will take your place with him. There will be no arguments.” He fixed her with a glare. “Am I clear?”

Brooke nodded meekly.

“Very well.” He unfolded his arms. “We have to wait until Friday to withdraw you, because that’s when your semester ends. You will finish your education at the Marshall’s home. But you need to begin packing your things and preparing for your move. Do you understand?”

Brooke nodded again.
“Good.” Her grandfather nodded. “You are not to tell any of the other students at your school about this, either. Finish whatever homework you have to until the end of the week.”

“Yes, Grandpa,” she muttered.

“Everything will be fine, pumpkin.” Her father smiled at her. “Robert is a very nice young man. He’ll take good care of you.”

“Come along, sweetie.” Her mother finally spoke from behind her, nudging her shoulder gently. “Why don’t you go upstairs to your room. You can start figuring out what you want to take with you to the Marshall’s.”
Brooke barely spoke for the rest of that night.

She’d gone through the motions numbly. After finishing her homework, her mother had helped her fold and pack several of her dresses. She spent most of those two hours encouraging Brooke to get excited, as she talked about when she’d first moved with Brooke’s dad at the age of sixteen.

It didn’t help. Brooke nodded along to the stories mutely, as she filled three cardboard boxes with clothes before she asked her mother if they could call it a night. “I’m really tired,” she said quietly.

“Oh.” Her mother smiled. “I know, it’s been a long day. Go ahead and get some sleep.”

She didn’t. Brooke lay awake staring at the ceiling well past midnight.

*I can’t believe this.* She blinked, trying not to let tears slide down her face. *I’m only fifteen. I can’t be married already.*

She wasn’t stupid. She knew that arranged marriages were the norm in her church. *They couldn’t even let me graduate high school,* she thought miserably. *Didn’t even ask if I wanted to go to college.*

A snort escaped her before she could stop it. *Come on, Brooke. Don’t be stupid. You knew that was never going to happen.*

But she wanted it. She liked pretending that she would go on to college like the normal kids. She wanted to get as excited as they did, when they talked about leaving Arcadia Bay to become doctors or lawyers.

*Fuck.* Brooke felt the wetness on her face, and quickly wiped the tear that escaped her eye. *I can’t believe this is happening.*

*I don’t want to do this.*

She closed her eyes and exhaled. *But what choice do I have?*

...

...

*No.*

*No, I can’t.*

Brooke shivered just thinking about it.

*I can’t just leave. It’s not allowed.*

*And what would I do anyway?* Brooke sighed. *I have nowhere else to go. I’d probably wind up dead. Just like Max.* She shook her head. *I can’t.*
So I just go be Bobby’s wife, then.

Fuck.

Neither option sounded good. Brooke turned over in her bed, staring at the wall. *Maybe it won’t be that bad. My dad’s right, Bobby’s probably matured a bunch since summer camp.* She closed her eyes. *Just stay positive, Brooke. It won’t be so bad.*

*And hey, at least you’ll be out of school. No more homework. Or finals.* She did smirk at that. *Just do some easy home-schooling while you play house with Bobby. One big happy...* Family.

*Oh.*

*Oh, God.* Her eyes shot open. *I would have to have sex with Bobby.*

*No. No, no, no. He’s nineteen. That’s illegal.* She sat up in bed and tried to calm her heart rate, as it skyrocketed. *I’m only fifteen. He can’t do that. That’s not legal, is it?*

*And who’s going to fucking tell on him?*

Brooke was taking shaky breaths now, as she stared into the dark. *Oh, God. No, no, I can’t do that yet. I don’t want to do that. I won’t. I won’t do it, I don’t care what Grandpa says.*

*What else can I do?*

Brooke wrestled with herself, trying to figure something out.

There was only one thing she could think of.

The posters had gone up early in the year. None of the teachers had ever mentioned them, and none of the students talked about them. And they certainly weren’t loudly advertised; just a few pieces of paper, on random corkboards in the hallway. Brooke didn’t even know who’d put them there. But she still remembered the first time she’d read the bold text.

**Are you being forced to do something you don’t think you should be?**

**People are willing to help you.**

A toll-free phone number was printed at the bottom.

Brooke knew that others had run away from First Light, besides her old camp counselor. There had been rumors, among the teenagers, of kids that left. But it was all speculation; nothing was ever concrete.

*I am definitely being forced to do something I shouldn’t be.*

Her gut twisted.
She was still exhausted when she left for school the next morning. Luckily, she caught the bus before her parents woke up. As soon as she got to school, she tracked down one of those posters and wrote the number down on her hand. And at lunch, when she had a few free minutes, she slipped out of the cafeteria and made her way to the pay phone near the gym.

Her heart was pounding in her chest as she dialed the number with shaky fingers. The phone rang once, twice, three times... then a click, as someone answered.

“Hello?”

Brooke licked her lips hesitantly, not sure what to say.

“Hello?” the woman on the other end asked again. “Is someone there?”

“Yea,” Brooke said in a small voice.

The woman didn’t say anything for a minute. “Do you need help?” she finally asked.

“I...” Brooke swallowed. “Yes.”

“Are you at Arcadia Bay High School?”

Brooke blinked, surprised that the woman would know that. “Yes.”

“Okay... are you with First Light?”

Brooke breath caught, and she didn’t respond.

“Hello? Are you still there?”

“Yes,” Brooke finally got out.

“Are you there? Or yes, you’re with First Light?”

Brooke bit her lip. “Both,” she said quietly.

“Sweetie, listen to me very carefully,” the woman said calmly. “Whatever trouble you’re in, whatever they’re making you do, you don’t have to go through with it. I can help you.”

Brooke let out a slow breath through her nose. “How?” she finally asked.

“I can get you out.” The woman paused. “I can help you leave First Light.”

“I’m... I’m only fifteen years-”

“It doesn’t matter,” she interrupted. “If you’re in danger, or you’re being forced to do something against your will, I can help you get away from them.”

Brooke glanced around nervously, making sure nobody could see her talking on the phone. “How can you do that?” she asked.

“Sweetie, I’m an Oregon state social worker,” the woman assured her. “I had your principal put those posters around your school. I can remove you from your family’s home if your situation is bad
“enough.”

“You...” Brooke swallowed. “You can?”

“Are you at school?” Brooke could hear rustling through the phone. “I can come see you right now. I’m only forty-five minutes away.”

Brooke blinked, as her heart rate increased. Shaking in nervousness and worry, she did the only thing she could think of.

She hung up the phone.

She walked away, going back to the cafeteria, and didn’t say a word to anyone.

It was all she could think about, for the rest of the day.

I could get out. Brooke kept her eyes on the board, as her English teacher spoke about their reading assignment, but she wasn’t listening. I could leave. I wouldn’t have to live with Bobby.

What if I can’t?

Brooke scratched her arm nervously. What If I can’t leave? What if my situation isn’t bad enough, and they force me to go back? Fuck, Mom and Dad would kill me.

Hell, Grandpa will kill me first.

...

Fuck it. Not like the other option is better.

When the final bell rang, Brooke made her way back to the pay phones as fast as she could; she only had a few minutes, before she had to catch the bus. Glancing back at the number written on her hand, she re-dialed the woman and waited.

Unlike before, the phone was answered on the first ring.

“Hello?”

Brooke glanced around, making sure nobody was paying attention to her. “… hi. Again.”

“Is that you? The girl who called earlier?”

“Yea.” Brooke nodded. “Um... sorry.”

“It’s okay, sweetie. I just want to help. You don’t?”

“How do I know you won’t give me back?” Brooke interrupted.

The woman was silent for a few seconds. “I won’t.”

“If...” Brooke paused. “If I leave, I can’t go back. I won’t go back. They’ll kill me.”

“Sweetie, I want you to listen to me.” The woman took a deep breath. “If you don’t want to go back, then you won’t. I will not let your family take you against your will.”

“You won’t?”
“I promise.”

Brooke glanced back into the hallway. The crowd of students was starting to disperse; she didn’t have much time left.

“I can’t leave today.” Brooke swallowed. “I have to wait until tomorrow.”

“Sweetie-”

“I’ll call you back when I get to school.”

“Wait, WAIT?” The woman called desperately, as Brooke got ready to hang up.

“What?”

“Tell me your first name.” The woman took a deep breath. “I promise, I won’t come looking for you. Just tell me your first name, so I know it’s you tomorrow.”

Brooke hesitated, not sure if she wanted to give the woman too much information. But she gave in. “Brooke,” she said. “My name’s Brooke.”

She hung up and ran away, towards her bus.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2015. UCLA, after Max ran away.

“I still think we should have taken your car.”

Victoria scoffed as she looked at Taylor. “Why? So your heartthrob could see you drive up to the house in an Audi?”

“Exactly.” Her friend smirked as she took a turn. “Certainly would’ve put me ahead of the competition.”

“I think you’re already ahead of the competition.” Victoria looked over her friend’s outfit; between the short shorts, crop top hanging from one shoulder, and makeup, she was definitely sending all the right signals for men to pick up on. “I mean, Jesus, why don’t you just throw yourself at him and scream ‘take me, take me now’?”

Taylor raised an eyebrow. “Do you think it would work?”

“No.” Victoria rolled her eyes. “Matthews might be attractive, but he couldn’t take a hint if you force-fed it to him.”

“He’s on the Dean’s List,” Taylor reminded her. “He’s plenty smart.”

“Book-wise, yea. With the ladies, on the other hand...” Victoria shrugged. “And I still don’t know why I’m here. I could be studying for my mid-term right now.”

Taylor grinned. “Because after I do get Derek Matthews to pick up on the hint, and have wild, drunk, world-shattering sex with him, I’m gonna need someone to drive me home.”

“Alternatively,” Victoria offered, “you’re going to need someone to hold your hair back while you puke out two night’s worth of vodka. And listen to you cry about how stupid boys are, and oh, God, why can’t you find someone to love you for you?”

“You are such a pessimistic bitch.” Taylor glared at Victoria, though she couldn’t hide the smile. “But I did pay a lot of money for this hair.”

Victoria sighed as they pulled up to the house on fraternity row. Oh, good, she thought to herself miserably. Another night of drunken assholes trying to hit on me. Never gets old.

“You DEFINITELY owe me for this either way,” she said as Taylor turned off the car.

“Yea, yea, put it on my tab,” Taylor said dismissively as they got out. “You know, you could at least try and have some fun. Maybe meet a few people, and make some more friends.”

Victoria sighed. “Nobody worth meeting ever comes to these things,” she muttered as she closed her door.
As predicted, Derek Matthews was completely and totally dense as a block of wood.

Victoria couldn’t help but roll her eyes as she watched Taylor bat her lashes for the hundredth time, alongside at least four other girls as they all fawned over the swimming champion’s incredibly boring stories. *Seriously, are they even paying attention to what he’s saying?* Victoria wondered, as she leaned against the wall and watched from across the room. *Or are they too focused on his jawline?*

“Hey, girl, how you doin’?”

“Fuck off.” Victoria didn’t even look at the guy trying to hit on her.

“Yo, whas wrong?” The voice sounded irritated, and definitely not sober. “I wha’s... just ashking a question.”

Victoria turned and stared daggers at her inquisitor. “It’s the same question you’ve asked the last four girls as you wandered around this house,” she snapped. “Do you think we don’t notice this shit? You’re not Joey from Friends, you’re Drunken Fraternity Asshole Number Four.” She waved her hand. “Go try your luck elsewhere. And while you’re at it, find yourself some proper shoes. Whoever told you it was okay to wear flip-flops and jeans to a party was an idiot.”

The guy stared at her blankly, but he took the hint and wandered away.

_Taylor doesn’t appreciate me enough,_ Victoria thought bitterly as she looked back at her friend. One of them had somehow convinced the swimmer to lift his shirt, and they were all fawning over his chiseled six-pack abs. _Christ, you can practically FEEL their panties getting wet._

Victoria rolled her eyes again as she went back into the house’s kitchen. Thankfully, someone had the decency to stock the fridge with bottles of water. She grabbed what was her third of the night, cracking the seal and taking a sip while the girls in the other room giggled at something Derek had said.

The blonde couldn’t help but smirk to herself. _This dude is either completely clueless, or gay. Either way, all of those girls are in for a very disappointing night._

_Ah, fuck. That means I’ll be holding Taylor’s hair back for sure._

“Hey, what’s a girl like you doing here?”

_Christ, these assholes can’t be original, can they?_

“I was just wondering the same thing.” Victoria turned to her latest admirer. “Do you know where the exit is?”

He was taken aback, and Victoria took the opportunity to look him over. “Holy shit, are you seriously wearing cargo shorts?” she asked incredulously. “Who told you they look good, your mother?”

“Um... wow.” The guy looked at her cautiously, like she made him nervous. “Okay, jeez. I was just seeing if you wanted to talk. What’s your problem?”

Victoria scoffed. “I’m not interested. Wait for half an hour, when your friend Derek either makes his pick of the litter or rejects them all. One of those girls will be desperate enough to sleep with the first guy who tells her she looks pretty. Right now, you’re just wasting time. Yours, and mine.”

“... right.” The guy blinked. “So, you’re-”
“SO not into men.” Victoria took another sip of her water. “Especially ones who wear cargo shorts. Seriously, you need to burn those and invest in a decent pair of chinos.”

He looked at her, puzzled. “Then... why are you here?”

Victoria blinked. “You know what? That’s a good question.”

She turned and left the kitchen, heading back into the main room as she searched for the door. *Taylor can find me outside when she’s done being rejected,* Victoria thought to herself.

“Hey, girl, how YOU doing?”

Wow, you have got to be kidding me.

“Um, can you back up, please?”

Victoria glanced over and saw the drunken idiot from before. He was standing way to close to his latest target, a short girl with blonde hair tied up in a bun. “Wha’s wrong?” he slurred.

“Uh, you...” the girl cringed, as she tried to back away, but only got a few inches before she ran into the wall. “Your, uh, breath really smells like alcohol.”

“Ah, isss alright.” He waved as he planted one hand on the wall behind her head, smiling stupidly. “Man, yur... cute as a button. You wanna have shum fun?”

The blonde girl cringed further, turning her head to the side in an attempt to avoid the drunken idiot’s breath.

Victoria took three big steps over to him and grabbed his ear, twisting violently and pulling. “Hey!” he yelped as he leaned back, desperately trying to regain his balance.

She ignored him and looked behind her, reaching over and grabbing the soberest fraternity brother she could see. “You. Put your friend to bed,” she ordered as she pulled the drunk around her. “He’s done for the night.”

The sober guy blinked as he looked between her and the drunk, as he struggled to get his ear out of her hand. “What- wait, why are you-”

“No what, no why, just fucking do it,” she snapped. “He’s been walking around drunk off his ass, harassing girls for an hour now. It’s only a matter of time before he does something stupid. Get his dumb ass out of here.”

“Hey, lady, ah’m not that dr-”

Whatever he had to say was lost as Victoria gave his ear another quarter-turn, and he started yelping in pain. She didn’t look at him, focusing on the sober one in front of her. “You can take care of this, or you can wait for one of these girls to call the cops and get the party shut down,” she told him. “Your choice.”

It didn’t take him long to make it. “Yea, alright.” He took his friend’s arm, as Victoria finally released him. “Come on, Justin, let’s call it a night.”

“But I washn’t...” his voice trailed off as he was dragged away.

Satisfied, Victoria turned back to the smaller girl, who was staring at her with wide eyes. “Are you okay?”
“Yea,” she replied. “Um... wow. Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.” Victoria smirked. “These fraternity assholes get stupid when they drink too much. You just gotta remind them who’s boss.”

The girl smiled back. “You’ve, uh, dealt with them before, I take it?”

“Whenever my friend drags me to these things.” Victoria looked back over at Taylor. *I swear, her eyes haven’t left Matthews since we got here.*

“Is your friend trying to hook up with him, too?”

Victoria turned back to her, eyebrows raised. “Is that why you’re here?”

She nodded towards the gaggle of girls. “My roommate’s been trying to get him alone all night,” she mentioned. “I don’t think he’s picking up on it.”

“Yea, Derek may look pretty, but he’s not very suave.” Victoria shrugged, looking back at her. “What, do you not want a piece of that?”

The girl surprised her by shaking her head. “He’s, uh... not my type.”

“Really? Tall, handsome, and muscular isn’t your type?”

The girl’s face reddened slightly as she squirmed.

Realization dawned on Victoria, and she did a double-take. “Oh. Wow.”

“What?” the girl looked at her, confused.

“Nothing.” Victoria smirked again. “I get dragged to enough of these parties. I guess it was only a matter of time before I found another lesbian wingman.”

The girl was taken aback. “How did you know I-”

“Because every straight girl that has two eyes is looking over there.” Victoria nodded at Derek Matthews, who was in the process of lifting his shirt again. “Which one is your friend?”

The girl looked very apprehensive, but she slowly pointed. “Her. The one with the purple highlights.”

Victoria glanced the girl’s friend up and down. “Hmm. She might have a shot. She looks interesting, at least.”

“Which one is yours?”

“The blonde girl trying really hard to look like a porn star.” Victoria nodded at Taylor. “I’m pretty sure her shirt is slipping on purpose.”

The girl frowned as she looked over. “I don’t think your friend is wearing a bra.”

“Probably not. But to be fair, I don’t think she’s wearing any panties, either.”

The girl snorted in amusement, and Victoria snickered with her.

“I’m Victoria, by the way.”
“Kate.” She smiled. “Nice to meet you.”

Chapter End Notes

Merry Christmas! Enjoy the updates!
2015. UCLA, after Max ran away.

Victoria: So... are you doing anything this weekend?

She bit her lip. *No, that's lame,* she thought as she quickly deleted the text.

Victoria: Hey, do you have plans on Saturday?

*Yea, I don’t think that's much better.* Victoria grit her teeth as she deleted that message, as well. *Come on. You're Victoria fucking Chase. Asking someone out shouldn’t be this hard.*

Victoria: Hey, do you want to go get dinner somet-

*Fuck.* Victoria mashed her finger on the delete key.

“You figure it out yet?”

She glanced up at Taylor, as her friend sat across from her at the Starbucks. “Huh?”

“Asking out Kate,” Taylor had an amused look on her face. “I’ve watched you delete the text, like, twenty times.”

“It has not been twenty times,” Victoria grumbled. “And no. Not yet.”

“Dude, just fucking ask her.” Taylor rolled her eyes. “You’ve been texting each other non-stop for over a week now.”

That was true. After they’d exchanged phone numbers at the party, Kate had texted her later that night, to make sure her and Taylor had gotten back okay. They hadn’t stopped talking since. “I know,” Victoria muttered. “I...”

“Oh, Jesus, if only Courtney was here to see you get flustered.” Taylor smirked. “Her image of you as the unflappable Victoria Chase would shatter like glass.”

“Shut up.” Victoria put her phone down as she rubbed the bridge of her nose. “I’m just... I like her.”

Taylor scoffed. “Well, no shit, Sherlock.”

“I mean I really like her,” Victoria clarified. “I don’t want to make it awkward. Especially if she doesn’t feel the same way.”

“You’ve already met her for lunch,” Taylor pointed out. “Asking her to dinner isn’t much of a stretch from that.”

“Meeting for lunch was mutual,” Victoria countered. “That was as friends. This is a date.”

“You’ve asked girls out on dates before,” Taylor reminded her. “Remember Jasmine? And Anne?”

“Yea, because those turned out so well.” Glancing at her phone, Victoria tried not to think about her brief experiment with online dating. “At least I know she wouldn’t show up drunk.”
Taylor leaned forward, a look of genuine concern in her eyes. “What’s the big deal, really?” she asked.

Victoria didn’t answer.

“I seriously haven’t seen you like this since...” Taylor trailed off. “It’s her, isn’t it?”

“No,” Victoria said, not as convincingly as she wanted.

Taylor reached forward and took Victoria’s hands in hers. “I know she reminds you of her,” she said carefully, “but Kate is not Max.”

“I am very aware of that.” Victoria looked at Taylor. “It’s... hell.” She sighed. “She has that same look in her eyes.”

“What look?”

“Like she’s out of her depth,” Victoria answered quietly. “Like she barely knows how big the world really is, and she’s having trouble absorbing it.”

Taylor pursed her lips, before she shook her head. “It sounds to me like you’re overthinking this.”

“Tay, I...”

“Here.” Taylor picked up her phone and started tapping.

Victoria narrowed her eyes. “If you send a text before I see it, I will end your miserable little existence,” she cautioned. “Painfully, and slowly.”

“Relax, I wouldn’t do that.” Taylor finished, then gave Victoria her phone back. “There.”

**Victoria:** Do you want to go get dinner with me on Saturday?

“Short and simple.” Taylor nodded. “Just fuckin’ send it already.”

Victoria hesitated, then sighed and tapped the ‘Send’ button. “Guess we’ll see,” she muttered as she put her phone down.

Taylor smirked. “You’re not gonna hold it desperately, waiting for her reply?”

“She’s in class right now,” Victoria replied. “Her phone is on Silent. She won’t see it for another half an hour.”

“You already have her schedule memorized?”

“Blow me.”

“This one?”

“No.”

“This one?”

“No.”

“What about this one?”
“No.”

“Or this—” Kate paused, then peeked out of her closet, clothes in hand. “You’re not even looking!”

“Good catch.” Alyssa smirked as she sat on the bed opposite Kate, scrolling through the Facebook feed on her phone while her friend tried to pick an outfit.

“Alyssa! I asked for your help picking an outfit!”

Alyssa sighed as she looked up. “I gave it to you already,” she pointed out. “Wear whatever you think looks nice.”

Kate crossed her arms. “I want to make sure it actually DOES look nice,” she countered. “Which is why I asked for your help. So you could tell me if I’m right, not ignore me while you Facebook-stalk Derek.”

“I finished that already,” she said dismissively, looking back at her phone. “Now I’m Facebook-stalking your date.”

“Wh- Alyssa!”

“Hey, I’m gathering intelligence for you.” Alyssa shrugged. “Wear that white blouse with your black skirt. That looks nice.”

“Last time I did that, you told me I looked like a penguin!”

“That’s right, but a NICE penguin.”

“I... argh!” Kate fumed as she turned back to her closet, rifling through it.

“Do you want to know about Victoria or not?” Alyssa asked.

“No!”

“Kate.”

“... fine. Yes.”

Alyssa chuckled. “Well, she’s a year older than you. She wants to be a lawyer. And she’s from some tiny little town in Oregon called Arcadia Bay.”

“She is?” Kate poked her head back out. “I thought she was from Seattle.”

“Her parents live in Seattle,” Alyssa corrected her. “She graduated high school in Oregon.”

“Hmm.” Kate shrugged and went back to her clothes. “I already knew the other stuff. Anything else?”

“Wow. She drives a REALLY nice car.” Alyssa scrolled some more. “And definitely has a thing for high-end clothes, purses, and shoes. Either she’s loaded, or her parents are.”

“Her parents,” Kate said dismissively as she pulled her blouse off of a hangar. “Her dad runs a business empire of some kind. She told me about it over lunch.”

Alyssa hummed. “Well, as far as I can tell, she doesn’t follow any sports teams, so you’re in the clear there. She studies a lot and travels a lot. There’s pictures of herself in Paris, London, Rome... Jesus,
her passport must look like a novel.”

“She did mention she’s been to Europe a few times,” Kate remarked as she quickly changed.

“Other than that, there’s not much.” Alyssa frowned. “She doesn’t post very often. Except for...” she scrolled. “Wow.”

“What?”

“She shares posts from a Facebook page twice a month or so, about some missing girl named Maxine Caulfield. Looks like they went through high school together.”

“Really?” Kate left her closet as she pulled her sweater round her shoulders. Alyssa showed her the photo of a brunette girl wearing a yellow shirt. “God, that’s so sad.”

“Yea.” Alyssa nodded. “When is she getting here?”

Kate’s phone beeped from her nightstand. “Right now,” she said as she grabbed it, sliding it into her purse. “Gotta run!”

____________

“Wow.”

That was all Kate could say as she followed Victoria into the restaurant. She blinked as she looked around, taking in the details; hardwood paneling, crystal lights, exquisitely decorated tables and chairs, and waiters in smart white suits moving amongst the tables.

“Pretty nice, right?” Victoria asked, and Kate detected a hint of uncertainty in her voice.

“No, yea, this is...” Kate couldn’t stop looking around. “I feel under-dressed.”

“It’s okay, you look good,” Victoria assured her.

Kate smiled. “Do I?”

Victoria blushed, as she realized what she’d said. “I, uh... yea, you do.”

“Miss Chase?”

The girls turned as a waiter appeared in front of them. “You table is over here.”

Kate followed behind Victoria, glancing around at the other diners. The men all wore suits or collared shirts, and the woman were in business attire or nice dresses. Even Victoria looked the part, in her deep blue sweater and khaki pants, her long legs terminating in a pair of white heels. Kate felt very uncomfortable, as she tried her best to look like she belonged.

The booth he took them to was in the far corner of the restaurant. Kate slid into her seat quickly, as the waiter set some menus down and departed. “Are you okay?” Victoria asked.

“Um, yea.” Kate nodded quickly, as she glanced around. “Just, you know... like I said, feeling a little out of place.” She took a breath, exhaling slowly as she turned back to Victoria. “This is your favorite restaurant?”

“One of them.” Victoria gave her a small smile, as she slid a menu towards her. “Their tuna is some of the best I’ve ever had.”
“Tuna sounds pretty nice.” Kate smiled back as she took the menu. “I haven’t had good seafood for a while.”

“Yea, me either.” Victoria picked her menu up.

*That does look pretty good,* Kate thought as she found the seafood section. *Wow, that sounds fancy. I wonder if they OH MY GOD.*

“Whoa,” she breathed, as her heart rate skyrocketed.

“What?” Victoria looked at her.

“The... uh...” Kate felt her face flush, as she looked up at Victoria. “That number, after the name. That’s... not the price is it?”

Victoria squirmed. “Um... yes?”

“Oh. Oh, my God.” Kate closed her menu. “I... I can’t. Victoria, I’m sorry, I’m sure it’s amazing, but there is NO way I can afford this place. I-”

“Kate. Kate, hang on.” Victoria put her menu down. “I can take care of it, it’s not a problem.”

“It’s...” Kate stopped, as her voice got high-pitched, and quickly lowered it. “It’s way too expensive!”

Victoria shifted in her chair. “Kate, really, I-”

“I’m sorry, Victoria, I just...” Kate stopped, not sure what she was trying to say.

Victoria saved her from having to answer, as she cast her eyes downward. “I...” she sighed. “Hell. I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry.” Kate put her hands in her lap and tried to control her breathing. “Victoria, I... I’m just... I’m not comfortable, with someone spending that much money on dinner for me.”

The other girl played with her fingers. “No, it’s...” Victoria hesitated, sighing. “I... I’m really sorry, Kate. I just... you know...”

Kate furrowed her brow. “What?”

Victoria’s face reddened. “I just wanted to impress you,” she muttered.

Kate blinked. “You...”

“I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.” Victoria glanced up nervously. “I just wanted to, you know, take you out. I never thought about...” she paused. “I’m not used to stuff like this making people feel, you know, bad. Seriously, paying for a dinner like this is nothing.”

Kate didn’t reply for a minute, before she leaned forward. “You don’t have to take me out to a place like this to impress me, Victoria.”

“I...” the other girl hesitated.

“I mean... it means a lot, that you cared.” Kate glanced around again. “But this is too much.”

Victoria sighed. “I’m sorry,” she repeated.
Kate hesitantly reached across the table. Victoria froze as Kate took her hand, and glanced between their hands and Kate’s face. “This was still really sweet of you,” Kate said with a smile. “Nobody’s, you know, really tried to impress me before.”

Victoria slowly let herself relax as she squeezed Kate’s hand back, letting a smirk come over her face. “So... what you’re saying is, the bar...”

“Yea.” Kate nodded, her own smile coming over her face. “It’s pretty low.”

Victoria laughed, finally exhaling as she sat back upright. “Are you sure?” she asked. “Like I said, it’s not.”

Kate was shaking her head before Victoria could finish her sentence. “I really don’t want you to spend a hundred and sixty bucks on a plate of food for me.”

“Okay.” Victoria took a deep breath. “Look, I still want to take you to dinner, so how about this.” She glanced back at the menu. “Let’s just get appetizers here, and go. Then you can pick a restaurant where you’re comfortable with me buying you whatever you want.”

Kate smiled. “I can do that.”

“This... was not what I had in mind.”

Kate looked at Victoria as they stood in front of the new restaurant. “What were you expecting?”

“I don’t know.” Victoria studied the building warily. “Not a franchise restaurant, that’s for sure.”

They both looked up at the big Red Robin sign over the entrance. “This was my favorite place to eat when I was a kid,” Kate mentioned.

Victoria looked at her. “Really?”

“Oh, yea. Me and my little sisters used to inhale their bottomless fries.” Kate grinned. “Pretty sure that was why my parents liked to bring us here.”

“Bottomless fries?” Victoria raised her eyebrows. “That’s a thing?”

Kate glanced back at her. “Have you... never eaten here before?”

Victoria hesitated. “There weren’t any of these back home,” she finally admitted. “We had an Applebee’s, that was probably the closest thing to a place like this, but I never went there, either.”

Kate raised an eyebrow. “Where did you go, when you went out to eat?”

“We usually left town and hit up a nice restaurant in Portland,” Victoria replied.

“So... this is a new experience for you?”

Victoria smirked. “Yes. Very.”

“Well, come on, then.” Kate extended her hand. “Let me show you how the plebeians dine.”

“Oh, God.” Victoria rolled her eyes, but took Kate’s hand and followed her inside.

They were quickly greeted by the hostess, and it became Victoria’s turn to look around the restaurant
as they were led to a booth. “It’s... very colorful,” she admitted. “Louder than the last place, though.”

“This is a family restaurant,” Kate pointed out, as she nodded at a table with three boisterous kids. “Are YOU okay?”

Victoria smirked. “I’ll try my best to survive the night.”

The waiter brought their menus a minute later, which had Victoria raising her eyebrows again as she scanned the menu. “Wow. So, this place serves straight cholesterol?”

“And trans fats.” Kate flipped through the menu. “I’m sure there are some healthy options in here for you.”

“Mm.” Victoria glanced over the burger menu again. “Know what? Forget it. I’m gonna be fat tonight.”

Kate grinned. “Really?”

“Why not. Trying new things, right?” Victoria tapped a picture. “This one has blue cheese? Sold.”

“Two hours, huh?”

“Yea.” Victoria cracked a smile. “She really had her heart set on him.”

Kate laughed, and took a sip of her water. “I mean, Alyssa was pretty disappointed, too,” she allowed. “But she certainly didn’t cry for two hours about Derek not wanting to sleep with her.”

“I think Taylor just has a problem believing that someone could be that religious.” Victoria shrugged. “You should have heard her, going on and on between bouts of puking, about how she had put in so much work to be so pretty, and he’d barely given her the time of day before letting her know he was saving himself for marriage.”

Kate hummed, trying not to look too uncomfortable as she played with her napkin. “What do you think about it?” she asked, trying not to let her apprehension show.


“Both, I guess?” Kate took another sip of water. “All of it.”

“Hmm.” Victoria leaned backwards. “I... won’t pretend to understand it,” she admitted. “I wasn’t raised with religion. My parents are both atheists”

“And you?” Kate pressed.

Victoria sighed. “I’m not sure,” she confessed. “I mean, I’ve always had a ‘live and let live’ attitude, about this sort of thing. But, you know... I’ve heard what some of those people say. About... us.”

Kate furrowed her brow. “Us?”

“Gay people,” Victoria clarified, crossing her arms. “Those evangelists on TV, Mormons, the Catholic church... I never did anything to them, and listening to them say that I should die because of who I am is... I don’t know. Really insulting, I guess.”

“Yea.” Kate bit her lip and glanced away.
Victoria tilted her head. “Are you... did I just offend you?”

“No.” Sighing, Kate took a drink from her glass of water. “I mean, I was raised Catholic. I still believe in God. But... yea, listening to people condemn me is kind of depressing.”

“Ah.” Victoria scratched her arm and looked down. “Sorry. This stuff leaves a bad taste in my mouth.”

“I think it would for anyone.”

“No, especially me.” Victoria looked back up. “Have you ever heard of a church called First Light of Christ?”

Kate frowned. “It sounds really familiar.”

“You’ve probably seen them on TV, or in a newspaper somewhere. They’re a...” Victoria hesitated. “I was going to call them a religion, but that’s an insult to actual religions.” She scoffed. “They’re a cult. And they were based twenty miles from my house, back in Arcadia Bay.”

Kate raised an eyebrow. “For real?”

Victoria nodded. “They were serious fundamentalists,” she explained. “The world is six thousand years old, evolution isn’t real, gay people should be executed in the streets, all the normal crap. It was literally impossible to avoid them when I was growing up.”

“Wow.” Kate couldn’t help but stare with wide eyes. “Did they ever do anything to you?”

“No. Not to me.” Victoria shifted as she averted her eyes. “It’s... like I said, they left a really bad taste in my mouth.”

“Oh.” Kate paused. “I’m sorry.”

Victoria sighed. “It was a long time ago. Let’s talk about something else.” She looked back at Kate. “You’ve only got two years left for your Bachelor’s, right?”

Kate pursed her lips and nodded, deciding to move past the conversation. “I want to get my Masters, though,” she added. “I always wanted to be a teacher.”

“Yea?” Victoria smiled as she leaned forward. “What, little kids, or high-schoolers?”

“Definitely kids.” Kate smirked. “Teaching is hard enough. I don’t want to deal with hormonal teenagers on top of it.”

Victoria was still laughing as their waiter came back. “Oh, thank God, I am so hungry,” Kate breathed as he set her food down in front of her.

“Okay, this does look really good,” Victoria allowed as she admired her burger. She gingerly took hold of both sides, lifting it... and furrowed her brow, as a line of grease puddled out the back onto her plate.

She stared at it for a second. “Yea, I’m just gonna ignore that,” she finally said as she opened her mouth and bit down.

Kate munched on a fry as she watched Victoria chew and swallow, as the girl maintained a neutral expression. “Well?” she asked nervously. “What do you think?”
Victoria blinked, staring at the burger. “Holy crap.”

Kate laughed as Victoria took another huge bite. “Good enough for your refined tastes?” she teased.

The other girl grinned as she chewed and swallowed. “Good enough for anybody,” she said. “This is the best burger I’ve ever had.”

“They’ve got one with pineapple on it, too,” Kate mentioned as she picked up her own burger. “That’s one of my favorites.”

“Next time.” Victoria set her burger down and picked up a fry. “We are totally coming back.”

Kate raised her eyebrows. “So we’re doing a second date?”

Victoria froze, her fry halfway to her mouth. “Yes?” she said hopefully. “Please?”

Kate let her worry for a few seconds before she broke out a smile. “Definitely,” she finally said as she bit into her fries. Victoria breathed a sigh of relief across the table. “Maybe next time we can do Applebee’s.”

“Hmm.” Victoria swallowed. “They did always smell good, when we drove past them back home.”

“Perfect.” Kate grinned. “Then we’ll do McDonalds.”

“Oh, come on.” Victoria scoffed. “Everybody’s had McDonalds.”

“Until today, I thought everyone had eaten at Red Robin, too.”
Steph fucking HATED her mother.

Indifference wasn’t new to her. Her mom had always let her do as she pleased, so long as it didn’t tremendously impact her life. But the lackadaisical attitude her mother had towards Max, and Steph’s involvement, made her mad in ways she couldn’t describe.

Rachel’s father had been furious at both of them. And who wouldn’t have been? To hear that your teenage daughter had twisted the arm of another student? Manipulated them to do something that put them in real danger? And that as a result of that, the other student had gotten the crap beaten out of her and been forced to run away?

Her mother couldn’t have cared less.

Steph hated herself. She WANTED her mom to be mad at her. To scream, and yell, and punish her for her stupidity and lack of thought.

But her mother was satisfied to let Steph do whatever she wanted.

Right now, rather than chewing Steph out and punishing her, she was on her phone, talking sweetly to some other man. Probably a different one than yesterday, Steph thought bitterly as she sat at her laptop.

“Two weeks? Thank fucking God. Steph looked at the fridge. At least we just went grocery shopping.

“Two weeks? Well, that sounds absolutely lovely!”

“Oh, of course I can get away. My boss at work loves me. And I’m due plenty of vacation time. I can put in for it tomorrow.”

Your boss? Is that what we’re calling Jesse’s alimony now? Steph rolled her eyes so hard that she actually felt pain. Her mother hadn’t held down a steady job in months, the two of them living solely off of her last ex-husband’s sizable alimony checks. And Steph was pretty sure she’d been fired from her last job.

“Absolutely.” Even though she couldn’t see her, Steph could feel her mom smiling sweetly into the phone. “I’ll be ready to go first thing Saturday morning. I’ll make sure to bring something special to wear, just for our first night out at sea.”

Gag. Jesus, Mom, maybe try to remember that I’m in the room.

Steph quickly wrote down the last of the addresses as her mom hung up on her latest fling. Not
before saying goodbye in her sickeningly sweet tone of voice, though. “I’m going on a two-week cruise this Saturday,” she told Steph lazily as she got up off the couch. “You’ll have to fend for yourself.”

“Cool.” Steph shrugged as she closed the laptop. “Can I have cash for food? And the car?”

“Yea, sure.” Her mom went to her purse and pulled out her wallet, taking out a few bills. Steph held her hand out as her mom gave her three hundred bucks. “Use the credit card, if you need more. Also, there’s no cell service on the boat, so you won’t be able to call me. You remember that, right?”

_It’ll be your third cruise this year. And your second to Hawaii, despite what you told fuckshisname._

“Yea, I got it.” Steph elected to keep her thoughts to herself, as she pocketed the money. _Three hundred bucks. Jesse would be pissed to hear how casually you throw his alimony around._

Her mom went over to the counter, picking up a bottle of vodka as she made herself a drink. “What are you doing?” She asked, in the tone of voice that meant she didn’t actually care, and wasn’t actually listening.

“Making a list of shelters to visit this weekend,” Steph replied. “Rachel and I are going to Eugene to look for Max.”

“Who’s Max again?”

_Come on, Mom, I’ve told you three times._

“A girl we knew at school who ran away,” Steph said dismissively. She really didn’t feel like telling her mother the story again.

“That’s so sad.” Again, in the tone of voice that meant she didn’t actually care. Her mother finished making her drink and sipped from the glass. “Is your homework done?”

“Finished an hour ago,” Steph replied.

“Good.” He mother walked back over to the couch and sat down.

Steph’s phone buzzed next to her on the counter.

**Rachel:** @ American Rust.

“Mom, can I borrow your car?”

“Where does your dad think you are, anyway?”

Rachel took a healthy sip from the bottle of vodka they kept in the shed before she answered. “At a study group,” she muttered. “Him and my mom are both at work, though, so they can’t really check up on me.”

Steph sighed, taking the bottle back. “When do you have to be back?”

“Not for a few hours.” Rachel looked back at her, and Steph noted her sunken eye sockets. Rachel had lost weight since November, and Steph knew she was deeply depressed.

_We both are_, she thought to herself as she drank from the bottle. The two of them were sitting on the floor of a dilapidated cinderblock shed that someone had set up in the middle of the junkyard, for no
reason they could think of. It had turned into their spot to meet and talk, since they had become pariahs at school.

“Did you get the addresses in Eugene?” Rachel continued.

“Yea. There aren’t many shelters. The ones I talked to said there is still a sizeable homeless community, though, so we might get lucky.” Steph shrugged. “My mom gave me a bunch of money, too, way more than I need for food. And I have one of her credit cards. We can get a motel or something, if we want to stay the weekend. Maybe hit up Salem on the way back.”

“Sure.” Rachel took the bottle back. “Sounds good to me.”

Steph raised her eyebrows. “You don’t want to ask your dad for permission, first?”

Rachel shook her head. “I’ll let him know,” she muttered. “But he said I could be out, if I was looking for Max. And all my homework is done.” She took another drink, looking at the bottle. “I need to get another one of these. This one’s almost gone.”

Steph rested the back of her head on the wall. “When do you want to leave?”

“I’ll pack a duffle bag when I get home tonight.” Rachel took another drink. “I’ll be ready to go on Friday, whenever you are.”

“I- shit.” Steph grimaced. “I can’t. I won’t have the car until Saturday morning, when my mom leaves.”

Rachel sighed. “That means we’ll only have the afternoon to look for her on Saturday. And Eugene isn’t exactly small.”

“Oh, then we’ll do Salem another time.” Steph shook her head. “Next weekend. I should have some money left over. We can get another motel room and-”

“Do you think she’s left Oregon?”

Steph paused as she looked at Rachel. “Huh?”

“What if she left the state?” Rachel glanced back at her. “If she got to Portland on her own, then Seattle’s not beyond her reach. I was looking it up online, and they have a huge homeless community up north.”

“I think that’s stretching it.” Steph scratched her head. “Max has only been gone for six weeks. And it wasn’t like she had a ton of money.”

“Maybe she got some more. Panhandling, a job, stealing for all we fucking know.” Rachel looked back at the vodka bottle. “We can’t rule it out.”

“Where is this coming from?” Steph raised an eyebrow. “Max has never even left this city before.”

Rachel bit her lip, before she answered. “My dad said he had Max’s info sent to the Oregon State Police,” she said quietly. “They put it out state-wide four weeks ago. But there’s been no leads since then. Nobody’s seen her.”

Steph sighed as she took the bottle from Rachel. “You... Rachel, you don’t think she’s-”

“Don’t.”
Steph glanced over. Rachel wasn’t looking at her; she was staring at the ground in front of them, her eyes vacant.

“Don’t say it,” she continued quietly. “Max isn’t dead.”

“Yea.” Steph took a drink, finishing the bottle and tossing it lazily aside. It clattered against the floor and rolled, clinking as it contacted the far wall. “I’m sure she’s not, Rachel. I-”

“My dad already told me that he checked with all the state coroners. And hospitals. They don’t have anybody that matches Max’s description.” Rachel picked her head back up, staring at the wall. “She’s still alive. We just have to find her.”

Steph nodded. “We will,” she assured her quietly.

“Yea.” Rachel rubbed her eyes. “Fuck.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Tired.”

Steph nodded. “You’re not sleeping either, are you?”

“Nope.” Rachel leaned back into the wall. “I try. But I mostly just lay on the bed and stare at the ceiling. The doctor my mom makes me see gave me some pills, and they help a little bit, but...”

“Yea.” Steph sighed. “What did you get?”

“Zoloft.” Rachel pulled a small bottle out of her jacket pocket and shook it, the pills rattling inside. “It helps me feel like less of a piece of shit. Doesn’t really help me sleep, though.”

“Hang on.” Steph reached over and opened her purse. “I have something to take the edge off.”

Rachel looked over as Steph pulled a plastic baggie out of her purse, several white-wrapped blunts inside. “You have pot?”

“One of my mom’s ex-boyfriends grows it.” Steph retrieved one of the sticks and a lighter. “He was cool enough to let me light up with him sometimes. He still sells to me for a good price, too.”

“I wonder how that’ll interact with my drugs,” Rachel remarked dryly.

“Well, if you don’t want any-”

“Fuck that. Light one up.”

“A barbarian? Seriously?”

Steph blinked. “Why not?”

“Dude, do I look like a barbarian to you?” Rachel glanced down at herself. “I would definitely play as, like, a mage or something. Just scream something indiscernible, and set shit on fire.” She put the blunt to her lips, taking another puff. “That’s more my jam.”

“Nah.” Steph shook her head. “I’ve seen you get mad. Remember on Black Friday last year, when that girl tried to cut in front of us?”
Rachel snorted. “How could I forget? That bitch, tryin’ to take the spot we’d been waiting three hours for, like I’m not fuckin’ standin’ there.”

“Right. And you got in her face and just...” Steph waved her arm. “Fuckin’ ROARED some crazy shit. I thought that girl was gonna start crying.”

“Yea. Man, I thought those security guards were gonna kick me out.” Rachel shook her head, as she exhaled a cloud of smoke. “So what? That makes me a barbarian now?”

“Totally.” Steph snickered. “Pretty sure that would count as your battle cry, or something.”

Rachel pursed her lips, then shrugged. “I guess I could live with that,” she allowed. “What about you? What’s your Dungeons and Dragons character?”

“Oh, I’m totally a rogue.” Steph smirked. “I like playing as an elf. All wise and mysterious n’ shit.”

“Nah.” Rachel shook her head. “You know what you are? You’re a fuckin’...” she frowned. “What do they call them? The tree people?”

Steph looked up in thought. “Druids?”

“Yea.” Rachel nodded. “You’re a druid.”

“How the fuck am I a druid?”

“Because you’re aaaaallllll about that green.” Rachel held up the blunt, as she pinched it between her thumb and pointer finger. “Mother Nature over chemistry.”

Steph snorted. “You’re high.”

“Technically, I’m low.” Rachel took another puff of the joint before she passed it back. “I’m the lowest motherfucker in this city.”

“Low?” Steph frowned. “What does that mean?”

“I’m fuckin’ lowest of the low.” Rachel’s smirk had vanished, and she went back to looking at her feet. “I’m lower than fuckin’ dirt. Shit, at least dirt is useful.”

Steph bit her lip. “This stuff is supposed to make you happier,” she said quietly.

“Yea, so I’ve heard.” Rachel glanced back at her. “I did stop thinking about Max for about half an hour. Which beats the ten-minute record my pills had, so there’s definitely an advantage.”

“Rachel.” Steph put the blunt aside. “Rachel, you’re not-”

“Save it,” Rachel muttered. “I really don’t want to be rescued from my pit of self-loathing.”

Steph didn’t say anything to that, as she watched Rachel carefully.

“You know what really fucking sucks?” Rachel drew her knees up. “Like, big-time blows?”

“What?”

“It’s when I finally do sleep.” Rachel looked at Steph morosely. “I don’t know about you, but I don’t have nightmares. I have really good dreams.”
Steph blinked. “You do?”

“Yea.” Rachel nodded. “It’s like... I wake up, and go to school, and Max is... there.” She gestured, waving her hand. “She’s back in the seat in front of me in English, just watching the teacher and taking notes. She’s across from me in the cafeteria, and we’re talking about dumb shit. She’s at the meetings with us after school. She’s just... there.”

Rachel sniffed, and Steph could see tears forming as she blinked. “But my fuckin’ alarm clock goes off, while Max is in the middle of saying something naïve. And then I wake up, and I remember that Max isn’t there. She’s fuckin’ out on the streets somewhere, doing God-knows-what, God-knows-where. And...”

She started to choke, as her voice caught. “And it’s all my fault,” she got out. “I fuckin’ lied to her because I wanted to help my dad. For no fuckin’ reason!” Rachel cried out the last part, as tears started to flow. “I had no good fuckin’ reason to get her to steal those emails! My dad never said he needed them! He was just bitching that he was having trouble, and I thought that I could do something! And now Max is...”

Rachel glanced back at Steph. “Max is gone,” she whispered. “Max is gone, and it’s... it’s...” Her voice cracked. “It’s my fuckin’ fault.”

Steph barely got her arm around Rachel’s shoulder, before her friend started crying.

Her own tears flowed, too. Because she couldn’t even try to comfort her. Steph knew there was no point it telling her that she was wrong. So she just held her, as tears carved their way down her face.

It took a few minutes for Rachel to cry herself out. By that point, she’d fallen sideways into Steph’s lap, tears and snot staining her pant leg.

“Our fault.”

Rachel sniffed, turning her head to face Steph. “Huh?”

“It’s our fault,” Steph said quietly as she squeezed Rachel’s shoulder. “We did this to her. I was right next to you. We’re both responsible, not just you.”

“It was my idea.” Rachel muttered, as she wiped her nose. “I came up with it. You were just-”

“I agreed with you,” Steph reminded her. “I thought it was a good idea, too. I wanted to see that fucking pastor go to prison just as badly as you did. I didn’t think for a second what could happen to Max.” She sniffed. “I’m just as shitty of a friend as you are.”


“We’re gonna find Max,” Steph assured her. “We’ll find her, and we’ll get her back, and get her some help. And then we can throw ourselves at her feet, and beg for forgiveness.”

“I don’t fuckin’ deserve forgiveness.” Rachel met Steph’s eyes. “I hate myself, more than anything. I wish...” she trailed off for a second. “I wish Max had never met me.”

Steph let out a slow breath, trying to think of a way to make Rachel feel better. But the truth was that she couldn’t. All Rachel was doing was saying the things Steph was thinking in her head, every day. She was just depressed enough to give those thoughts voice.

She had no idea why she did what she did next.
Steph leaned her head down and pressed her lips to Rachel’s.

Her mind caught up with what she was doing a couple of second later, and she quickly pulled her head back up, yanking herself back to reality. Rachel was frozen in shock, blinking.

“Sorry,” Steph breathed. “I’m sorry, Rachel, I just—”

She didn’t get a chance to finish. Rachel’s lips were on hers again; this time, her friend had come up to her.

It wasn’t a quick peck. She was hungry. Rachel had Steph’s face on her hands, as she kissed her deeply and forcefully. Steph’s hands found themselves inadvertently wrapped up on Rachel’s coat, as she quickly started kissing her back.

Neither of them were thinking. At least, nothing coherent. They could only understand feelings, sensations, and needs. Rachel’s hands ran under Steph’s shirt, as Steph’s hands went for Rachel’s belt, and neither of their lips left the others.

“Do you want to talk about...”

“No.”

Steph hesitated, but nodded slowly, as she leaned back against the wall. She made a brief attempt at straightening her pants, though it didn’t help. “Are you okay?”

“Yea.” Rachel finished connecting her bra strap, then reached over and grabbed her shirt, pulling it back over her head. “Are you?”

“Mm-hmm.” Steph shifted, trying to get comfortable on the hard floor as she adjusted her beanie. “Can you pass me my shoe?”

Rachel reached over and slid Steph’s sneaker across the ground, before she put her jacket back on. She went back to leaning against the wall next to Steph, both of them silent.

“That was definitely not how I imagined that going,” Rachel finally said as Steph pulled her shoe back onto her foot.

“How you...” Steph paused and looked at her. “Wait. Was that...”

“Yea. It was.” Rachel pushed the back of her head into the wall. “Is there anything left on that joint?”

Steph checked, but the blunt was gone; it had burned out a while ago. “No.”

“Figured.” Rachel exhaled. “Oh well.”

“I, uh...” Steph bit her lip. “I’m sorry.”


“I mean... that was...”

“I don’t give a shit.” Rachel shrugged. “I wasn’t expecting unicorns and an orchestra. It just... like I said. Thought it’d be different.”
“... oh.”

Rachel looked at Steph. “Was that...”

“No.” Steph shook her head. “Not for me.”

“Mm.” Rachel pursed her lips. “Was it Dana?”

“Jesus Christ.” The back of Steph’s head hit the cinderblock wall with a thump. “How much longer am I gonna get shit for that?”

Rachel smirked. “It was pretty funny.”

“I’m glad you think so.” Steph sighed. “It was another girl. A senior from last year. She told me where they were doing their after-party, and I crashed it. We were already pretty drunk, so...” she waved her arm dismissively.


“Yea, not so much.” Steph shook her head. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine.” Rachel reached under the collar of her shirt, adjusting her bra. “Definitely need a shower, though.”

Steph glanced at her watch. “It is getting kind of late.”

“Are you sober enough to drive me back?”

“Yes.” Steph nodded. “You want to go home?”

“Please.”

The car ride was silent. Neither of them even reached for the radio. Steph focused on the road, while Rachel watched the scenery go by.

“This isn’t going to be weird, is it?” Rachel finally asked, as they got closer to her house.

Steph blinked, turning to her. “Weird how?”

Rachel took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. “We just fucked,” she said simply. “As... whatever, as that was... finding Max is still all I can think about right now.”

“Me too.” Steph nodded.

“Okay.” Rachel looked at Steph. “We’re not going to do the whole ‘am I your girlfriend’ thing, right?”

Steph shook her head as she slowed the car, stopping on front of Rachel’s house.

“Cool.” Rachel glanced at her home, sighing. “I’ll see you on Saturday morning?”

“Yea. I’ll try to get here around ten or so.”

“All right.” Rachel opened the car door. “Later.”
2018. After Max’s mother is found Not Guilty.

“What’s happening at the church?”

Her mother smiled over her shoulder. “There’s a meeting between the Elders and the Pastors,” she answered, as Brooke’s father drove them in his car. “Your grandpa wants your father and I to attend with him.”

“What’s happening at the church?” Brooke asked. “This is really weird, in the middle of the week.”

“I honestly don’t know,” her father replied with a shrug. “You’re right, though, it is weird.”

“Mm.” Brooke turned back to the window.

“Are you feeling okay, Pumpkin?” Her father looked at her through the rearview mirror. “How are you doing with everything?”

She shrugged and didn’t respond.

“Robert is going to take very good care of you,” her father assured her. “You’ll get used to being married, I promise.”

In the back seat next to her, Brooke’s brother scoffed. “I don’t even know why you’re so bummed,” he grumbled. “You get to miss the rest of high school.”

“Hey, I’m just sayin’. If I got to skip out on the rest of my history homework, I’d be doin’ backflips.”

You’d have to actually know what history homework was, you moron. Brooke rolled her eyes. Her brother wasn’t very bright, in her opinion. Hell, she’d say it; he was dumb as a rock. He’d graduated near the bottom of his high school class, which was probably why she hadn’t heard anything about an arranged marriage for him yet.

But he was a believer, which her grandfather placed a premium on. Better to be faithful than smart, apparently.

They pulled up to the house quickly enough; Brooke’s grandparents lived less than two blocks away from their house. “Does Grandma know that I need to get up early for school tomorrow?” she asked as she got out of the car.

“Make sure you remind her.” Her father smiled through the open driver’s window. “Sorry you’ll have to get up earlier than usual to walk back.”

Brooke shrugged again. “Have fun at the meeting.”

“I’m sure we won’t.” Her father rolled his eyes. “Love you, Pumpkin.”

“Love you too.” Brooke waved at her parents. Her mother waved back, as her father pulled the car away from the curb and drove down the street.
if I don’t see them tomorrow, I might not see them again.

Brooke hadn’t thought about that. She watched them turn the corner without a word.

I wonder if I should have said something.

No.

No point. They wouldn’t change their mind. And even if they would, Grandpa won’t.

“Hey, Squirt!”

She blinked and turned; her brother was already halfway towards the house. “You coming, or what?”

Their evening was decidedly non-descript. After giving them both hugs, their grandmother let them watch TV and fed them both dinner.

Brooke said a slightly longer, silent prayer while her grandmother said Grace. God, if you’re really listening... I’m sorry. Brooke shifted slightly, as she bent her head with her eyes closed. I don’t know if I’m really supposed to go be a family with Bobby. But if that was your plan... I can’t. Sorry. I just can’t.

She picked at her food silently. Her grandmother even made a comment, that she wasn’t her usual cheerful self. Brooke shrugged it off, that she was just feeling tired.

They all went back to the TV for another couple of hours, but her grandmother had them turn it off early; she said she wasn’t feeling very awake, either. They all retired for the night around nine o’clock. Brooke normally would have argued, but given what she was planning, she opted not to.

Like the previous night, though, she didn’t sleep. She lay on her side, staring at the door, as she thought about what her plan was for tomorrow.

Get up early, walk back home, shower, change, and pack my backpack.

... 

Pack it with what?

Brooke hadn’t given a lot of thought about what to bring with her.

Well, toothbrush, at least. I doubt Mom and Dad will notice that it’s gone so early. And another couple of dresses.

No. Just one. Probably can’t fit more than that into the backpack; they’re too poofy.

Oh, man, what am I going to do for a wardrobe? She hadn’t even considered that. I have, like, no money. And nothing that isn’t a dress or sleep shirt.

I guess I could sell something. Brooke thought about what she could try and get rid of for cash. That necklace Dad gave me last Christmas. He said it was gold; that should be worth a few bucks. Maybe that watch Grandpa gave me, too, that was pretty nice.

...
Brooke knew that her grandfather managed First Light’s money. She blinked, as a thought occurred to her.

*I wonder if he keeps any cash here?*

She glanced at her alarm clock; just after midnight. Her grandmother would, for sure, still be asleep. Her brother, on the other hand...

*One way to find out.*

Slowly creeping out of bed, she very carefully made her way across her room and opened the door. She tip-toed out, slipping down the hall and pausing outside the room her brother was in. She was relieved to hear the sounds of him snoring.

Brooke slipped downstairs just as quietly, creeping across the living room as she made her way towards her grandfather’s office. Her heartbeat, already elevated, shot through the roof as she slowly pushed the door open. *Grandpa always said that I should never come in here,* she thought as she walked inside.

*Oh, well. In for a penny...*

The moon cast just enough light through the window for her to see, as she crept around her grandfather’s desk. She slowly opened the drawers, one at a time, as she looked for money. The first couple came up bare; nothing but paperwork. But the bottom drawer on the right...

*Holy SHIT.*

Brooke stared, shocked, at a gun. The black pistol sat on top of a stack of paperwork, easily accessible.*I didn’t know Grandpa had a gun! What the hell does he need that for?!*

She decided that she didn’t care to find out, as she pushed the drawer closed with her foot. The next drawer was also devoid of cash, but the top drawer on the left gave her pause. *That envelope looks promising...*

A peek inside made her smile. There wasn’t much, though. *Better than nothing,* she figured as she closed the manila envelope. *Thanks, Grandpa.*

Excited and relieved about finding the money, she turned to leave-

And her foot hit the shredder with a very audible *THUMP.*

Brooke froze, her heart hammering in her ribcage. She tried to listen over it, to see if anyone had heard her, but there was nothing; the house didn’t stir. She relaxed after a few minutes. *I'm on another floor and across the house from everyone. They're not gonna hear shit.*

She sighed, as she glanced at the offending shredder. There was a stack of paperwork sitting on top of it. *Nice, Grandpa, being lazy again...*

*Wait.* Frowning, she took a closer look. *Are those bank statements?*

Curiosity got the better of her as she picked up the top page from the stack, holding it up too see in the moonlight streaming through the window. She read the name of the company on top of the paper. *Abel Industries? What the hell is that?*
She picked up the other papers, sifting through them quickly. *Boy, those are some really high dollar amounts.*

**Why wouldn’t Grandpa want to keep these?**

Brooke glanced nervously at the door to the office. She knew she should return the papers and go back to her bedroom. Every second she stayed in the office was one that she could get caught. Especially since her grandfather hadn’t come home yet.

But her gut was telling her those papers were important. She wasn’t stupid; she knew there was something fishy about how First Light handled their finances. So many of her church friends lived in poverty, on food stamps, while her family drove nice cars and lived in bigger houses. *There must be a reason he wants to destroy these records,* she reasoned.

...  

_Fuck it._

She looked over at her grandfather’s printer. It was an all-in-one that could make copies. And it was quiet, which was one of the reasons her grandfather had gotten it; he hated listening to excessive noise while he worked. She quickly gathered up all the papers, placed them in the tray, and woke the printer from sleep mode.

Biting her lip, she set it to copy and hit the green button.

Maybe it was because she was so nervous, but the printer was WAY louder than she remembered, as it clicked and whirred. She stood frozen, immediately regretting her decision as it snapped up page after page, spitting out copies as it worked for a solid two or three minutes.

When it finally stopped, Brooke exhaled slowly, listening to the house; there wasn’t a sound being made. Deciding that she’d pushed her luck enough for the night, she gathered the papers from the printer and stacked the copies neatly on the shredder where the originals had been. She took the leftover paperwork and the envelope before she spirited upstairs, pausing to make sure that her brother was still snoring before she went back to bed.

Not five minutes after she got back under the covers, she listened to a car pull into the driveway. The front door opened and closed quietly, her grandfather clearly not wanting to wake anyone.

*Please don’t go into your office.*

He didn’t. Brooke closed her eyes and pretended to be asleep as her grandfather came upstairs and went to the master bedroom, shutting the door behind him.

*No turning back now.* Her grandfather was a very light sleeper. There was no way she’d be able to make it back to the office, even if she wanted to.

She tried to sleep, but it didn’t come.

Her alarm went off a few hours later and she silenced it quickly, turning to sit upright and rubbing her eyes.

As she got dressed, she made sure to grab the paperwork and fold it around the envelope. She wrapped the previous day’s dress around it before she left her room. Slipping down the stairs, she kept her ears peeled for any sign of someone else waking up. But she was the only thing moving as
she left her grandfather’s house, shutting the door behind her.

It was a quick walk back home. The door wasn’t locked, so she crept inside silently, heading straight for her room. Brooke elected not to bother showering, instead going straight for her backpack and dumping out all of her textbooks. She replaced them with a few articles of clothing, the little bit of jewelry she owned, and a couple of small knick-knacks.

*Wow, this is depressing.* Brooke still had room in her backpack when she zipped it up. *There really isn’t anything else I want to bring with me.*

She snatched her toothbrush from the bathroom as she left. But she paused before she got to her front door. Her father’s wallet and her mother’s purse were both on the kitchen counter. Not bothering to weigh the morals, she checked them both quickly; her mom didn’t have any cash, but her dad had about fifty bucks that she slipped into her backpack.

*Should I leave a note?* she wondered, pausing by the door. A dry-erase board was stuck to the fridge, with a reminder for her mother to grab bread on her next grocery trip.

*And say... what, exactly?*

After a few seconds of contemplation, she made up her mind. The message she scribbled was short, but to the point.

**THIS IS MY LIFE.**

**NOT YOURS.**

She left, satisfied, as she ran to catch her bus.
It was the fourth date when things got... interesting.

When deciding where to eat, Kate had insisted that they go to a local park and pick from the food trucks. “Who in the world eats food out of the back of a truck?” Victoria asked incredulously, as she drove. “That seems like a terrible idea. How do you know these people aren’t serving, like, cat meat or something?”

Kate snickered. “They’re not regular trucks, Victoria,” she chastised. “We’re not buying a meal from the back of a U-Haul. They’re trucks that have been specifically set up to cook and serve food.”

Victoria frowned. “That’s weird.”

“It’s really not. They’re becoming very popular, among us peons.”

“Ugh.” Victoria rolled her eyes. Kate seemed to enjoy poking fun at her upper-class status, and whenever she did, Victoria inevitably folded. “Fine. But if I get food poisoning and die, I’m coming back to haunt you.”

“Sure thing.” Kate reached over and squeezed Victoria’s knee. The touch sent a jolt through her heart, and her face flushed slightly, though Kate didn’t notice. “Here, take this left.”

There were three different food trucks in the lot, as they got out of the car. “Oh, that’s one of my favorites,” Kate said as she pointed to one that served Japanese food. “They do these teriyaki bowls that are amazing.”

“Mm.” Victoria looked over the others. “That one looks good,” she allowed, pointing at a Thai food truck.

“Oh, yea. Alyssa loves that one.” Kate nodded. “They do rice bowls in hollowed-out pineapples.”

“Oh, I can definitely get behind that.” Victoria smirked. “I guess I’ll see you at the table.”

It took about ten minutes for the truck to make Victoria’s food, during which she lost Kate in the small crowd. She didn’t worry about it until she got food and started looking for her. But when another ten minutes passed without seeing Kate, Victoria started to get concerned.

She was about to put her tray down and call Kate when she saw a familiar head of hair, next to the food truck; Kate was on the phone. Instantly relieved, she walked towards her, finally picking up on the conversation as she got closer.

“No. Mom, I said- because I’ve already made plans to stay here after classes end,” Kate said tersely into the phone. “Yes, I know, I- Mom- Mom! I told you this last month!”

Victoria paused, unable to stop herself from listening.
“I don’t- Mom, I don’t really care if Chris is coming back for the summer, I’m not- no, really Mom, his presence doesn’t dictate where I am in life. I have a job and living accommodations already lined up, and I can’t back out now.”

Kate lifted her head, breathing deeply. “I know. Yes, I- Mom, I already told Dad that I was going to come back for a couple of weeks in July. Yes, I did. Y- Mom, I don’t care that Chris won’t be there, this has nothing to do with him. I’m coming back to see you guys, not him.” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “Mom, I don’t know how many times I have to tell you, but Chris and I are not interested in each- no, Mom, really, we’re not. We’re only friends, and I haven’t seen him in over a- Mom! You know he already has a girlfr- argh!”

Kate threw her arms up, turning and finally noticing that Victoria was behind her. “Mom, I have to go,” she said quickly. “No, I- because I’m doing stuff, Mom, and you interrupted. I don’t- Mom, I seriously have to go. Love you, bye.” She pulled the phone from her ear and ended the call.

“Um...” Victoria looked her over. “Are... you okay?”

“Yea.” Kate sighed. “I’m sorry. My mom called, and when she gets going, it’s...” Kate’s phone rang again, and she seemed to deflate as she looked at the screen.

Victoria glanced between her and the phone. “Do you need to take that?”

Kate took a deep breath. “No,” she said, silencing the call and switching her phone onto vibrate before she turned back to Victoria. “She can wait. Did you get your food?”

Victoria held up her half-pineapple. “Did you?”

“It should be ready by now.” Kate walked back around the food truck. The man working inside noticed her, and handed her a Styrofoam tray. “Come on, let’s sit.”

They settled down at one of the nearby tables, sharing a corner as they sat next to each other. Kate didn’t really eat her food, though. Victoria watched her pick at it and move it around the tray, not really saying anything. “Are you sure you’re okay?” she finally asked.

Kate sighed as she put her fork down. “How much did you hear?”

Victoria squirmed. “I, uh, wasn’t trying to eavesdrop...”

One corner of Kate’s mouth tugged up in a smirk. “I wasn’t really whispering, either.”

“You’re staying here for the summer?” Victoria asked. “I heard that. I didn’t know you weren’t going back.”

“Yea.” Kate picked her fork back up and stirred her food absently. “I made plans with Alyssa to work this summer, after I heard that Chris was going back to San Diego.”

Victoria raised an eyebrow. “And Chris is...”

“The son of a family friend,” Kate answered. “And my mother has been trying to push the two of us together since we were fourteen. She’s still trying, even though Chris has a girlfriend already.”

“What?” Victoria looked at her with wide eyes. “Why?”

“I have no idea. She’s weirdly obsessed with the two of us getting married.” Kate shrugged. “She even wanted me to follow him to Berkeley after I graduated high school. She was mad that I decided
to go to UCLA instead. I try not to be in the same city as the two of them, because my mother goes crazy trying to hook us up.”

Victoria mulled over that. “So, your mom doesn’t know that you’re...”

“No.” Kate shook her head. “My family has no idea that I’m gay.”

Neither of them said anything for a few seconds. Victoria finally put her fork down and reached over, gently taking Kate’s hand. Kate squeezed back, neither of them speaking.

“I’m sorry,” Victoria finally said.

Kate bit her lip. “Thanks,” she muttered.

“Your mom doesn’t think very much of gay people, then?”

Kate barked a laugh. “She doesn’t think they exist,” she said. “She thinks we’re all just confused, or going through a phase, until we decide to come back to the light.”

Victoria blinked. “Come back to- huh?”

“It’s her stupid catch phrase,” Kate explained, as she rolled her eyes. “Basically, getting right with God. She’s been saying it all my life.”

“Wow.” Victoria rubbed the back of Kate’s hand with her thumb. “What about your dad?”

“I don’t know.” Kate shrugged morosely. “He’s not as... devoted as my mom is. I never asked him what he thought.”

“Why not?” Victoria asked.

Kate glanced off to the side and didn’t say anything for a few seconds. “Because I’m afraid of what he’ll say,” she finally admitted.

Victoria didn’t speak as she watched Kate stare off into nothing, stewing in her own mind. *Fuck,* she thought miserably. *I hate seeing her like this. I...*

*Ah, hell.*

She squeezed Kate’s hand, and the other girl turned back to look at her. Once she had her attention, Victoria leaned in and softly planted a kiss on her lips.

Kate blinked as they separated, a shocked look on her face. “Oh. Wow,” she breathed.

Victoria blushed furiously. “I... um...” she hesitated. “Please tell me that wasn’t too forward or-”

Before she could finish her sentence, Kate leaned forward and kissed her back. Victoria’s heart rate instantly shot through the roof, and her face felt like it was on fire. When they broke apart, she could see Kate blushing as well.

“Yea, no.” She smiled. “Not too forward.”

Victoria breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m, uh, sorry. About your mom.” She smiled. “You know there’s nothing wrong with you, right?”

Kate nodded. “It’s nice to hear, though, for a change.”
“So... you have a job lined up?” Victoria asked, changing direction.

Kate nodded. “Alyssa and I got a seasonal gig at an ice cream parlor,” she said. “We’re using grants and scholarships for school, but they don’t cover everything. The money we make this summer should pay the rest. For this year, anyway, if we’re really lucky.”

“Nice.” Victoria squeezed Kate’s hand. “You’re not using any student loans?”

“Some,” Kate admitted. “I couldn’t get a job for the first couple of summers.”

“Ah.” Victoria nodded. “I’m... really glad you’re staying here.”

“You’re not going back home?” Kate raised her eyebrows.

Victoria shook her head. “No point. My parents both work full time. We usually only see each other for holidays or vacations.”

“Not taking one of those either?” Kate flashed a smirk. “You don’t want to go back to Europe?”

“I mean... I was thinking about it, before.” Victoria winked at Kate. “At this point, though... I’d rather stay here for the summer.”

Kate flushed. “Really?”

“Yea.” She paused. “Also, there’s a couple of courses I can take to boost my GPA before the fall semester, so...”

Kate rolled her eyes. “Here I thought you were trying to be sweet.”

“Hey, there’s no reason I can’t do both.”

Chapter End Notes

Have a happy New Year!!
2011.

The homeless woman shook her head, as she looked between Steph and the photo in her hand. “Sorry,” she said in a tiny voice. “She doesn’t look familiar.”

“Are you sure? She’s only sixteen,” Steph said desperately. “There can’t be too many teenagers on the streets.”

The woman sighed. “More than you’d think, sweetheart.” She looked again. “But I’m sorry. I’ve never seen her before.”

Steph bit her lip. “Okay. Here.” She reached into her jacket pocket and produced a package of crackers; her and Rachel had figured out that offering food made the local homeless population more open to talking.

“Oh, well, thank you, sweetie.” The woman took them gratefully. “Always appreciated.”

“Any idea where else we could look?” Steph asked, taking advantage of someone who wasn’t yelling at them to go the fuck away.

“Try the mosque on 49th,” the woman offered. “They let people sleep in the main room when it gets really cold. And they don’t call the cops when you camp out in the alley behind the building, where the steam comes out.”

“We did already.” Steph sighed miserably, as she produced another pack of crackers. “Thanks anyway.”

She moved on, walking back towards the opening of the overpass. She saw Rachel as she got closer, holding the picture of Max in front of a homeless man. “Where?” she was saying intently. “Where did you see her?”

Steph’s ears perked up. Does he know where Max is?

“I’ll tell ya, you give me more of them crackers,” the man drawled.

Rachel removed another two packs from her pocket, tossing them at him. “Where is she?!”

“Saw her in Salem.” The man shrugged, as he slipped the crackers away.

Rachel glared at him, as he didn’t say anything else. “Salem is fucking huge,” she finally snapped. “Where in Salem?!”

“You want that, I want more crackers.” The man smirked at her.

Great. Another homeless asshole.

“Rachel, come on.” Steph reached for her friend’s arm. “He doesn’t know where she is. He’s just trying to-”

“One pack? Fuck you.” He snatched it up, before they could take it back. “I want more. And some money. At least a hundred bucks.”

“Rachel.” Steph took her bicep and tugged. “Fuck him. He doesn’t have shit for us.”

“Oh, yea, that’s a good idea.” The man smirked. “You fuck me, I’ll tell you where your little friend is. Or I’ll just find her, I bet she got a tight little-”

Neither him, nor Steph, could follow how fast Rachel’s fist moved. Steph blinked, and the man was lying flat on his back, howling as he clutched his nose in his hands. “Rachel!” she yelped.

Her friend didn’t hear her as she stalked up to the man. She put one of her boots on his chest as she pulled a knife from her pocket, snapping the blade into place with a flick of her wrist. She leaned over and pressed the point of the blade into the man’s forehead, which made him stop squirming. He stared with wide eyes at the weapon in her hand.

“I am going to ask you one more time,” Rachel growled, her voice laden with malice. “And if you don’t tell me the truth, I’m going to carve my friend’s name into your fucking forehead. Do you know where she is or not?”

“No,” the man gasped quickly. “I never seen her before.”

Rachel tightened her grip on the knife. She pulled it away a few seconds later, stepping off of him. “Enjoy the fucking crackers,” she snapped, as she turned and walked away.

Steph followed her silently as they left the overpass, hiking up the hill towards the lot she’d parked in. Neither of them spoke as they got in the car.

“Are you okay?” Steph asked quietly.

“I’m fine. He didn’t touch me.” Rachel leaned forward, pulling the folded map from beneath her seat. “Where now? You want to circle back to the shelter on Park Street again?”

“Rachel, that’s not what I meant.” Steph paused. “You almost-”

“I wasn’t gonna kill him.” Rachel shot her a look. “I just wanted a straight answer out of that asshole.”

“You threatened to cut Max’s name into his forehead,” Steph reminded her.

Rachel sighed. “I know what I said. Can we move on?”

“I’m worried about you, Rachel. You-”

“I want to find Max!” Rachel interrupted, shooting Steph a look that made her recoil. “Do you?! Or are we going to sit here all day?!”

Steph bit her lip, before she turned back and started the car. They pulled back onto the street, driving north.

“Please don’t yell at me,” she said quietly after a few minutes. “You know I want Max back, too.”

Rachel sighed. “I’m sorry,” she muttered after a few seconds. “Just... that guy was really an asshole.”
“I know.” Steph spun the wheel, maneuvering the car down another street. “Remember, though, you can’t look for Max if the cops bust you for assault with a deadly weapon.”

“Yea.” Rachel leaned her head against the window. “Let’s just hope the bums at the shelter are nicer.”

After the shelter, the two of them searched a seedier part of town, cruising down the streets and checking the alleys. While they saw plenty of homeless people, stray animals, and possibly a drug deal (if Steph was right, anyway), nobody they saw looked like Max.

They finally went to the motel when it got too dark to search anymore. Steph sat on the bed to play on her phone for a bit, while Rachel went straight to the bathroom to shower; the city had left a smell on her that she was eager to get rid of.

Either that, or that homeless cocksucker, she figured as she scrubbed her skin with the bar of soap. I do kind of smell like misogyny and desperation.

Christ, what an asshole. She smirked, as she rinsed off. Should’ve carved something into his forehead anyway.

She almost felt humor, for a minute, before she remembered what she was doing, and her mirth vanished. Nobody saw a trace of her. And we covered over half the city.

Turning off the water, she got out and started drying off, finally wrapping herself in a towel. She wiped the fog from the mirror, getting a good look at herself and once again hating what she saw. Between the bags under her eyes, un-shampooed hair, and dead pupils, she looked like hell.

Feel like it, too.

She hated seeing herself in the mirror. She didn’t even like brushing her teeth in the morning, because she could barely face herself. After a few seconds, she diverted her eyes from her reflection, leaning on the sink as she stared at the floor.

We’re being stupid, she thought bitterly. We’re searching cities at random. Because we don’t have a fucking clue where Max is, and we’re desperate. Almost fifteen thousand homeless live on Oregon’s streets... and we’re searching for a needle in a stack of needles.

God damn it. She sighed. I don’t know what else we can do.

She frowned, as she caught herself picking at the skin on her thumb with a fingernail again, and willed herself to stop. The self-destructive habit had started shortly after Max had run away, and as much as Rachel tried, she couldn’t seem to quit. She elected to take a few deep breaths instead, closing her eyes.

It didn’t work. She still felt like a piece of shit.

And I didn’t bring my goddamn Zoloft with me.

...

Fuck it.

Rachel stood upright and pulled the towel loose, letting it puddle around her feet. Not stopping to think, she stepped out of it, taking the bathroom door handle and pushing it open. Steph looked up
from her phone and froze, as she walked out of the bathroom.

“Rachel?” Steph asked carefully, her eyes wide.

She ignored her, as she reached out and pushed Steph back onto her elbows. She climbed onto the bed after her, knees on either side as she straddled Steph’s lap.

“Rachel. Rachel, wait,” Steph said, blinking in surprise as her friend took hold of her collar. “What are you-”

She was silenced, as Rachel mashed her lips into hers. Steph was still frozen in surprise, but started kissing back after a few seconds. “Shut up,” Rachel ordered quietly, as she pulled Steph’s shirt off. “Just... shut the fuck up.”

“Do you want to tell me what that was all about?”

Rachel sighed, as she looked over. Steph was laying on the bed next to her, naked except for her beanie; somehow, it had survived the removal of her shirt.

“How did that stay on?” Rachel asked curiously. “Do you, like, pin it to your hair or something?”

“I’ve seriously never seen you with it off,” Rachel mused. “Do you have a bald spot? Or a scar? Is that why you always wear it?”

“Rachel-”

“I wanted to not think about anything for a few minutes,” Rachel interrupted her just as quietly. “Not Max freezing. Not my dad looking at me like I’m a fucking failure of a daughter. Not half the school acting like I’m a leper. And...” she waved her arm, indicating the two of them. “This is a lot more effective than my Zoloft.”

“Mm.” Steph sat up, taking the nearby blanket and pulling it around her. “So, I’m... what? Your stress ball or something?”

Rachel blinked. “Are you not on board with this?” she asked. “I mean...”

Steph heaved a sigh. “It... was nice, to get Max off my mind for a while,” she admitted. “This is just... I don’t know. Confusing?”

Rachel turned to look back at the ceiling, her head on the pillow. She made no attempt to cover up. “Can I clear anything up?”

“I... don’t know.” Steph bit her lip, glancing at her. “I’m sorry, can you...”

“What? Not like you haven’t seen it before. Twice now, actually.”

“I know. It’s just... this is really... us being...”

Rachel sighed. “Fine,” she muttered as she swung her legs over, sitting up. She reached into her duffle bag and grabbed a long shirt, pulling it over her head. “Better?”

“Sure.” Steph shrugged. “So... now what?”
“Now I need a cigarette.” Rachel got up, walking over to her purse and retrieving a pack of Marlboros. “Max is back in my head again.”

“When did you start smoking?”

“After I sent my friend into the den of wolves that beat the shit out of her.” Rachel tapped one of the sticks out, sitting on the office chair. She rolled across the room and opened the window, lighting up and blowing the smoke outside. “It helps, a little.”

Steph got up, wrapping the blanket further around herself as she went over to the trash can. She pulled out an empty soda can and tossed it to Rachel. “Here.”

Rachel caught the can, confused. “What’s this for?”

“The ashes. Duh.” Steph sat on the bed across from her. “This is a non-smoking room. You get busted leaving traces of cigarettes, they’re gonna whack my mom’s credit card for a cleaning fee.”

“Oh. Right.” Rachel tapped the cigarette ashes into the can, as she took another puff. “Sorry.”

“Eh.” Steph shrugged. “I don’t think my mom would really care, to be honest. She’s too busy with her newest boy-toy anyway.”

“Where is she?”

“Some cruise to...” Steph looked up. “Hawaii. She’ll be gone for two weeks.”

Rachel snorted. “At least she left you with some cash for the trip.”

“She left me with cash for food. Not remembering that we filled the fridge four days ago.” Steph sighed. “I like it so much better when she’s not here.”

“Why?” Rachel looked at her. “Does she give you endless amounts of grief about Max too?”

“My mother couldn’t give less of a shit.” Steph looked at Rachel’s eyes. “I’ve had to tell her who Max was, like, four times now. So long as whatever I do doesn’t inconvenience her, she really doesn’t care.”

“Sounds pretty nice.” Rachel turned back to the window, taking another deep drag of her cigarette. “Better than my father looking at me like I should be behind bars, or something.” Steph scoffed at that, which made Rachel furrow her brow. “What was that?”

“I would love that.” Steph looked away. “I would love for my mother to acknowledge what I did. How badly I fucked up.” She snorted. “I want her to yell, or scream, or just... fucking CARE. Instead, she just runs off with her newest fuck-buddy at the earliest opportunity, and lets me do whatever the hell I want.”

Rachel stared at her, listening. As Steph finished her rant, she silently held out the cigarette.

“Fuck.” Steph took it and inhaled. She blew out the smoke a few seconds later. “Thanks.”

“Sure.” Rachel took the cigarette back, taking her own drag. “Did it help?”


Rachel nodded, as she took one more puff of the cigarette before she dropped it into the can and shut the window. Then she stood. Steph looked back up at her as Rachel slowly took her shirt back off.
“Um...” Steph bit her lip, as she took her in. “Rachel, I don’t know if this is the healthiest-”

“Do you want to keep feeling like a piece of shit?” Rachel asked quietly. “Or do you want to forget about everything for a few minutes?”

Steph bit her lip, as she glanced at her lap. She sighed after a few seconds, as she let go of her sheet. It cascaded onto the bed as Rachel walked closer.

When Rachel went home that next night, her father didn’t speak to her. She could practically feel the anger emanating from him, when he looked up from his work to study her before returning to his laptop.

Her mother was still worried, of course. She insisted that Rachel eat dinner. She only had a couple of bites of the microwaved food before she muttered that she wasn’t hungry, and was going to bed.

What followed was par for the course. She changed into her PJs and climbed under the covers, then stared at the ceiling for an hour. Then turned onto her side and stared at the wall for another hour. All the while, the guilt in her mind gnawed at her.

*I fucked up.*

*And I can’t fix it.*

She felt tears starting to collect in the corner of her eyes and wiped them away quickly.

*I’m sorry, Max.*

*I know it doesn’t mean shit from me. But I’m so sorry I couldn’t help you. I’m sorry I fucked up so bad.*

She sighed, as she tried to close her eyes again.

*I’ll never stop looking. I won’t give up. I know you’re still alive, out there, somewhere. I will find you.*

*I will find some way to make things right.*

*And I will find a way to make First Light pay for what they’ve done.*
As soon as Brooke got to school, she found the closest poster she could and copied the number again. Then she went for the pay phone and dialed.

The woman answered on the first ring. “Hello?”

“It’s, uh, me. Brooke.”

“Where are you?” The woman asked. “Are you at school?”

“Yea.” She nodded into the receiver. “I just got here.”

“Okay, listen carefully.” The woman took a breath. “Go to your first class, and find your teacher. Tell him or her that you need a special hall pass to see Mrs. Grant.”

Brooke frowned. “The chemistry teacher?”

“That’s right.”

“But I don’t have her class. My teacher won’t give me a pass for her.”

“Yes, they will,” the woman assured her.

“But.”

“Brooke, I need you to trust me,” the woman interrupted. “Tell your teacher that you need a special hall pass to see Mrs. Grant. Make sure you use the word ‘special’. They will give you one without asking questions.”

Brooke bit her lip. “Okay... then what?”

“Then go see Mrs. Grant.” The woman exhaled. “Everything is going to be okay, Brooke. I promise.”

“... all right.”

Brooke was still nervous, as she hung up the phone and made her way to her first period class. Her English teacher, Mr. Voss, was sitting at his desk and collecting homework assignments when she got there; she waited until there weren’t any students in front of him before she approached.

“Mister Voss?”

He looked up at her, his face full of indifference. “Yes, Miss Scott?”

“I... um...” she shifted nervously, remembering what the woman had said. “I need a special hall pass. To see Mrs. Grant.”

He blinked, and his expression shifted as he focused his full attention on her. “... a special hall pass, you said?”
Brooke nodded.

“Ah.” He leaned back slowly. “Of course.”

Mr. Voss retrieved a blank hall pass just as the bell rang. Scribbling quickly, he wrote out and signed the paper as the other students got themselves seated. “Here you go,” he said, giving it to her. “Make sure you take your backpack with you.”

“Okay.” Brooke took the paper. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He smiled at her. “Good luck.”

She left, the curious eyes of the other students on her, and made her way to the upper floor. Walking down the empty hall, she kept her eyes on the classrooms until she saw Mrs. Grant’s lab, where the teacher was taking attendance. She knocked carefully before opening the door.

Mrs. Grant paused and turned to face her. “Yes?”

Brooke’s face colored as the other students stared at her, puzzled over the interruption. “I... uh, I have a pass.” She held up the paper. “To see you.”

“Oh. Yes, of course.” Mrs. Grant smiled. “I’ll be with you as soon as I finish taking roll call.”

Brooke stood still as Mrs. Grant finished accounting for her students. “Okay, everyone, open your books to chapter twelve,” she told them as she stood. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

She gestured for Brooke to follow her, and they left the classroom. Mrs. Grant took her right down the hall and used a key to open another door. Brooke walked into the empty classroom behind her.

No, it wasn’t empty, Brooke realized. There was another woman sitting on one of the desks, waiting for them. She seemed young; Brooke wouldn’t have put her at any older than twenty-five or so. Her brown hair had slight streaks of blonde running through it, and cascaded loosely onto her red flannel shirt. The most outstanding feature was the blue feather hanging from her left earring.

She smiled as Mrs. Grant led the way into the room. “Hello, Brooke.”

Brooke blinked. “You’re the woman I was talking to on the phone.”

“That’s right.” She stood up, straightening her shirt. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Brooke, this is Miss Amber,” Mrs. Grant told her. “She’s a social worker with Child Protective Services.”

“Oh.” Brooke looked her up and down. “I... wait, I thought you were, like, forty-five minutes away?”

“My office is.” Miss Amber nodded. “I drove down so I could see you this morning.”

“I have a class to get back to,” Mrs. Grant stated. “Are you good, Rachel?”

“I got it.” She smiled back. “Thank you.”

Mrs. Grant nodded and left, and Brooke heard the door close behind her. Miss Amber gestured to the desk beside her. “Do you want to sit?”

Brooke shook her head.
“Okay.” Miss Amber leaned against the desk behind her. “Why don’t you tell me why you called?”

“I...” Brooke swallowed nervously, as she started breathing faster. “I can’t stay at home anymore.”

“Why not?”

“My parents want me to move out.” Brooke squirmed. “So I, uh... so I can be with my husband.”

The social worker frowned. “Your husband?”

Brooke took a deep breath, and all of her words spilled out at once. “I signed a marriage certificate when I was a kid. I didn’t know it was real. My parents and grandpa just told me a couple of days ago that they were pulling me out of school when the semester ends on Friday. I’m supposed to move in with my husband this weekend.”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to. But my grandpa said I don’t have a choice. He said I’m legally married, and—” her breath hitched, and she swallowed before she continued. “I can’t. I just can’t. I barely even know him, I haven’t seen him since I was eight years old, and I don’t want to go live with him and be his w—” She got choked up, and she felt herself starting to get emotional. “His w—”

“Okay, Brooke, it’s okay,” Miss Amber said quickly, as she stepped forward and placed her hands on Brooke’s shoulders. “Sweetie, take a deep breath and relax. It’s okay.”

Brooke did what she said, inhaling deeply and slowly exhaling a shaky breath. “I can’t go back,” she said quietly.

“You don’t have to.” Miss Amber squeezed her shoulder. “Brooke, look at me and listen very carefully.”

Brooke looked at her expectantly.

“Your grandfather is full of crap,” Miss Amber told her. “I can assure you, one hundred percent, that you are not married.”

“I’m...” Brooke swallowed. “I’m not?”

“The state of Oregon does not allow anyone under the age of seventeen to sign a marriage license,” Miss Amber explained. “And even if they did, an eight-year-old cannot sign a legal document, nor would it stand up in any court of law. You aren’t anybody’s wife.”

“But...” Brooke’s voice failed her for a second. “My grandpa showed me the marriage license. He said it was notarized.”

“The District Attorney is prosecuting a couple of city workers for taking bribes to falsely notarize documents,” Miss Amber assured her. “I promise you, that marriage license isn’t worth the paper it’s printed on.”

Brooke felt better, as she heard that. She turned her head as she absorbed everything. “So... I’m not married.”

“No.” Miss Amber smiled. “You are still very single.”

Brooke sighed. “It doesn’t matter,” she muttered. “I can’t go back, anyway.”

“I told you, you don’t have to. Come on, have a seat.” Miss Amber gestured to the desk. Brooke complied, sitting slowly as she dropped her backpack on the ground.
“Listen, Brooke, your church has established a very clear pattern of abuse towards children who even think of rebelling,” Miss Amber informed her. “If you don’t want to go back to your family, then you won’t.”

Brooke looked at her. “You’ll still help me?” she asked carefully.

“I told you I would.”

“But...” Brooke frowned. “You said that my family can’t make me do this.”

Miss Amber sat on the desk next to her. “Brooke, if you go back, you’ll be in your family’s control. You could still get forced into this. I don’t want that for you, and I know you don’t want that either.” She paused. “Do you still want to leave?”


“Good.” Miss Amber smiled. “I know it’s a little scary. But you’re not alone. I’ll be here with you, and we’re not going to make you go back.”

“I can’t anyway.” Brooke sighed, as she looked at her watch. “I’m pretty sure I burned that bridge by now.”

The social worker frowned. “What does that mean?”

“My parents should be awake.” Brooke met Miss Amber’s gaze. “They’ve probably seen the note I left them on the fridge.”

“You left them a note?” Miss Amber immediately sat up in alarm. “What did it say?”

“That this was my life, not theirs.”

The social worker pressed her lips together. “I don’t think that was a good idea.”

“Why n-”

The intercom overhead played a triple-tone, interrupting Brooke. The two women both turned to look at the speaker in the ceiling. “Brooke Scott, please report to the principal’s office. Brooke Scott, to the principal’s office. Thank you.”

Brooke felt the blood drain from her face. “Oh, shit.”

“That’s why. And don’t swear,” Miss Amber added as her phone buzzed. She checked the screen quickly as she stood, then started typing out a text message. “Don’t worry, either. We’ve got this under control.”

“It’s my parents.” Brooke’s voice hiked up an octave. “It’s my parents. They’re here for me.”

“It’s actually your grandfather.” Miss Amber corrected her absently, as she worked her phone. “He’s in the main office. And he’s very insistent that you be dismissed from school immediately.”

“He...” Brooke’s breath hitched again. “Oh, fuck.”

“Don’t swear,” Miss Amber repeated, as she held her hand out to Brooke. “Come on. The staff is going to stall him for us.”

Brooke couldn’t think. She took the social worker’s hand and let herself be pulled up to a standing
position. Miss Amber grabbed the backpack and shoved it into Brooke’s arms before she guided her to the door, opening it and poking her head out. “Let’s go.”

Miss Amber guided her across the hall, towards a staircase, and led her down to the first floor. They walked away from the offices, passing a few classrooms before Brooke was brought out of a side exit. A blue car was parked in front of them, and Miss Amber unlocked it as they approached.

“Put your seatbelt on,” she told Brooke as they got in. The teenager was still buckling up as Miss Amber started the car, backing up and accelerating out of the parking lot.

Brooke turned and looked behind her, as they pulled onto the main road. She could have sworn she saw her grandfather’s car, for a second, before the view was obstructed by trees.

*Oh my God, what did I just do?*
“Three scoops of chocolate with extra sprinkles!” Kate smiled widely as she reached over the counter, handing the ice cream to the little boy. “Enjoy!”

“What do we say, James?” his mother coaxed as he took the cup

“Thank you!” The boy exclaimed back, his eyes big as he took the spoon for his treat.

“You’re welcome!” Kate waved as they left the store. “Come again!”

Alyssa slid up behind her as the door closed. “That’s what Elliot was telling me last night,” she whispered.

Kate’s face involuntarily reddened as she shot a look over her shoulder. “Shut up!” she whispered back. “You’re gonna get us fired!”

“Oh, please.” Alyssa gestured around. “This place is empty.”

She was right; other than a couple in the very far corner, nobody was around to overhear them. “You still shouldn’t talk like that,” Kate chastised her. “It’s not very becoming. And if Harvey hears you…”

“Yea, yea.” Alyssa rolled her eyes. “Speaking of other halves, where is your girlfriend? She’s usually here and making eyes with you by now.”

“Oh, stop it.” Kate frowned. “And she said she’d be in late. Her class started today.”

“Yea?” Alyssa’s smile didn’t go away. “You gonna let her put money in the tip jar this time?”

Kate remembered that day. She’d been wondering why their tips had been so good for the past week. It wasn’t until she caught her girlfriend cramming extra bills into the jar when she wasn’t looking that she figured it out. Alyssa had given her a lot of grief, when Kate made Victoria take them back out. “I am not going to let her just GIVE me money,” she said adamantly.

“Oh, you mean give US money,” Alyssa pointed out. “And we’ve got student loans. Her classes are paid for by a trust fund.”

“It is not a trust fund.” Kate crossed her arms. “And it doesn’t matter. I’m not accepting money that I didn’t earn.”

“Fine,” Alyssa sighed. “That moral compass of yours is a real pain in the ass.”

Kate smirked. “So I’ve heard.”

The bell above the door rang, drawing their attention. Kate’s smirk turned into a genuine smile as a familiar head of blonde hair came through the door. “Hey!” she squealed, running over to the counter. “How was your class?”

“Good!” Victoria smiled and leaned over the counter, giving Kate a peck on the lips. “Mostly introductory stuff, pretty easy. The teacher said the class won’t get too stressful until the third or
fourth week.” She looked over Kate’s shoulder. “Hey, Alyssa.”

“Sup?” Alyssa was already heading down to the other end of the counter. “Usual?”

“Yes, please.”

Alyssa nodded and started making a small cup of nonfat vanilla ice cream. “How much longer until your shift ends?” Victoria asked.

Kate checked her watch. “Fifteen minutes,” she replied. “Where are we going?”

“Well, you said you wanted to bring me to Denny’s,” Victoria reminded her. “So, I figured there?”

Kate chuckled. “They serve breakfast food, Victoria.”

Her girlfriend cocked an eyebrow. “So what? We can’t have pancakes for dinner?”

“Mm.” Kate pursed her lips. “Okay, that does sound pretty good.”

“Sure does.” Alyssa appeared behind Kate, handing Victoria her ice cream. “Four seventy-seven.”

Victoria paid for her ice cream and took a seat next to the door to wait. “You two are adorable,” Alyssa commented as they wiped down the counter, prepping for the next shift to take over.

Kate rolled her eyes. “Don’t make fun of us.”

“You’re not my real mom.” Alyssa grinned. “What number date is this now?”

“Um...” Kate looked up, thinking. “I don’t know. I lost count, a while back.”

Alyssa whistled. “Look at you, dating like an adult.”

“Oh, shut up.” Kate glanced back at Victoria, who was absorbed in her phone while eating her ice cream. She bit her lip as she turned back to Alyssa. “Hey... can I ask you something?”

“What?”

“What’s...” she hesitated. “What do I... um... how should...”

Alyssa furrowed her brow in confusion, before she blinked, a look of comprehension coming over her face. “Are you trying to ask me a sex question?” she asked in a low voice.

The flush on Kate’s face was the only answer she needed.

Victoria picked her head up as Alyssa grabbed Kate’s arm and dragged her towards the back of the store. “Where are you guys going?”

“We have to inventory the storage room,” Alyssa called over her shoulder. “Be back in a second!”

“Wha- wait, seriously?” Kate got out as they went around the corner. “We did that this morning.”

“Somehow, I doubt your girlfriend knows the intricacies of working the day shift at an ice cream parlor.” Alyssa pushed Kate against the wall. “Okay, spill.”

“Oh...” Kate scratched her arm as her face turned a dark shade of crimson. “I’m just...”

Alyssa rolled her eyes. “Dude, we don’t have all day.”
“I know.” Kate sighed. “I’m just... not really sure how to...”

“Do it?” Alyssa arched an eyebrow. “Come on. I know you’re at least semi-familiar with the process of...”

“That’s not what I meant!” Kate snipped in a high-pitched voice. She took a breath and spoke in a lower voice. “I just don’t know how to... you know... get started.”

“Oooooh.” Alyssa paused. “Yea, I can’t help you with that.”

“Excuse me?” Kate asked incredulously. “You most certainly can. I’ve heard your stories. I know far more about your sex life than ANYONE should be comfortable with.”

Alyssa shook her head. “Kate, those are booty calls, or friends with benefits,” she replied. “Unlike you, I am SO not interested in doing the whole ‘exclusive commitment’ thing with anyone right now.”

“Alyssa-”

“You are head-over heels for this girl,” Alyssa interrupted. “Even I can tell that what you guys have is going to last for a while. However your physical relationship starts will define the rest of your relationship as a whole. You have to figure out how to do this on your own.”

Kate paused, then hung her head. “I am so screwed,” she muttered.

“Is that figuratively, or literally?”

“I hate you so much.”

I could really use a sign right now.

It was later that evening, after their dinner. Kate and Victoria were holding hands as they walked down the street, Kate trying to pay attention to her girlfriend’s story while she was lost in her mind. I don’t even know how this would work, Kate thought. I can’t just invite her over to the apartment, Alyssa is there. She smirked. Plus, I don’t think Victoria would be caught dead in our complex.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing.” Kate shook her head. “Random thought. Sorry.”

“Ah.” Victoria smiled. “Do I have to start over again?”

“No. Did you guys win the argument?”

Victoria nodded. “The judges actually had to leave the room, to look it up on one of the school computers,” she explained. “But yea, they found out the whole thing had been a hoax. It was spread by some newspaper columnist in the early nineties, as an example of how people don’t fact-check stuff on the internet.”

“Wow.” Kate shook her head. “I always heard that we ate spiders in our sleep, and I thought it was true. I never looked into it, either.”

“Yea. They reversed their decision, and we won that competition.” Victoria smirked. “The other team wasn’t happy, but whatever.”
Kate smiled. “So did you go to a championship Quiz Bowl, or something?”

“Not that year.”

“Why not?”

“We... just didn’t.” Victoria shrugged. “So, what do you want to do now? See a movie?”

Kate hummed. “Which one?”

“Let’s see what’s playing.” Victoria pulled her phone out, typing with one thumb while she continued to hold Kate’s hand with the other.

*This is stupid.* Kate squeezed Victoria’s hand, though her girlfriend didn’t really notice. *It’s not like you don’t have experience. You did this with Megan.*

*Ha. Yea, that was a real winner.*

Kate tried really hard not to remember her first ‘experience’, after she’d gotten to UCLA. Even that term was a big stretch; two dates hardly made for updating a relationship status on Facebook.

It hadn’t even been planned. Kate had simply found her outside her door, one night in the dorms, the red-headed sophomore pretty drunk. She’d helped her inside, not wanting to leave her in the hallway, and Megan had gotten... affectionate. Very affectionate, very fast. Kate had simply gotten caught up in the moment, between the sloppy kisses and the groping...

The whole experience had been incredibly unsatisfying.

To top it all off, when she’d seen Alyssa the next morning, she’d found out that Megan had been making out with several girls and boys earlier in the evening at a bar. Kate resolved herself not to return Megan’s texts, but the girl hadn’t even bothered to send her any. Or call her. To use one of Alyssa’s terms, she’d been ‘ghosted’.

*Victoria’s not Megan,* Kate reminded herself as she squeezed her girlfriend’s hand again. *She wouldn’t do that. She’s way more-*

Lost in her own mind, Kate hadn’t been paying attention to where she was walking. She didn’t notice the section of sidewalk that stuck up two inches taller than the others. When her toe caught it, it took her completely by surprise.

The rest of it almost seemed to happen in slow motion. As she tripped and started to fall, she inadvertently lost her grip on Victoria’s hand. Her girlfriend tried to grab her arm, to save her, but only succeeded in pinching Kate’s shirt sleeve; it slipped from her fingers before she could get a grip. The friction caused Kate to stumbled forward, and her knee came down hard, right on the middle of a hole in the sidewalk that was full of small chunks of cement.

“OW!!” Kate yelped. She quickly rolled over and sat up, her hands instinctively grabbing her knee. “Ahh...”

“Kate!” Victoria gasped as she quickly knelt next to her. “Kate, are you okay?!”

“Mmmm...” Kate winced. “That hurt.”

Victoria flipped Kate’s skirt up, revealing her injury; her knee had been roughly skinned, and small bits of debris were jammed into the wound. The blood was already staining Kate’s fingers. “Crap,
Kate...

“It’s fine,” Kate assured her through gritted teeth. “It’s... ouch.” She winced again. “Dang sidewalk.”

“Come here, up you go.” Victoria took both of Kate’s forearms and pulled her to her feet. “Do you want to go to the ER?”

Kate shook her head quickly. “It’s not that bad.” She winced, though, as she put weight on her knee. “I just need to clean it up and put some ice on it.”

“Okay, come on.” Victoria grabbed Kate’s shoulder and pulled her forward. “Let’s get in my car. My apartment’s only ten minutes away from here. We’ll get you cleaned up really quick.”

Whoa.

That was all Kate could think as Victoria pulled into the parking lot of the six-story building. The glass and steel construction give it an extremely modern look, and the nice cars in the lot made it clear than the people who resided there had serious money.

“How’s your knee?” Victoria asked as she drove through the parking lot, towards the underground garage.

Kate tried to ignore the throbbing as she gripped it. She’d kept pressure on it, to stop the bleeding, but it was still painful. “Feeling a little sore,” she admitted, as she watched the automatic gate raise in front of the car. Victoria maneuver the car down the ramp, parking in a space near the elevator. “Sorry I biffed it on our date night.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Victoria said as she got out, going over to Kate’s side and helping her out of the car. “Besides, it’s not your fault. We can blame the city of Los Angeles for their terrible sidewalks.”

Kate snorted as she let Victoria lead her into the elevator. She wasn’t surprised to see her push the button for the top floor. Kate tried to stand back up straight, hissing as her knee almost buckled. “Not much farther,” Victoria assured her.

Victoria’s door was just down the hall from the elevator. She quickly unlocked it, helping Kate inside as she reached over and turned on the lights. Kate stopped and blinked, as she took in the apartment.

It was the nicest place she’d ever seen, even from the shows on HGTV that Alyssa loved to watch. All of the furniture was a pristine white, and everything was spotless. The kitchen was done with what even she could tell was high-end granite and stainless-steel appliances. And the windows showed an incredible view of the city, to include the Hollywood sign.

“This is where you live?” she asked, her eyes wide.

Victoria nodded distractedly, as she guided Kate through the apartment. “My dad actually owns it,” she explained. “He brought it as an investment property, but when I got accepted to UCLA, he told me to use it.”

Kate couldn’t stop looking around as they made their way to the bathroom. Even that was nicer than any she’d ever been in; it was stocked with fancy towels, decorative knick-knacks, and high-end soap and shampoo. Victoria sat her on the toilet and pulled open the cabinet under the sink, retrieving a small red case. “Let me see,” she ordered Kate as she pulled out some gauze and a small bottle.
“Do you know what you’re doing?” Kate asked cautiously as she moved her hands.

“Hey, rich girls skin their knees, too.” Victoria smirked as she poured some of the liquid onto the gauze. “This is going to burn.”

“Hydrogen peroxide?”

Victoria nodded.

“Yea.” Kate sighed. “Go for it.”

She tried not to wince and squirm too hard as Victoria carefully cleaned her knee, making sure to get out all the little pieces of debris. Once she was done, she wrapped it with a couple of layers of clean gauze, taping it in place. “Come on,” Victoria said, standing her up again. “Let’s go to the living room. I’ve got an ice pack in the freezer.”

Kate let Victoria lead her back to the couch. She carefully sat down, still looking around as her girlfriend went to the kitchen. Her eyes settled on the massive TV across from her. Wow. Dad would be incredibly jealous if he saw that thing.

“How big IS that?” Kate asked.

“Eighty inches,” Victoria replied as she came back, sitting next to Kate. She gently placed the soft ice compress on her knee. “Better?”

“Oh, yes.” Kate sighed as she leaned back into the couch. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Victoria smiled. “So... uh...” she glanced at her TV. “You still want to watch a movie?”

“On that thing? Absolutely.” Kate grinned as she admired it, and the speakers around the room. “You’ve got surround sound?”

Victoria scoffed as she got up. “Of course. You think my dad’s going to splurge on an amazing TV and NOT have top-quality sound?” She stepped over to the shelf, scanning the Blu-Rays. “What kind of movie do you want to watch?”

“Um...” Kate hesitated. “I don’t know.”

“Drama?”

“Maybe.”

“Action?”

“Eh.”

“Sci-Fi?”

“No.”

“Horror?”

“DEFINITELY not.”

Victoria reached out and plucked one off the shelf. “How about a romantic comedy?”
Kate snickered. “What, like a date ending early because someone busted their knee?”

“Yea.” Victoria smirked. “It does seem to fit.”

Kate barely paid attention to the movie as it went on.

She should have been enjoying it. Watching a poor Jennifer Lopez pretend to be rich was very entertaining. But she found herself enjoying sitting with Victoria more than the movie. At some point, her girlfriend’s arm made its way around her shoulders, and Kate relaxed into Victoria’s side as the film went on.

“Nice,” Victoria said as the movie ended. “Gotta love good karma.”

Kate hummed in agreement.

Victoria glanced at Kate’s leg. “How’s your knee?”

“Much better.” Kate removed the ice pack, placing it on the couch next to her and and bending her knee. “Still a little sore, though.”

“Aw.” Victoria stole a glance at Kate’s face. “You need a kiss to make it better?”

Kate looked up at her and smiled. “Couldn’t hurt, right?”

Victoria smiled back, bending down and kissing Kate tenderly on the lips. “Better?”

“Mm.” Kate wriggled her nose. “Not yet.”

Victoria kissed her again. And another time, for good measure. “And now?” she asked, much quieter.

“Getting there.”

Victoria bent down again. And this time she didn’t stop. Quick kisses turned into deep ones, as they hungrily made out. They shifted closer to each other, Victoria moving her hands down Kate’s shoulders.

As she got closer to Kate, though, Victoria inadvertently bumped her leg into Kate’s injured knee. “Ouch!” Kate gasped.

“Oh! Crap!” Victoria jerked her head up. “I’m sorry!”

Kate winced. “It’s-”

“I was just- I’m sorry-” Victoria stared wide-eyed at Kate’s bandaged leg. “I wasn’t paying-”

Kate put her hand on Victoria’s cheek and turned her head so they were facing each other.

“Vicky?”

Victoria blinked. “What?”

“Don’t stop.”

Victoria slowly smiled as she lowered her head again.
“I’m really worried about her, James.”

Rose’s husband glanced at her over the file in his hands. “Rachel?”

She nodded, as she glanced at the tablet in her hand. “Have you seen the credit card statements?”

“I have.” James turned a page. “She’s looking for Maxine every weekend, dear. You know that.”

“You have no problem letting our daughter run all over the state with Stephanie?” Rose asked. “Did you even know she was in Eureka last weekend?”

“No.”

“Or Salem, the weekend before that?”

James looked at her with an exasperated expression. “I don’t track our child’s movements like a GPS, dear. If she feels the need to go searching every weekend, then-”

“How about Seattle?” Rose interrupted.

James blinked. “Excuse me?”

“There’s a charge from three weeks ago at a gas station in Seattle.” Rose turned the iPad in her hands, showing her husband the transaction. “Two weeks before that, there was one in Tacoma. Rachel is tearing apart the entire Pacific Northwest looking for Maxine.”

“Hm.” James pursed his lips. “I wasn’t aware that she was leaving the state.”

Rose set the tablet down and folded her arms. “Well, are you aware that she sees Doctor Keys every Thursday? And that she has a prescription for anti-depressants?”

“I am not totally oblivious, Rose.”

“I’m not so sure about that.” She leaned forward. “When was the last time you asked her how she was doing?”

“I’m sure it was-”

“Because I certainly can’t remember.” Rose ignored whatever James had to say, as she continued. “The last six months have been the same. Rachel comes home from school, or wherever she was searching for Maxine, and you barely acknowledge her presence in this house. And she only talks to me when she has to.” She sighed. “Our daughter is becoming a ghost. And that worries me. Does it worry you?”

James heaved a sigh, as he closed the folder in his hands. He set it down on the side table next to him. “… a little.”

“Then why haven’t-”
“Because I’m too angry to look at her.”

Rose did a double take at that answer. James shook his head, as she stayed silent. “I’m still furious at our daughter, Rose,” he continued quietly. “I know she’s my child. And I want to forgive her for what she did. But I can’t. Every time I look at her while she’s crying, or lost in her head, or taking her medication...” he paused. “All I can think is that she deserves it.”

She chose her words carefully, before Rose responded. “She’s our daughter, James. We’re supposed to be on her side. No matter what.”

“I don’t want to argue, dear. But that’s very easy for you to say.” James pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers. “She didn’t use YOUR position and authority to convince a teenage girl to steal evidence of a crime from a church full of fundamentalist sociopaths.”

Rose bit her lip. “There is no way Rachel could have known what would happen.”

“Pastor Rogers almost beat a seventeen-year-old boy to death for the crime of being gay.” James met his wife’s gaze. “If our daughter had spent a few moments and actually thought about that, she would have known how dangerous it was to get Maxine involved.”

“She’s a child, James.”

“No, she’s not. She’s eighteen years old.” He glanced at the calendar on the wall. “She’ll be nineteen soon. She’s an adult. And old enough to have to deal with the consequences of her actions.”

“Our daughter is in pain.” Rose glanced at the picture of Rachel they kept on the mantle. “She’s not sleeping. All of her friends have abandoned her. Doctor Keys said that her weight loss is becoming alarming. She needs us on her side.” She paused. “BOTH of us.”

James leaned back in his chair facing the window. Neither of them spoke for several seconds.

“Her graduation is in a few days,” he finally said. “She’s going to OSU this fall. Once she’s away from the other students who hate her, and has higher education to focus on, she’ll get better.”

Rose sighed, as she leaned forward, placing her elbows on her lap and she tried to decide what to say. She was still thinking about it when she heard the shifting of a heavy engine coming down the street. The school bus stopped in front of her house a moment later.

A few seconds after it left, Rachel opened the door and walked inside. “Hey, honey,” Rose greeted her, trying to sound upbeat. She made a pointed effort to ignore how her daughter’s clothes hung on her frame, and the permanent bags under her eyes. “How was your final?”

“It was okay.” Rachel shrugged morosely. “Last one knocked out. Felt pretty good.”

“So, that’s it.” Rose smiled as she stood. “You’re done with high school?”

“Yep.” Rachel thumbed behind her. “That was my last bus ride.”

“Great!” Rose gave her daughter a hug. “Did you get the info for your graduation? Your father and I need to schedule time off.”

Rachel sighed, as she set her backpack down and opened it. She removed a blue folder and gave it to her mom. “No.”

“No?” Rose looked confused, as she opened the folder. “Then what is...” her voice trailed off, as she
looked inside. “What is this?”

“My diploma.” Rachel closed her backpack. “I got it from the office when I finished the exam.”

“Wha- Rachel!” Her mother looked at her, astonished. “They’re supposed to give this to you when you cross the stage this weekend! There’s a ceremony and everything!”

“I don’t want to go.”

“But-”

“Mom.” Rachel folded her arms, averting her eyes. “Nobody is going to applaud for me. And I don’t feel like celebrating.” She bit her lip. “Steph and I both opted out of the ceremony.”

“Rachel.” Rose closed the folder, a worried look on her face. “It’s your high school graduation. This is a major milestone in your life. I know you’re hurting, but you shouldn’t skip it just because-”

Rachel shook her head. “It’s done, mom. I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

Rose struggled for words that would help her daughter, but nothing came.

“Steph is going to be here in half an hour.” Rachel re-slung her backpack. “I have to go get changed.”

Rose watched her daughter climb the stairs. She turned back to James as she heard the door close.

“You could say something,” she said quietly.

James shook his head, as he picked the folder back up and returned to his work.

“What did your mom say?”

Steph snorted, as she took a drag from her blunt. The two girls were back in the cinderblock shed at American Rust, avoiding the world once more. “You’re making the grand assumption that she asked. Or was interested in going in the first place.”

“Fair enough.” Rachel took another gulp from the Smirnoff bottle. “Sorry. Sometimes I forget that your mom’s a cunt.”

“Yea.” Steph shook her head. “Maybe you should still do it. I mean, your mom clearly cares.”

“Why? So I can get booed off the stage by Victoria Chase and her fucking lackeys?” Rachel scoffed. “Fuck that. My self-esteem is in the shitter as it is. You gonna hog that thing the whole time or what?”

Steph took one more puff before she held out the blunt. “I’ll trade you.”

“Deal.” Rachel swapped the bottle of vodka for the marijuana, inhaling deeply as she hit the joint. “Christ, your mom’s ex-boyfriend has good shit. Did he step his game up?”

“Yea. Some kind of new strain he’s been working on.” Steph shrugged. “He was telling me about it, but he was using words like ‘cross-pollination’ and ‘hybrid mating’. I didn’t follow it worth a shit. He charged me double, but said it was totally worth it.”

“He’s not wrong.” Rachel took another puff. “It’s pretty good. Better than the last one.”
“Yea. Mixes well with vodka, too.” Steph took a short pull from the bottle. “We’re still going to Corvallis this weekend, right?”

Rachel nodded. “Unless your mom changed her mind about giving you her car.”

“I found out that it’s my car now.” Steph smirked. “Her new fuck-buddy gave her a Mazda, so she let me have her old one. Said she knew I was graduating high school, and to consider it my present.”

“I thought your mom didn’t care?”

“She doesn’t. She gave it to me a week ago, because she thought I was already done.” Steph shrugged. “I didn’t bother to correct her, about the finals.”

“Mm.” Rachel shrugged. “Congrats on the new wheels.”

“Thanks.” Steph paused. “Hey, I know we’re going up there to look for Max. But... do you want to take an hour or so, and go look at the OSU campus while we’re up there?”

“Yea. We probably should. Get the lay of... the...” Rachel’s voice trailed off as she blinked, her eyes staring at the wall.

“Rachel?” Steph frowned. “Are you okay?”

“... is this how it starts?”

“How what starts?” Steph tried to make eye contact, but Rachel’s gaze was stuck on the wall.

“Forgetting about Max.” Rachel finally turned to meet Steph’s gaze. “Like, yea, sure, we’re gonna go look for her, but we’re also gonna do our own thing. Might as well, since we know we’re not gonna find her.”

“Hey. HEY.” Steph sat up a little straighter. “We don’t know that, Rachel. She could be-”

“What? In the city, waiting for us for to finish our own fucking errand?” Rachel’s lips started trembling. Steph knew it was only a matter of seconds before the waterworks started. “I mean, sure. What’s the fuckin’ point? We’ve already torn apart Corvallis twice, might as well do something for us while we try to find the friend we fucking abandoned and-”

“STOP.” Steph grabbed Rachel’s shoulder. “We’re not going to forget about her. I CAN’T forget about her. I know you can’t, either. We’re the only ones still looking. Max is not-”

“What if she’s already dead?”

Steph exhaled, as Rachel whispered those words.

“She’s not,” Rachel continued after a few seconds. “She’s not. Right, Steph? Max isn’t dead.”

“No.” Steph squeezed Rachel’s shoulder. “Max isn’t dead.”

“What if she is?” Rachel sniffed. “Oh, God, what if she’s sitting in some... fucking box at a morgue somewhere because nobody knows who she is? She-”

“RACHEL!!”

The forceful exclamation from Steph stunned Rachel into silence.
“Your dad sent out a BOLO for Max, remember?” Steph asked. “All the state agencies and local police stations know what Max looks like. If she was dead, and they had a body, your dad would know.”

“But—”

“Max is still alive.” It was Steph turn to sniffle, as her emotions started to run high in response to Rachel’s outburst. “She’s still alive. She has to be.”

Rachel sniffled, as she nodded. She scooted closer to Steph, leaning her head on her shoulder as she closed her eyes. “I hate myself,” she whimpered.

“I know.” Steph snorted to keep her nose from running, as she wiped the moisture from her eyes. “Me too.”

Rachel sniffed as she picked her head back up. Steph turned to look at her, and their eyes met. She couldn’t be sure, but she suspected that the level of despair and agony in Rachel’s eyes matched her own. Rachel’s lips were still trembling, as she swallowed, hard.

She leaned in and planted her lips on Steph’s.

The mood shifted, as Steph kissed back. “Rachel—”

“I need you,” Rachel whispered, kissing her again. “I need you, Steph. Please. I can’t think about this anymore. I need you right now.”

Steph nodded as she kissed her back, her hand grabbing at Rachel’s belt.

“I really hate doing this here.”

Steph shrugged, not replying as she pulled her pants back on and re-did her belt.

“I usually need a shower anyway, afterwards, but when we do it here, I feel just... filthy.” Rachel sighed, as she finished putting her shoe back on. “I mean, this place definitely isn’t a hotel room.”

“Right.” Steph sighed, as she plopped down onto the overturned wooden crate on the other wall.

“I kind of miss that one in Tacoma.” Rachel scratched behind her neck. “I mean, even if the area was a shithole, the room was nice. I liked that memory-foam mattress, and—”

“What are we doing?” Steph interrupted her.

Rachel was taken aback at her abrupt question. “Huh?”

“Not that I don’t appreciate being your stress-relief, or masturbatory aid, or whatever, Rachel, but...” Steph gestured between them. “What exact is this?”

“What—” Rachel blinked. “Where is this coming from?”


“No, not ‘never mind’.” Rachel tilted her head to look at Steph. “You’ve got something to say. Get it off your chest.”

“I—”
“Are you not enjoying this?” Rachel waved her arm around the room. “Your thighs may have been blocking my ears, but I’m pretty sure you were making some satisfied noises a few minutes ago.”

Steph scoffed. “It’s sex, Rachel. Of course I like it. But what for?”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Are we just doing this to keep our minds off of the shitty thing we did?” Steph shifted on her seat. “Is the entirety of our mental health dependent on fucking our brains out, whenever we think about Max too much?”

Rachel folded her arms. “I don’t know why you’re saying that like it’s a bad thing.”

Steph exhaled. “So. That’s all this is?”

“I don’t know about you, Steph, but I need a coping mechanism.” Rachel sighed. “My drugs, the pot, the booze, they only help so much. I don’t even remember the last time I looked at myself in the mirror without feeling sick.”

“You don’t have to tell me about feeling like a sack of shit.” Steph’s gaze fell to her feet. “I haven’t gotten a good night’s sleep in seven months either.”

“Then why is this a problem for you?”

“It’s...” Steph bit her lip, and she averted her gaze.

“What?” Rachel leaned forward. “Spit it out.”

“Nothing. Forget I brought it up.”

“God damn it, Steph, just fucking-”

“I want more.”

Rachel blinked in surprise. The answer had shocked her into silence.

Steph kept her eyes on the ground, as she talked. “I just... Rachel...” she finally glanced back up. “I care about you. Like... a lot.”

“You...” Rachel’s voice trailed off.

“You’re my best friend.” Steph sniffed. “Even before all of this started, you were the only one I could ever talk to about all my problems with my mother. You’re really the only person I’ve ever been able to relate to. And I...”

She hesitated, as she looked at Rachel. The other brunette was staring at her, unmoving, as she listened. Steph swallowed and kept going.

“I really, really like you.” Steph looked back at the floor. “I have for a couple of years, since you helped start that LGBT group. And... if you want to just keep doing this to stay sane then whatever. Fine.” She exhaled. “But... I want more.”

Rachel didn’t speak for several seconds, before she finally looked away from Steph. She pulled her knees up, resting her arms on them as she stared at the far wall.
I don’t want to.

Yes, you do.

No, I really don’t, voice in my head.

Yes, you really do. You’re a fucking liar if you really believe that you don’t.

Tell her something.

Tell her that you’re not ready for that.

Tell her that you need time to think.

Tell her that you’ve wanted to ask her out since Sophomore year, but for all your confidence, you’re a fucking pussy when it comes to dating. Which is why you didn’t pop your cherry until you were drunk, high, and depressed in the middle of a junkyard.

You’re in my head. You know why.

I know that you feel like a piece of shit twenty-four-seven. I know that you have since November. I know that you’re burning through your Zoloft like a fucking pill-popper trying to get more than three hours of sleep a night.

I know about that razor.

Fuck you.

Sorry, I’m not Steph.

FUCK you.

Would it be so bad, really? You’re both miserable fuckheads. No reason you can’t be miserable
fuckheads together.

I don’t deserve it.

No. You don’t.

But you don’t deserve to feel like a fuckhead for the rest of your life, either.

...

FUCKING.

SAY.

SOMETHING.

“Are you good to drive?” Rachel asked quietly, the first thing she’d said out loud in ten minutes.

Steph picked her head up. She slowly nodded.

“Can you take me home?”

Rachel watched Steph drive away from her door.

Neither girl had spoken until just before Steph had pulled up to Rachel’s house. “You still good to go to Corvallis on Friday?” Rachel had asked.

Steph nodded.

“What time can you come get me?”

“Nine?” Steph had asked quietly.

“Okay.” Rachel nodded. “I’ll see you then.”

“Okay.”

As Steph’s headlights disappeared down the road, Rachel turned and walked back inside the house. She studiously ignored her father, as he sat in his chair going through files; he glanced up, seeing her, but didn’t say anything as she walked upstairs back to her room.

She kicked her shoes off and lay in bed, on top of the comforter as she stared at the ceiling.

You fucking coward.

Rachel and Steph never brought the conversation up again.

When they went to Corvallis that next weekend, the car ride was silent. It was awkward for the entire day, as they both did their best to focus on the search for Max. And when they checked into the motel that Friday night, they stayed on their own beds.

They spend most of Saturday looking for Max. After lunch, though, they drove over to the OSU campus and spent a couple of hours looking around.
“Nice place,” Rachel commented. “Bigger than I thought it was.”

“I think this is their main campus.” Steph craned her neck, as she drove. “There are the dorms. They look brand new.”

Rachel followed her gaze. “Oh, wow. Yea, they do. How big do you think the rooms are?”

Steph shrugged. “A little bigger than our bedrooms at home, I think,” she said. “The pictures I saw weren’t very clear, in terms of scale.”

“Roommates?”

“Depends on the dorm, I think.” Steph pointed at another building. “That’s an older dorm, and the rooms are smaller. I know those are single beds.”

“Mm.” Rachel nodded. “This... isn’t that bad.”

“No, it’s not.” Steph paused. “Are you excited to come here?”

Rachel sighed. “More like eager to get out of my house,” she admitted. “I’m tired of my parents.”

Steph looked at her. “Your dad? Or your mom?”

“Both,” Rachel muttered. “Between my dad refusing to look at me, and my mother trying to fix everything, I’m ready to leave.”

“Oh.”

They both fell quiet, as they continued the drive through the campus. Other than the odd comment, neither of them spoke. They got back to the motel later that evening and headed to bed. Rachel laid on her back under the covers, staring at the ceiling as her mind went in circles for over an hour.

_I hate this._

_MAX is still missing. And we’re trying to get excited about going to college. While our friend is on the streets or dead._

_And it’s our fault._

...

_I can’t take this anymore._

“Steph?”

The brunette turned in bed, clearly also not sleeping. She didn’t speak, though, staring at Rachel while she waited.

Rachel sat up, turning and hanging her legs off the side of the bed. “I can’t sleep.”

“Yea.” Steph paused. “Me either.”

Rachel bit her lip. “I don’t want this to be awkward. But... I don’t want to talk about it, either.”

Steph didn’t reply for several seconds, as she met Rachel’s gaze.

“... okay.”
She sat upright, as Rachel stood and pulled her shirt over her head. Steph followed suit, as Rachel yanked the covers back and climbed on top of her.
Fifty minutes after they left the school, they pulled into the parking lot of a small office building.

Brooke had spent most of the car ride silent. Miss Amber had tried to engage her in conversation, but she hadn’t responded very well. Her heart was still pounding, as she finally realized what she’d actually done

*I’m a runaway.* Brooke swallowed, hard. *I just ran away from home. With a woman I barely know, a social worker no less, and my grandfather probably ready to kill me.*

*Holy shit, I am in so much trouble.*

Miss Amber seemed to sense her distress, as she parked her car. “Everything is going to be okay, Brooke,” she assured her. “Don’t worry.”

“Uh huh.” Brooke nodded, clutching her backpack tightly. She appraised the office building carefully. “Where are we?”

“This is our office.” Miss Amber gestured. “You’re going to stay here for a little bit, while we take care of a few things.”

“Like what?”

“Some paperwork, and administrative stuff.” Miss Amber unbuckled her seat belt and opened her door. “It’ll take a little while.”

Brooke followed her into the building, through security. The social worker flashed an ID at the guards, and they were both waved through. She was then escorted into an elevator that opened on the second floor. Miss Amber waved her ID again, and they were buzzed in through a pair of sliding plastic doors; Brooke noticed that they were at least an inch thick.

“Have a seat right here.” Miss Amber brought her to a cubicle in the middle of the room, and Brooke sat in an office chair. “I have to go talk to my boss really quick. I’ll be back in a little bit, all right?”

Brooke nodded, and Miss Amber walked into an office against the far wall, slipping inside and closing the door behind her.

The teenager glanced around a little bit, noting the contents of Miss Amber’s desk. A bunch of paperwork, of course. An orange coffee mug with the OSU logo stamped into it. And several picture frames, scattered around her computer. Brooke looked at those more closely.

The first was a picture of an older man and woman in nice outfits, smiling for the camera. *Her parents?* Brooke wondered, shrugging as she moved on.

The next picture was of a pair of girls sitting on a picnic table, holding hands and smiling. Brooke found her focus drawn away from the first girl, who she would have described as “plain”, and towards the one with blue hair. She was wearing a white sleeveless shirt, the sides of her black bra visible through the large arm holes. The tattoo covering her arm was very intricate, and Brooke
couldn’t help but admire how it looked.

The third picture made her blink in surprise. It was Miss Amber sitting on a couch next to another girl with brown hair, though hers was partially hidden by a white beanie. The two of them had their arms over each other’s shoulders, and Brooke couldn’t help but notice the wristband on the other girl’s arm.

A rainbow wristband.

_Is she gay?_ Brooke slowly glanced back at the office. She could see Miss Amber leaning against the wall, her hands in her pockets as she spoke to an older woman behind a desk. _Is... Miss Amber gay? She didn’t seem..._ she frowned, trying to think of the word. _Weird? Wow, no, that’s...

Brooke winced, as she slouched in her seat. _Fuck. I can’t believe I just thought that._ Fifteen years of homophobic sermons had definitely given her a bad worldview, she decided. _It doesn’t matter. She’s helping me. I don’t give a shit what the church thinks about her._

She sighed as she rubbed her hands together, keeping an eye on the two women in the office. Whatever was happening, the older woman seemed to be agreeing with Miss Amber a lot; she nodded frequently, only speaking a few times as Miss Amber explained something with her hands. Brooke saw them both look towards her occasionally, but whatever they were saying was completely indiscernible.

And whatever they were talking about was taking a while. Brooke quickly lost track of how long she sat waiting. She spent most of it staring at the floor, aimlessly spinning the chair around with her feet as she tried not to think too hard about what she’d just done.

_It was this, or go be Bobby’s wife, _Brooke thought miserably. _Rock and a hard place is right. Run away from home, or go be a wife to some stranger._

_Did I do the right thing?_

She shook her head. _Too late to back out now. Even if I did want to go back. Mom and Dad would kill me, if Grandpa didn’t get ahold of me first. Not like I could-

A noise from the office entrance distracted her. She glanced over as the elevator doors opened.

She’d only met him a few times, and had never actually spoken to him. But Ryan Caulfield’s reputation preceded him. Her heart stopped as he stepped out of the elevator, his eyes on the receptionist.

Brooke quickly threw herself to the ground and scrambled under Miss Amber’s desk, huddling in the corner. She kicked her leg up, stopping the chair from spinning before she curled in on herself and started praying. _Oh, God, please don’t let him see me, please, God, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, don’t let him know that I’m here, please, God, PLEASE..._

“Can I help you?” she heard the receptionist ask.

“I’m here to speak to Miss Hemingway,” Ryan replied smoothly. “Where is she?”

Brooke heard the office door open. “Mister Caulfield, WHAT do you think you’re doing here?” An older voice asked sharply. “I have told you before-”

“I remember what you’ve told me,” Ryan replied. “That was before your office kidnapped a child from a public school. I am here to retrieve Brooke Scott, and insist that you produce her
immediately.”

“That’s not going to happen.” Miss Amber’s voice had taken on a hard edge. “You need to leave. Now.”

“THAT is not going to happen, Miss Amber.” The volume and tone of Ryan’s voice didn’t waver. “You have illegally coerced a minor into running away from home. If you don’t give her back, right now, there will be very serious legal consequences for both of you.”

Brooke hugged her knees tightly to her chest as she listened to what Ryan said. Her heart rate was so high, she could hear blood pounding in her ears, as she pressed her forehead into her knees and willed Ryan Caulfield to go away.

“We did not coerce Brooke to do anything,” the older woman snapped. “She called us of her own volition, unprompted and unassisted, to report her abusive situation. We are taking steps to-”

“I object fiercely to the accusation that Brooke Scott was being abused, Miss Hemingway. If she was, I demand to see proof, right now.”

“You’re not in a position to demand anything,” Miss Amber shot back.

“And we’re referring to parents forcing a child under the age of seventeen to marry an adult,” Miss Hemingway added. “So you can save your objections, because we’re not in court.”

“Unless you two want to find yourself there at the next available date, I suggest you return Miss Scott immediately.” The smooth voice made the hair on the back of Brooke’s neck stand upright, as he continued. “If I don’t leave with James Scott’s granddaughter today, my next stop will be the court house, to file a motion to sue for her return of custody. And then the police station, to report her abduction.”

“I wish you luck on reporting her abduction by a state-licensed social worker,” Miss Hemingway retorted. “And you’re free to do whatever you feel is necessary, when you leave this office, but Brooke will NOT be returned to an environment where she’ll be forced to marry a man against her will.”

“If that’s what she told you, then you should know that Miss Scott is a very troubled youth,” Ryan stated. “She is a known pathological liar, and her issues have given her family a lot of pain and heartache in the past few years. This little stunt is only the capstone of her outrageous behavior.”

“I’m a WHAT? Brooke gasped. That’s not- I didn’t- NO! She began having trouble breathing. It’s not true, it’s not true, please don’t believe him, PLEASE figure out that he’s full of shit... She didn’t even realize that she was crying until she felt the tears on her cheeks.

“If that’s the case, Mister Caulfield, then I’m guessing you have documentation of that behavior?” Miss Amber asked. “Surely if it was such a problem that it escalated to her running away from home, she’s seen a mental health specialist in the past?”

“Miss Scott was seen and has been speaking to a Pastor for her actions-”

Miss Amber interrupted him with a scoff. “Yea, I didn’t think so.”

“Your flippant attitude, Miss Amber, does not change the facts of this situation,” Ryan replied. “You went to a public school and coerced a child into leaving, turning her into both a runaway and a truant. You are now refusing to give her back, based off of her lies and your inability to see through a deception so obvious, it’s painful. This is solicitation at best, kidnapping at worst.”
“Interesting that you’re leaving out your church’s precedent for abusing and murdering children.”

“Those instances were exaggerated by the media to serve the state’s purpose in demonizing our religious beliefs.”

“Tell it to Jennifer and Sara. And the six people who plead out over the last year.” Miss Amber paused. “How is your wife, by the way?”

“I see we’ve evolved into personal attacks against my family, so—”

“Enough!” Miss Hemingway interrupted sharply. “Mister Caulfield, you will not be leaving with Brooke. Period, end of story. You are free to see the police and stop by the courthouse on your way home. But if you don’t leave, right now, then I will call the state troopers upstairs and have them remove you.”

There was silence. Brooke held her breath.

“I will give you two one more chance to produce Miss Scott, and save yourself a very protracted legal battle.”

“The answer is no. Have a good day.”

“Very well.” Brooke heard movement, as he left. “I’ll see you both in court.”

Nobody spoke for several seconds, and Brooke continued to hold her breath. Finally, she heard the ding of an elevator. Followed shortly by doors closing.

The two women let out long sighs of relief. “Rachel, you know better than that.”

“Yea. Sorry.”

“Ryan Caulfield is already more akin to a pit bull than human. Antagonizing him by bringing his wife into the argument was not very helpful.”

“I know,” Miss Amber agreed. “But it was pretty satisfying.”

“I suppose I can’t disagree with that.” Miss Hemingway paused. “Where did Brooke go?”

The teenager heard the footsteps come around the desk, and saw the two sets of legs appear in front of her. Miss Amber bent over, one hand on her desk for balance. “Brooke?” she asked carefully. “Are you okay, sweetie?”

Brooke sniffed, as she looked at the social worker. “Is...” She swallowed. “Is he gone?”

“Yes. He left.” Miss Amber nodded. “He’s not coming back.”

Brooke’s lip trembled, as she tried to wipe her eyes. “I’m not a liar,” she said meekly. “I swear to God, Miss Amber, I’m telling the truth. Please don’t make me go back.”

“I know you are.” Miss Amber held out her hand. “Come on out. Everything’s okay.”

The teenager reached out very hesitantly, taking Miss Amber’s hand. She let the social worker pull her out from under the desk and sit her back in the chair.

“Please don’t send me back with Mister Caulfield,” she whispered.
“We’re not,” Miss Amber said forcefully. “Ryan Caulfield isn’t taking you anywhere.”

“I don’t-” Brooke’s voice caught in her throat. “I don’t want to die. Please don’t let him take me.”

Miss Amber smirked, but it faded quickly. “Ryan Caulfield is all talk,” she stated. “We’re not going to let you go back with him, or anyone else from your church. Including your grandfather.”

The older woman behind her, Miss Hemingway, cleared her throat. “Speaking of grandparents,” she said, matter-of-factly. “You’re Elder Scott’s granddaughter?”

Brooke bit her lip and nodded.

“That would explain why he got here so fast.” She glanced at Rachel. “A heads-up would have been a good idea, too.”

Miss Amber shifted. “I, uh... didn’t make the connection.”

“Well, it’s done.” Miss Hemingway shrugged. “Future reference.”

“Yea.” Miss Amber looked back at Brooke. “Okay. Brooke, I have a little bit of paperwork to handle. Then I’m going to take your full statement.” She paused, as she brushed a length of hair behind her ear. “After that, I’m going to take you to see a doctor really quick.”

Brooke frowned, as she wiped her nose. “A doctor? Why?”

“Standard procedure, when we remove a child from a house,” Miss Hemingway answered. “Just to make sure you don’t have any injuries, or to write you prescriptions for any medications you might need.”

“That’s right.” Miss Amber nodded. “It shouldn’t take long. Once that’s done, we’ll get you set up with someplace to stay.”

“I’ll do that,” Miss Hemingway assured her. “We’ve got a few secure foster homes we can put you in outside of the city.”

Miss Amber nodded, as she glanced at her boss. “The further, the better.”

“Really?” Miss Hemingway scoffed. “You think?”
Victoria woke up the next morning and immediately noticed two things.

The first was that she wasn’t wearing anything.

The second was that Kate wasn’t, either. She had fallen asleep with her head on Victoria’s shoulder, and she snored lightly as Victoria made an effort to move as little as possible. The blankets were still tangled around them, which made it easier.

So. That happened.

Victoria closed her eyes and smiled.

I could totally get used to this. Kate stirred slightly, and Victoria froze, fearful of waking her, but she settled quickly. Man, she’s a deep sleeper. At least her snoring isn’t too loud.

I wonder if she knows she snores?

Oh, Jesus, she probably thinks she doesn’t. Victoria almost snorted in amusement. I’ll bet she probably hasn’t had anyone... tell...

Shit.

The smile left Victoria’s face. Oh, man. Is she going to regret this?

Victoria hadn’t given any thought to Kate’s beliefs. While Kate had never said anything of the kind, Victoria knew that her girlfriend was more religious than she let on. The gold crucifix she wore on her necklace made that clear. What if she wakes up and decides that it was all a mistake?

Victoria’s heart started to race. Oh, man. Oh, shit. She glanced up at her ceiling. God, if you are there, and you’re not already furious at me for being gay, please don’t let this fall apart. I really like her, and I don’t want to fuck this up. Just do me this one solid and-

“Vicky?”

Kate slowly peeled her eyes open as Victoria looked back at her. “Morning,” she replied softly.

“Mm.” Kate closed her eyes and snuggled closer. “So it wasn’t just a dream.”

Oh, thank you God.

“How’d you sleep?” Victoria asked.

“Really good.” Kate opened her eyes again. “Um... it’s, you know, okay that I spent the night, right?”

“Of course it is.” Victoria kissed Kate’s forehead. “How are you?”

“Well.” Kate paused. “We totally did that last night.”
“Yea.” Victoria nodded carefully. “We did.”

Kate turned her head, looking up to meet Victoria’s gaze. “Vicky?”

“Yea?”

She smiled. “I kind of want to do it again.”

Victoria grinned. “So it’s true what they say, about church girls,” she teased.

Kate narrowed her eyes. “Unless you don’t want to,” she added. “In which case-”

Victoria quickly bent down and silenced Kate with a kiss before she could continue.

Alyssa was waiting in the ice cream parlor with folded arms when Kate came through the door.

After running her clothes through the washer and dryer, Victoria had driven Kate over for her shift with ten minutes to spare. They’d quickly kissed goodbye in the Audi, Victoria promising to pick her up after work before she left.

Kate was already dreading the grief she was about to get from her roommate.

“So,” Alyssa started smugly. “I noticed that you didn’t make it back from Denny’s last night.”

“No, I did not.” Kate walked towards the back room, grabbing an apron and her nametag as she studiously ignored Alyssa. “How was your night?”

“Lonely,” Alyssa replied with a grin. “How was YOUR night?”

Kate hesitated. “It was very good,” she finally said as she put the apron on, attaching the name tag before she picked up her visor.

“Oh, come on!” Alyssa pouted. “I want details!”

“I’m sorry?”

“What did you do? How many times did you do it? Where were your legs in relation to your head?” Alyssa grabbed Kate’s arm and jumped up and down like a toddler. “I wanna know everything!”

“I am absolutely NOT sharing any of that information with you,” Kate said sternly as she pulled her visor on. “Come on, hurry up and get ready.”

“No fair!” Alyssa pouted again. “I tell you all of my details!”

Kate rolled her eyes. “Yes, you do. Despite me asking you repeatedly to stop.”

“If I do stop, will you give me details?” Alyssa asked, trying to deal.

“No.”

Alyssa sighed. “You suck. Well...” she paused. “Will you at least tell me where you guys are at now?”

Kate looked at her, confused. “Where we are? What does that mean?”

“I mean, I’m assuming neither of you regret last night.” Alyssa finally took her own apron and name
tag, as she got ready for work. “Are you guys girlfriends now?”

Kate frowned. “I... thought we were before.”

Alyssa paused as she was in the middle of tying her apron. “Did you ever call her that?”

“... no?”

“Oh, boy.” Alyssa quickly finished the knot and pulled on her own visor. “Kate, that’s one of the talks you should probably have.”

“That’s a talk?” Kate raised her eyebrows. “I just...”

“I mean, maybe?” Alyssa winced. “Are you girlfriends, or are you ‘this girl I’m seeing’?”

“... crap.” Kate looked back at her. “What do I do?”

Alyssa pursed her lips. “Avoid the word for now,” she finally said. “Hopefully, she uses it first, and you can solve this problem on the spot.”

“And when do I...?” Kate hesitated. “I don’t know, have this ‘talk’?”

“I told you already, you’re in uncharted territory for me.” Alyssa shrugged. “How long have you two been dating again?”

“Almost six weeks,”

“Then...” Alyssa sighed again. “Look, Kate, every relationship is different. Some couples figure out if they’re serious right off the bat, some take a little while. I mean, are YOU serious about this relationship?”

Kate thought for a few seconds. “I mean... I really like her,” she allowed. “I don’t want to screw it up. And I for sure want to keep seeing her.”

“Do you think she feels the same way?”

“I...” Kate bit her lip. “... hope so?”

“Well, that’s a start.” Alyssa nodded at the door that lead to the front of the store. “Come on, let’s open up.”

“I was starting to think you’d forgotten about us.”

Victoria sighed, as she sat on her couch. “It hasn’t been THAT long, Court.”

“It’s been over three weeks,” Courtney corrected her. Even over the Skype connection, Victoria could feel her contention, though there were traces of mirth underneath the pout. “I thought you’d decided that your old Vortex club friends aren’t good enough for you anymore. I figured I was going to have to shop around or something, and find a new friend. Maybe at a Starbucks; I hear they’re having a sale on basic bitches.”

Victoria folded her arms. “Are you done?”

A smirk finally broke through Courtney’s face. “Eh. Sure, why not.” She leaned forward on her couch. “So, who’s been keeping you away from us?”
“Huh?”

“We talk to Taylor,” Courtney reminded her. “We know all about the little pixie from UCLA you’re seeing.”

“Pixie?” Victoria asked incredulously. “Come on, she’s not THAT short.”

“Sure, because that was an important detail.” Courtney rolled her eyes. “So, who is she?”

“Her name’s Kate,” Victoria started. “She’s another student at UCLA, trying to get her Master’s so she can become a teacher. We met at a house party on fraternity row.”

Courtney raised her eyebrows. “Picking people up at frat parties? Maybe Taylor is rubbing off on you,” she teased. “How long have you been seeing her?”

“About six weeks.”

“Nice.” Courtney nodded. “So, do we really like this girl, or are we just killing time?”

It became Victoria’s turn to roll her eyes. “Not everyone moves between hookups like Taylor.”

“Hey, I’m just impressed you found someone to date at all. What with your whole don’t-talk-to-me vibe.” Courtney grinned. “And don’t think I didn’t notice that you haven’t answered my question.”

Victoria knew it was no use. Unlike Taylor, she couldn’t pass off white lies to Courtney. “Yes, I like her,” she admitted. “We’ve been seeing each other a lot since we met.”

Courtney’s eyebrows shot up. “Wow,” she commented. “So you’re serious with this girl?”

“I mean...” Victoria fidgeted. “Maybe? I don’t know if we’ve been dating long enough for the ‘serious’ tag.”

Courtney leaned forward. “Well, I guess there’s one way to try and make the determination.”

A confused look came over Victoria’s face. “What’s that?”

“Well, I’m assuming you’ve already slept with her.” A grin broke out over Courtney’s face. “Tell me about it. All the juicy bits.”

Victoria shot her a glare. “Yea, that’s not gonna happen.”

“Holy shit, you really do like this girl.” Courtney’s grin widened as she turned her gaze over the top of the camera. “DANA!!”

Victoria’s shoulders slumped. “Really?”

Courtney ignored her. Victoria heard someone talking in the back, though the audio quality wasn’t good enough to hear what it was. “Come here!” Courtney yelled at her roommate.

Another unclear question was posed.

“Victoria’s crushing hard on a girl, and she won’t give me details!!”

Victoria did manage to pick up the sound of something crashing to the floor, followed by a stampeding of feet. Dana flew across the screen as she jumped over the coffee table, spun, and landed butt-first on the couch to stare at Victoria with a look of intensity she didn’t often employ.
“Tell me everything,” she breathed. “Start at the beginning, and don’t leave anything out.”

“I’m going to hang up on both of you in five seconds,” Victoria grumbled.

“Don’t you DARE.” Dana leaned forward. “You tell me. You tell me right now.”

Victoria smirked. “Or I deny you your gossip fix, and watch you go into withdrawals.”

“Her name is Kate, she’s studying to be a teacher, and her and Victoria TOTALLY had sex,” Courtney said. “Like, recently, I bet.”

“Ooh.” Dana grinned. “And our friend Victoria has no intimate details she wants to share about her girlfriend?”

Courtney didn’t catch Victoria’s squirming. Dana did, though, and her eyes narrowed. “What was that?”

“What was what?”

“Don’t you play with me, Victoria.” Dana crossed her arms. “Are you and Kate not using the ‘girlfriend’ label?”

“We... uh...” Victoria hesitated. “I don’t know.”


Victoria wanted to lob a snappy comeback, but nothing came to mind. So she just sighed and ran her hand over her face. “We’ve only been dating for six weeks,” she reminded them. “It... feels too soon, to use that term.”

“But do you want to?” Dana asked.

“... kind of,” Victoria admitted. “But at the same time... I don’t know.” She sighed again. “I need a cigarette.”

A buzzing sounded through the computer, and Dana pulled her phone from her pocket. “Crap, Trevor’s downstairs,” she muttered as she got up, turning back to Victoria. “We’re not done with this. I will have more questions when I get back later tonight, and I expect better answers.”

“Sure.” Victoria waved half-heartedly. “Have fun.”

Courtney watched Dana leave, turning back to the computer when the door closed. “Don’t worry, she’s not going to bug you about it for a while.”

“Yea, she will.” Victoria scoffed. “She’s like a dog that got a taste of the car’s bumper; she has to have more.”

“Not after tonight.” Courtney nodded towards the door. “Trevor’s proposing to her over dinner.”

“What?!” Victoria shot upright, her eyes widening. “Are you- wait, how do you know?”

“He asked me to steal one of her rings, so he could get her size.”

Victoria blinked. “Holy shit. You think she’s going to say yes?”
“Oh, totally,” Courtney assured her. “I know you haven’t met this dude yet, but she is all about him. And they’ve been together since her freshman year.”

“Yea. Still.” A grin crossed Victoria’s face. “If you had asked me who among us would agree to marry the owner of a marijuana dispensary franchise, I probably would have picked Taylor.”

“Right? And make fun of him all you want, he’s pretty flush with cash,” Courtney pointed out. “He sent me the picture of the ring he picked. The diamond is fucking massive. And they’re definitely 100% into each other.”


“Yea.” Courtney leaned forward. “So. Kate.”

Victoria sighed. “I’ll figure it out,” she muttered.

Victoria pulled back up to the ice cream parlor a few hours later to get Kate.

“Hey!” Kate greeted her excitedly.

She smiled back, as she leaned over the center console to kiss her. “How was work?”

“I-” Kate stopped, as her nose wrinkled. “Ew.”

“What?”

“You smell like cigarettes.” Kate looked at her. “I didn’t know you smoked.”

Victoria shifted uncomfortably. “Um... yea. Sometimes. Sorry.”

“That’s a terrible habit, you know,” Kate pointed out.

“Yea, I’ve seen the PSAs.”

She sighed. “Sorry. It just really smells.”

“Hang on.” Victoria opened her purse and pulled out a packet of Listerine breath strips. She quickly popped two into her mouth. “There. Give them a few minutes. Anyway,” she continued as she shifted her car into Drive. “How was work?”

Kate slumped in her chair. “I got yelled at,” she groaned.

“Huh?” Victoria furrowed her brow as she pulled away from the store. “Why?”

“Because we ran out of Rocky Road ice cream.” Kate extended her arms out, stretching her back. “The woman went off on me, screaming something about not being competent enough to keep such a popular ice cream flavor in stock. And told me I would never amount to anything if I couldn’t do such a simple task.”

Victoria stared at her, shocked. “What the hell? How is that your fault? Why didn’t she go yell at your manager?”

Kate smirked. “Because I was there, Vicky. My manager wasn’t.”

“Still. You should have...” Victoria’s voice trailed off as they pulled up to a stop light. “Huh.”
“What?” Kate looked over at her. “What’s wrong?”

“You... called me Vicky.” Victoria blinked. “You called me that last night, too. And this morning. I just now realized it.”

“Um, yea.” Kate squirmed. “It just... I don’t know. Rolls off the tongue. Is that okay?”

Victoria looked over at her. “I’m just surprised I didn’t catch it before.”

“Why?”

“Because I really hate when people shorten my name.” The light turned green, and Victoria accelerated through the intersection, turning her eyes back to the road. “That’s, like, my biggest pet peeve.”

“Oh.” Kate bit her lip. “Sorry. I didn’t know. I’ll stop.”

“No, don’t. I...” Victoria hesitated. “It’s different, coming from you. I don’t know why.” She smiled. “I actually like it.”

Kate raised her eyebrows. “Really?”

“Yea.” Victoria glanced back at her. “I could get used to my... uh, girlfriend, you know, calling me a nickname.”

A lump developed in Kate’s throat, but she quickly swallowed it back down, thinking carefully and quickly about how she wanted to respond.

“Good.” She smiled back and reached across the center console of the car, putting her hand on Victoria’s knee and squeezing. “Because I’m kind of attached to it now, and my girlfriend’s full name is a little bit of a mouthful.”

Victoria snorted from the driver’s seat. She took one hand off the steering wheel, taking Kate’s hand and squeezing back. “So.”

“So.” Kate smirked. “Now what?”

“It’s almost dinnertime,” Victoria said. “And I would like to point out that you have picked the last several places we’ve eaten. I want to pick the restaurant tonight, and pay for the meal, without you thinking about the price.”

Kate sighed. “Fine,” she agreed. “Just... please, nothing too fancy?”

“Okay, this isn’t too bad,” Kate allowed as she looked through the menu.

Victoria had taken her to a sushi restaurant that was more upscale than Kate was used to, but still low-key enough that she didn’t feel the need to run home and change. And the prices, while more expensive than normal, were not so bad that she wanted to run from the restaurant screaming.

“I promised you it wouldn’t be too fancy,” Victoria reminded her, as she scrolled through her own menu. “I recommend their California Rolls. They’re really good.”

Kate frowned. “I didn’t really care for them, the last time I had one.”

“Where did you get it from?”
“The, uh... deli at the grocery store.”

Victoria slowly lowered her menu, looking at Kate with an amused expression. “These guys use Alaskan King Crab,” she explained. “The avocados and cucumbers are fresh, grown locally. It’s a higher caliber of sushi, I promise.”

Kate sighed. “Okay, that’s fair.”

“Get a half of one,” Victoria suggested. “And pick half of another. And we’ll get some dumplings, those are really good, too.”

“Okay.” Kate scanned the menu again. “All right, I know what I want. What are you getting?”

Victoria’s phone buzzed in her pocket. “Definitely a full California roll,” she answered as she retrieved her phone, checking the screen. A huge grin slowly spread over her face. “And a new dress, I guess.”

“A new dress?” Kate raised an eyebrow. “Why?”

“My friend Dana just got engaged.”

“Really?”

Victoria showed her the group text message.

Dana: OMG OMG OMG my MFing BF just put a ring on it BITCHES!!

Kate snorted at the picture of the brown-haired girl flashing a diamond ring towards the camera.

Dana: First one engaged! I am SO FUCKING WINNING!!

“Did you guys make a bet or something?” Kate asked.

Victoria rolled her eyes. “No. She’s just being dramatic. She likes to stir trouble. Has ever since we were in high school.”

“Does she go to UCLA too?”

Victoria shook her head as she put her phone away. “Her and my other friend, Courtney, both got accepted to the University of Washington,” she replied. “Taylor was the only one who followed me to UCLA. What about Alyssa? Did she follow you from San Diego?”

“No, she’s from Colorado. She was assigned as my roommate in the dorms.” Kate frowned.

“Nobody really followed me up. Most of the people I knew in high school went to local schools. My friend Stella is graduating from San Diego State next year.”

“And...” Victoria hesitated. “Chris?”

Kate smirked. “He graduated Berkley last year, and got accepted to medical school at Stanford. So now my mother REALLY wants us to meet this summer.”


“Yea.” Kate stared back at her menu, growing quiet.

“Are... you going to be okay?” Victoria asked carefully. “For when you go back to visit your family
later this month?”

“I’ll be fine.” Kate waved her hand dismissively. “I’m used to my mother and her nonsense. I’m just going to avoid it as much as possible.”

Victoria would have felt better if Kate had sounded more convincing.
Brooke: Foster House

The paperwork Miss Amber handled didn’t take long. The statement Brooke gave, though, took a couple of hours. Miss Amber insisted that she go in-depth with some of her answers, and asked her several clarifying questions. The entire conversation was recorded, and it was explained to Brooke that the police were going to get a copy as well.

When they finished, they left the conference room they’d been using and met Miss Hemingway. The older woman had a file waiting for them. “We can put her in this home. Unless you want to use a different one?” she asked Miss Amber, discretely showing her the inside of the folder.

“No, that’s perfect.” Miss Amber nodded. “What about Doctor Headley?”

“I called him already. He’s expecting you.” Miss Hemingway closed the folder. “Go ahead and take her there.”

Brooke was led back into the elevator, only this time they went to a basement level. “The state police let us use their undercover vehicles when place new teenagers,” Miss Amber explained to Brooke, as they got into a white sedan; she didn’t notice until then that there were extra switches on the dashboard, and a radio in the center console.

“Why?” Brooke asked quietly, as she buckled her seat belt.

“So that we can make sure we’re not followed.” Miss Amber smiled. “It’s never happened, don’t worry.”

Brooke worried anyway. Even though the windows were tinted, and the garage was sealed with a metal roll-up door, and the ramp went up into a hidden side street. Her eyes stayed glued to the side mirrors for the entire ride, as she tried to keep track of which cars she saw.

Miss Amber seemed to know what she was doing, though. Brooke noticed that she made a couple of circles through town, before she finally got onto an expressway. And Brooke saw that her eyes glanced in the rearview mirror a lot as well.

They only drove for a few exits before they pulled into a small office park. Miss Amber pulled up to one of the first suites, and brought Brooke through the door right into a waiting room. An older gentleman was waiting for them. “Hello, Miss Amber,” he greeted her.

“Doctor Headley.” The social worker smiled. “Thanks for seeing us. This is Brooke Scott.”

“Hi,” Brooke said quietly, as the doctor looked at her.

“Hello, Brooke.” He smiled widely. “We’ll make this quick, I promise.”

Brooke was brought to an exam room, and the doctor only asked her a few questions. Did she have any injuries, any pre-existing conditions, was she on any medication... she answered in the negative for all of them.

“Always appreciate having an easy patient,” Doctor Headley remarked absently as he jotted some notes.

After a few more questions, Brooke was given back to Miss Amber, and they got back on the road. Brooke didn’t realize how much time had passed until she noticed the sun starting to go down, as
they turned into a residential area. By the time they pulled up to an unassuming white house, it was almost dark.

Miss Amber parked behind a green minivan, shutting off the engine. “We’re here.”

Brooke looked at the house. “What is this?”

“A foster home.” Miss Amber smiled. “You’re going to be staying here. For at least a little while.”

The teenager glanced around the street nervously.

“Brooke, you don’t have to worry,” Miss Amber assured her. “This is one of our secure foster homes.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that only me and Miss Hemingway will know you’re here,” Miss Amber explained. “Even the other social workers in my office won’t be able to access your location. And the people who will be taking care of you have been very thoroughly vetted by the state. The woman is a nurse, and her husband is retired from the Army. You will be very safe here, I promise.”

Brooke glanced over the house again. It certainly looks nice, at least.

“Okay,” she breathed, as she grabbed her backpack by the strap.

Miss Amber looked at the bag as they got out of the car. “There is a change of clothes in there, right?” she asked. “I’m sorry, I should have asked before.”

“I brought an extra dress.” Brooke shouldered her backpack. “I, uh... didn’t bring a lot else, though.”

“Do you have any money?” Miss Amber looked her in the eye. “You’re going to need more than one change of clothes.”


Miss Amber seemed surprised. “That’s more than most of the kids who run away have had.”

Brooke was surprised in return. “I didn’t know that many others had left the church.”

“A few,” Miss Amber allowed, as they approached the door. “Not a ton. But enough that we have some experience.”

Her heart rate rose again, as Miss Amber knocked on the door. An old woman with greying hair opened it a few seconds later. “Hello, Rachel,” she said with a smile.

“Hey, Jane.” Miss Amber gave her a quick hug. “How’re you doing?”

“Eh.” The woman shrugged. “Another few days closer to retirement.”

“Isn’t that the truth.” Miss Amber smiled, as she reached over and laid her hand on Brooke’s back. “Jane, this is Brooke Scott.”

“It’s lovely to meet you, Brooke.” Jane’s smile got bigger, as she extended her hand.

Brooke took it without thinking, shaking carefully. “Nice to meet you,” she replied quietly.

She hadn’t realized it until then, but Brooke was starving. The teenager had been given a sandwich for lunch several hours before, and her stomach was rumbling. She quickly nodded.

“Well, I hope you like pasta. We saved a bowl for you.” Jane turned towards the kitchen. “Emily!”

Brooke looked over as a blonde teenager appeared in the doorway. She was dressed very casually, in jeans and an oversized short-sleeve shirt. Her hair fell past her shoulders, and she tucked a strand behind her ear as she looked at Jane. “Yea?”

“Hello, Emily,” Miss Amber smiled at her.

“Oh, Hey, Miss Amber.” Emily waved, sparing a glance at Brooke.

“Emily, would you take Brooke into the kitchen and heat that bowl of pasta up for her?” Jane asked. “And some garlic bread, too.”

“Sure thing,” the blonde answered with a shrug, as she glanced back at Brooke. “Come on.”

Brooke glanced back at Miss Amber nervously, but she followed Emily into the kitchen. The blonde opened the fridge and took out a white bowl, peeling off the plastic wrap.

“Is it cool if I just toss the bread on top?” she asked. Brooke nodded, and Emily retrieved a piece of bread from the fridge as well, placing it in the bowl before putting it all in the microwave and starting the timer. “Dude, you can sit down if you want.”

“Sorry,” Brooke said quietly, and she quickly sat in one of the seats at the table.

Emily smirked. “You want a coke?”

Brooke nodded.

The blonde retrieved two cans of soda from the fridge, handing one to Brooke as she opened the other for herself. “So,” she started, sipping her drink as she leaned against the counter. “Are you gay, or a runaway bride?”

Brooke did a double-take. “Huh?”

“Are you gay, or a runaway bride?” Emily repeated. “I’ve met a few other girls who left the church. They either liked other girls, or they were trying to avoid one of those arranged marriages.” She tipped the can towards Brooke. “Which one are you?”

She couldn’t help but pause, at the other teenager’s casual attitude. Brooke didn’t answer for a few seconds.

“Look, if it’s ‘cause you’re a lesbian, I’m not judging. Nor do I care.” Emily shrugged. “I mean, who am I to really-”

“I’m not gay,” Brooke interjected.

“Oh.” Emily tilted her head. “Arranged marriage, then?”

Brooke sighed. “Yea,” she admitted.

“Me, too.” Emily nodded. “How long since you left?”
Brooke swallowed. “This morning.”

“Talk about fresh off the boat.”

“I guess so.” Brooke glanced back at the can of soda in her hands. She still hadn’t opened it.

“I didn’t mean that in a bad way.” Brooke looked back at Emily, as the girl took another drink. “This morning. So, you’re probably still in shock, aren’t you?”

Brooke bit her lip. “I... uh...”

“Yea, you are.” Emily sighed. “It’ll go away, after a couple of days. Don’t worry.” She frowned. “Why are you still wearing your dress?”

“I... don’t have anything else to wear,” Brooke answered quietly.

“Well, you can’t go get a new wardrobe looking like that.” Emily gestured with her free hand. “You’ll stick out like a sore thumb. I think I can find some clothes that fit you in my dresser.”

“Oh.” Brooke met Emily’s gaze. “... thank you.”

The microwave beeped, as it finished. Emily took the bowl out and put it in front of Brooke. “You’re welcome.”

Brooke dug into the food, and found that it was amazing. Even better than her mother’s pasta. She was finishing up when Miss Amber and Jane came into the kitchen.

“How was it?” Jane asked.


“Brooke, Jane is going to take you to Target tomorrow morning,” Miss Amber informed her. “She’s going to help you get some clothes, so you have more to wear than just your dresses.”

“Can I go with her?” Emily asked quickly.

Miss Amber narrowed her eyes. “Don’t you have school tomorrow?”

“It’s an off day.”

“No it isn’t. I checked before I came here.” The social worker crossed her arms. “Do we have to have ANOTHER conversation about skipping class?”

Emily sighed. “... no. I want to go to Target too, though.”

“I...” Brooke hesitated. “I’m good to wait until she gets home.”

Miss Amber shared a glance with Jane, who nodded. “I suppose we can do that,” she allowed. “And you can sleep in. I’m sure you’ll be tired tomorrow.”

“I’ll be back in the evening to check on you,” Miss Amber said. “Are you feeling okay? Do you have any questions?”

“What am I going to do about school?” Brooke asked.

“Mrs. Grant is going to put together your schoolwork for the rest of the week. That way you can
finish the semester at Arcadia Bay,” Miss Amber assured her. “She’s also going to make
arrangements to have you transferred to the high school over here.”

“She’s going to Blackwell with me?” Emily asked.

“Once we get her registered, yes.”

“Cool.” Emily looked at Brooke. “You’ll like it. The teachers are nice. Principal’s kind of a dick,
though.”

“Language, Emily,” Miss Amber chastised. “And Principal Wells is a very nice man, when you’re
not in his office once a week for skipping class.”

Emily didn’t reply, as she shrugged and crossed her arms.

“What about my grandfather?” Brooke asked quietly. “Mister Caulfield said he was going to sue to
get me back.”

“Don’t worry about your grandfather. Or Mister Caulfield.” Miss Amber shook her head. “Our
office will handle them.”

Brooke averted her eyes. Yea. Right.
“Mom, I really don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

Kate’s mother crossed her arms. “I still don’t see why you couldn’t have been here. You could have moved your dates back by one week,” she pressed.

“No, Mom, I really couldn’t. Alyssa went back to see her family in Boulder last week, and we needed the money to cover rent for the month.” Kate maintained eye contact with her mother. “If I’d come back last week, we wouldn’t have been able to pay our landlord.”

“You could have convinced HER to-”

Kate threw her hands up. “And why would I have done that?” she shot back. “Chris and I still talk on Facebook. I don’t need to see him in person.”

“Young lady, do NOT interrupt me.” Her mother’s glare was fierce and piercing. “I am sure Chris would have loved to have seen you in person, before he went back to Stanford.”

“Probably, but it wasn’t worth getting evicted for,” Kate retorted. “Either way, it’s done. Like I said, I’m not sure why we’re still talking about this.”

“Because I want you to take this seriously!” her mother said intently. “You’ve barely seen him since you ran away to UCLA, and-”

“I’m sorry, take WHAT seriously?!” Kate exclaimed. “Mother! He HAS a girlfriend! He’s been dating Jaime for six months now! NOTHING is going to happen between us!”

“What did I JUST say about interrupting?!”

Kate sighed. It was just turning into another circular argument in the kitchen, while she waited for Stella to get there. At least Lynn and Jessica aren’t here, she thought as she glanced at the door; Lynn was at a friend’s house, and Jessica was at a violin lesson. Her father was there, at the table, but Kate had learned long ago not to expect help from that corner.

“He has not been dating her long enough to be serious about it,” her mother fumed. “You two have been friends for years! He’s known that... HUSSY for a few minutes! It is hardly comparable!”

She couldn’t believe what was coming out of her mother’s mouth. “Are you seriously insinuating that I should convince Chris to cheat on his girlfriend with me?!”

“He is in medical school! He’s going to be a doctor soon!”

“And I still have years of classes at UCLA for my Masters!” Kate shot back. “I need that to teach, and our schools are hours apart!”

“You could be with a DOCTOR,” her mother fired back. “Who cares about your degree? You wouldn’t even need that silly little job!”

Kate’s face flushed, and she started angrily preparing a scathing comeback. Luckily, her mother was
saved as Stella’s car pulled into her driveway, her friend honking the horn. “I’m leaving,” she said icily, as she turned towards the door. “We’re done with this conversation.”

“EXCUSE me!” Her mother yelled. Kate continued to march out of the house. “I am the parent! I will decide when we’re done, not you! Get back here right now!”

“I don’t care! I am an adult! And we are done FUCKING talking!!” Kate snapped as she walked out of the house, slamming the door as hard as she could with both hands. She heard her mother yell from inside, but Kate didn’t turn around as she stalked towards Stella’s car and got in the passenger seat.

Stella was staring at her with wide eyes. “Um, what was-”

“Go.” Kate buckled her seat belt. “Drive. Right now. Get us out of here.”

After years of dealing with Kate and her mother, Stella knew when to not ask questions. And when to move quickly. She shifted the car, reversing out of the driveway far faster than she should have. They started accelerating down the street just as Kate’s mother threw the door open, her yelling lost to the noise of the engine.

“You want to tell me what that was all about?” Stella asked as she turned the corner.

Kate shook her head as she pulled out her phone, setting it to Silent. “Stella, I really don’t want to talk about my mother right now.” She placed her hands on her temples and rubbed in small circles. “Or think about her.”

“Okay.” Stella slowly nodded. “You still good to go get lunch?”

“Yes.”

“Any preference?”

“As far from my house as possible.”

“Chris did ask me to say ‘hi’.”

Stella had a very hesitant look on her face as Kate glanced up from her salad. “He did?”

She nodded. “He knows you arranged not to be here when he was on purpose, and he totally gets it,” she assured her. “He just wants to make sure you know there aren’t any hard feelings.”

“I... appreciate it.” Kate sighed. “Let him know, please.”

“I will.” Stella picked up a fry from her plate and ate it. “That was what your argument with your mom was about, right?”

Kate scoffed. “Apparently, getting Chris to cheat on his girlfriend with me is more important than MY hopes and dreams,” she muttered darkly. “She basically told me that my desire to become a teacher wasn’t worth anything, because I won’t need a job once I marry a doctor.”

“Yea. Your mom’s a fucking bitch.”

Kate had long since resigned herself to accepting people’s crude language regarding their opinions about her mother. Rather than rebuking Stella, she just nodded mutely as she took another bite of her salad. Her phone vibrated on the table before she could formulate a response, though. “God, she
needs to get a clue,” Kate sighed, not looking.

Stella peeked at her phone. “It’s not your mom. Who’s Victor?”

Kate picked her phone back up to see the latest message.

**Victor:** Four days. Still miss you :(

She couldn’t help but smile. Victoria had been texting her every day since she’d left, telling her that she was missed. Every time she saw them, Kate found her heart fluttering.

**Kate:** Me too :(  

**Kate:** Can’t want to get back to LA and see you.

“So?” Stella pressed. “Victor?”

“It’s my girlfriend.” Kate put her phone back down.

Stella did a double take. “You have a gi- wait. Her name is Victor?”

“No. It’s Victoria.” Kate speared into her salad, taking another bite. “I changed her name in my phone. I didn’t want my mother to see a text saying how much I was missed from a girl’s name.”

“Ah.” Stella nodded. “That’s... pretty smart.”

Kate shrugged. “Much as I’d love to take credit, it was my roommate’s idea.”

“So, who is this Victoria?” Stella leaned forward. “I didn’t know you were seeing anyone. Tell me about her.”

“We’ve only been dating for three months or so,” Kate started. “We met at a house party on fraternity row that we both got dragged to. She saved me from a drunk who was giving me a hard time.”

“Saved you?” Stella’s eyes got big. “From what?”

“Nothing like that,” Kate explained quickly. “He was getting in my face, being way too forward and breathing all over me. She dragged him away by his ear and made one of his frat brothers get rid of him.”


Kate nodded with a smirk. “We wound up talking for most of that party. She asked me out to dinner a week later. We’ve been seeing each other ever since.”

“So... you like this girl?”

“Definitely.” Kate smiled as she picked her phone back up. “Want to see a picture?”

Stella craned her head over to look at a selfie of the two of them. “Wow, she’s pretty. Does she go to UCLA too?”

“Yea. She’s back there right now, doing a couple of summer classes. She’s trying to boost her grades, so she’s more likely to be accepted for law school.”
“Nice.” Stella nodded. “Well, if a future doctor isn’t your thing, I guess a future lawyer is a close second.”

Kate blushed as she put her phone down. “Somehow, I don’t think my mother would approve.”

“No kidding.” Stella rolled her eyes, then a grin came over her face. “So. Three months or so. Have you guys... you know...”

She made a hand motion Kate didn’t recognize, where she spread her index and middle fingers on both hands, then slowly interlocked them together, the webs between both fingers meeting. “What in the world are you doing?” she asked, confused. “What is that?”

Stella smirked. “Sex, you idiot.”

“Stella!” Kate’s blush came back.

“Oh, come on!” Stella leaned forward. “You did, didn’t you? How was it?”

“I’m not talking about this with you.” Kate folded her arms. “I don’t know why you and Alyssa keep asking me about this.”

“Probably because we’re curious,” Stella replied. “And we’re both trying to see how serious you are about your relationship with this girl.”

“Well...” Kate hesitated. “I mean, I’m taking it seriously. I really like her.”

Stella hummed. “Do you think you’ll ever tell your family?” she asked. “About being a lesbian?”

“I... don’t know.” Kate shifted uncomfortably. “I know my mother will never accept it. My dad might, I’m not sure. And I don’t even know what Lynn or Jessica would say.”

Her phone vibrated again, and Kate picked it up, hoping to see another message from Victoria. But her face quickly fell.

Mom: You need to either answer my calls, or get home right now. We are going to thoroughly discuss your behavior and your attitude.

“God.” Kate sighed, showing the screen to Stella. “I don’t think I can do another ten days of this.”

Stella winced. “Do you want to stay at our house tonight? I’m sure my mom won’t have a problem with it.”

“Maybe.” Kate put her phone down. “I almost wish I hadn’t come back.”
Miss Amber left after a couple of hours, leaving Brooke alone with Emily and Jane. By then, it was time for bed.

“Two, you will have to share a room, just for tonight,” Jane informed her. “My husband has been using the other bedroom to store some boxes and tools while he works in the garage. I’ll have him move it all in the morning.”

“Where is he?” Brooke asked quietly, as she carried her backpack towards the other bedroom.

“He’s at the VFW post,” Jane explained. “They have a meeting tonight.”

Emily gave Brooke a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt to sleep in, then helped Jane set up an air mattress while Brooke changed and brushed her teeth in the bathroom. She was given a blanket and pillow, before Jane wished the girls good night.

After the lights went out, Emily got into bed and turned right over to sleep. Brooke lay on the mattress and stared at the ceiling. Anxiety gnawed at her brain like a rodent, and she couldn’t calm herself down. Despite not having slept for almost two days, her eyes remained fully open as her mind raced in circles.

I am in so much trouble.

I ran away from home. And spilled my guts to a social worker. And stole a shitload of money from my grandpa and my dad. She swallowed, as she tried to slow her breathing. If Miss Amber gives me back, they’re going to kill me.

Maybe I can just tell them it was a big mistake. I was scared. They gave me, like no notice that I was going to go live with Bobby. I panicked.

... Yea, like that’ll make everything better.

Oh my God. They sent Mister Caulfield to get me. Brooke’s lip trembled in the dark. They must be furious at me. Oh, Jesus, they’re going to kill me. She sniffled. Just like Max. They’ll never find my body, either.

This was a bad idea. This was a really, really bad idea.

I should just call them.

Yea. I’ll find a phone, and call them tomorrow. They have to understand. I can try to-

“Still awake, huh?”

Brooke blinked at the intrusion into her thoughts. “What?”

“I can hear you freaking out.” Emily turned over in bed. “You’re not being very quiet about it.”
"... sorry."

"You’re fine. I did the same thing."

She looked at her, eyes straining in the dark. "What?"

"Freaked out," Emily clarified. The other teenager sat up, putting her feet down and sliding to the floor to sit next to the air mattress. "I don’t think I slept for a couple of days when I first got here. I was too scared of what my family would do if they got me back."

Brooke pushed herself upright to face her. "Really?"

"Yea." Emily nodded. "It was pretty rough. I was way worse than you, too." She snorted in amusement. "I was full-on crying. And not in a cute way, either. Sadie didn’t get a wink of sleep those first few days I was here."

"Sadie?" Brooke furrowed her eyebrows. "Who’s Sadie?"

"The girl who was here when I showed up, about ten months ago."

"Where is she now?"

"She left a couple of months ago. Joined the Marines." Emily shrugged. "She hated school, but she was big into fitness and working out, and was the anti-bully of Blackwell. When she graduated, she didn’t want to go to college, so she enlisted. She’s at some camp in North Carolina, doing training."

"Wow," Brooke whispered in awe. "Was she trying to avoid a marriage, too?"

"No." Emily shook her head. "She’s gay. I mean, I guess she was avoiding getting married anyway, but she left First Light after those two girls died. Decided that sticking around wasn’t worth the risk."

"Yea." Brooke looked down at her lap. "Can’t blame her for that."

Emily nodded. "So. How bad is your anxiety?"

Brooke bit her lip and didn’t respond.

"What would have happened if you stayed?"

"Huh?"

"If you hadn’t called Miss Amber. If you had stayed with your family." Emily shifted as she got more comfortable. "What would you be doing tomorrow if you were still home?"

Brooke thought for a second. "I... It would have been my last day at school. And... I guess I would have finished packing my stuff, to move out."

"And the day after that?"

"I would have gone to live with Bobby." Brooke swallowed. "And been his wife."

"How old is Bobby?"

"Nineteen."

"You know what nineteen-year-olds want to do with girls, right?"
Brooke nodded, as she tried not to think about it.

“You need to remember that.” Emily leaned back, planting her hands on the floor behind her. “I know you’re thinking about going back, because I did, too. Every time you think that this was a mistake, you need to remember where you’ll be if you go back. And what you’ll be doing.”

... she’s right.

_I can’t go back to that._


“No prob.”

“Is that what you did?” Brooke asked. “Did it help?”

Emily sighed. “You’re, uh... you’re a lot luckier than I was.”

“Why?”

“Because you got out before you had to live with your husband.” Emily looked away. “My parents sprung it on me so fast, I didn’t have the chance to do anything about it.”

Brooke looked at her. “So... you...”

“Yea.” She shrugged. “His name was Martin. We got married when I was six. He was twelve.” She scoffed. “I guess I can be grateful that my parents waited as long as they did.”

“Oh.” Brooke bit her lip uncomfortably. “I’m sorry.”

“You know, he was actually pretty nice when I moved in.” Emily looked back at her. “I was kind of excited at first. Getting to leave school and being, like, a real adult. I didn’t even think about him being so much older than me. I thought he was kind of cool; he didn’t have any problem with me drinking alcohol, and even brought me a few bottles of whatever I wanted.”

She sighed. “I was so... fucking naïve. It never occurred to me that there was actually a reason he was trying to make me like him. It wasn’t until the fourth or fifth night that...” Emily got quiet, her eyes going distant before she waved her hand. “I didn’t even realize what he was doing until it was too late.”

Brooke stared at her, unsure of what to say.

“You know what’s really fucked up?” Emily’s eyes fell to her lap. “I thought it was gonna get better. The girls at school who used to talk about it said that it was fun, but every time he...” She scratched her arm. “It just... hurt. A lot. I tried to get him to stop, or at least take it easy, but he didn’t have any of it.”

“I am so sorry,” Brooke whispered.

“Thanks.” Emily looked back up again. “I left because I just couldn’t take it anymore. I snuck out one night and ran until I found a pay phone. The cops brought me to the hospital, and Miss Amber took me with her when I was discharged.”

“What about...” Brooke hesitated. “Martin?”

Emily shrugged. “Don’t know. Don’t care.”
“Didn’t the cops arrest him?”

“I never told them who he was.” Emily met Brooke’s eyes. “Please don’t tell Miss Amber his name. She was trying to get it from me, so he could be charged.”

“I won’t.” Brooke scooted closer. “But... why not?”

Emily leaned forward, putting her hands in her lap as she fidgeted with her fingers. “I... figured me running away, and embarrassing him and his family, was enough punishment.” She paused. “I also hate my parents way more than him, for putting me in that situation. But the cops couldn’t do anything about that, so... you know. Whatever.”

Brooke didn’t know what to say, as she watched Emily play with her fingers.

“At least you were smart enough to pack a bag.” Emily smirked. “I didn’t even grab a change of underwear. Miss Amber had to bring me to Wal-Mart while I was wearing hospital scrubs.”

She couldn’t help herself. Brooke snorted in amusement. Emily followed suit as the two girls snickered.

“I’m sorry,” Brooke finally said when she composed herself.

“Nothing for you to be sorry for.” Emily shrugged. “Anyway, you probably won’t be able to for a little bit, but you should try and get some sleep.” She stood back up, getting into bed. “I have school in the morning. I’ll try not to wake you.”
“Holy shit, you weren’t kidding. That burger was fucking AWESOME.”

“Yea.” Victoria nodded, as she sat across from Taylor.

“And they won’t stop bringing us fries until we tell them?” Taylor popped another one into her mouth. “This place might be my new post-hangover joint.”

“Yes.”

Taylor paused, noticing that Victoria hadn’t taken her eyes off her phone in several minutes. A wicked grin spread across her face. “So I told her that enough was enough, and she needed to hop off because it was my turn to fuck the clown.”

Victoria blinked as she finally looked at Taylor. “Huh?”

“That’s what I thought. Thanks for listening.”

“Sorry.” Victoria sighed, as she spun her phone on the table. “I was just... somewhere else.”

Taylor tilted her head. “Man, you fell fucking HARD, didn’t you?”

“I...” Victoria paused. “Shut up.”

“Jeez. I mean, I remember your little crush on Max, but that was nothing like this.” Taylor snickered as she leaned back in her seat. “Little Katie’s tongue must be fucking MAGICAL if that’s all you can think about right—”

WHAM!!

“OW!!”

Victoria glared, as Taylor grabbed her leg while yelping in pain. “One, don’t talk about her like that. Two, her name is Kate, not Katie. And three, stop swearing. This is a family restaurant, not a bar at happy hour.”


Her friend’s gaze softened. “Sorry,” she muttered.

“Me too.” Taylor put her foot back down. “I, uh... I was just busting your chops. I didn’t mean to—”

“Yea, I know.” Victoria glanced back at her phone. “Am I being pathetic right now?”

Taylor smirked again. “It’s okay to miss your girlfriend, Victoria.”

“It’s not... okay, I mean, I do miss her,” Victoria acknowledged. “But... I’m also worried.”

“Why? She’s just visiting family.”

“Yea, including her homophobic mother that’s trying to force her to marry a boy she grew up with. And she’s still in the closet.” Victoria glanced back at Taylor. “I’m overreacting, right? Please tell me I’m overreacting.”
Taylor leaned forward, planting her elbows on the table between them. “You’re overreacting,” she stated. “Kate’s an adult. And she has a cell phone. Worst thing that could happen is that her mother kicks her out, and she calls you. Then you drive down to San Diego and rescue her like a knight in shining armor, bring her back to L.A, and continue the fairy tale.”

Victoria took a deep breath, letting it out slowly through her nostrils. “You’re right,” she sighed, as she picked up a fry from her plate. “Sorry I kicked you.”

“No, you aren’t.”

“... yea, okay.”

She leaned back in her chair later that evening, stretching her back. She’d spent too long bent over her textbooks.

Victoria had gone at her summer homework with gusto, since Kate had left. She’d already finished the next two weeks of assignments. Anything to keep her girlfriend off her mind.

Seven days to go. Victoria sighed. Too long. Damnit. She looked back at the pack of cigarettes on the table next to her. No. Leave them alone. You had one this morning.

... screw it. She reached for the pack. I deserve one.

Her phone buzzed on the table, and she stopped to look and see who it was. A smile came over her face as she grabbed it, opening the text message.

Kate: Are you doing anything tonight?

That’s... an odd question. Victoria frowned as she tapped out a reply.

Victoria: Just some schoolwork. Why?

Kate: I left San Diego early.


Kate: I just couldn’t deal with my mother anymore. I changed my bus ticket.

Kate: Do you think you can come pick me up from the terminal?

A huge smile spread over Victoria’s face.

Victoria: I’m headed over right now.

Kate: No, Vicky, my bus won’t arrive for another two hours.

Victoria: I’ll wait.

Two hours and fourteen minutes later, she was drumming her fingers on her steering wheel, as she watched people slowly leave the bus terminal through her rearview mirror.

Three buses had pulled into the terminal within the last ten minutes, and she was getting impatient. It can’t take THAT long to offload passengers and luggage, she thought irritably. She sighed. I wonder
why she changed her ticket?

Probably shouldn’t ask her until later. If it WAS because of her mother... Victoria took out another Listerine strip and placed it into her mouth; she’d smoked one of her cigarettes while she waited, then had proceeded to blast the A/C on full to get rid of the smell. I’ll find out later, I guess.

Finally, a familiar head of blonde hair appeared as Kate walked out the door. She immediately spotted Victoria’s silver Audi, and she waved while making a beeline for the car. Victoria popped the trunk for her, and Kate threw her bag inside and closed it without breaking her stride for the passenger door.

As soon as she got in and closed the door, the two girls grabbed each other and kissed passionately across the center console.

“I missed the crap out of you,” Victoria breathed as they broke apart.

“Me too.” Kate smiled as she took hold of Victoria’s hand, squeezing tightly. “Please tell me you haven’t actually been waiting here for the past two hours.”

“Meh.” Victoria shrugged and kissed her again. “Like I said, I missed you.”

“I missed you, too.” Kate glanced behind them. “You should probably drive, though, before the security guard decides you’re blocking traffic.”

“Yea.” Victoria let go and settled back into her seat. She shifted and accelerated the car out of the spot. “Do you have to go back to your apartment for laundry?”

Kate shook her head as she buckled her seat belt. “I used my parent’s washer and dryer yesterday. Most of my clothes are clean.”

“And you’re still taking the next week off?”

“Well, I was going to ask my boss to put me back on the-”

“But you can take tomorrow off, right?” Victoria pressed.

Kate nodded.

“Good.” Victoria smiled. “Because you had me spoiled. I missed waking up next to you. And I need my fix.”

Kate giggled. “Is that all you missed me for?” she asked, acting hurt as she put a hand on her chest.

Victoria smirked as she reached over and squeezed Kate’s knee. “Among other things.”

Kate liked it when Victoria cooked her breakfast.

Victoria always got up way earlier than Kate did. She’d felt bad, at first, that her girlfriend got up before her, but Victoria didn’t seem to mind, and Kate liked to sleep in. So when she woke up the next morning and could smell the breakfast cooking, she quickly pulled on her too-long shirt and made her way into the kitchen.

“Hey!” Victoria smiled brightly as she stood in front of the stove, wearing her flannel pants and a short-sleeved shirt. She stirred a skillet quickly. “You slept late. Little tired?”
Kate looked at the clock and winced; it was almost ten in the morning. “Little bit,” she admitted as she padded across the kitchen. She gave her girlfriend a hug from behind, burying her face into her shirt. “You making scrambled eggs?”

“Yep. With bacon and potatoes.” Victoria stirred it a few more times, then lifted the pan, scraping the breakfast onto the two waiting plates. “Do you want OJ?”

“Yes, please.”

Kate brought the plates to the table and set them down, while Victoria got the carton of OJ from the fridge. “So, what do you want to do today?” Victoria asked, setting it down and taking her seat. “Besides eat breakfast, I mean.”

“Well...” Kate hesitated. “I have no idea. Unless there’s a movie or something you want to see?”

“Hmm.” Victoria pursed her lips. “There were a couple that looked pretty good. Southpaw, or maybe Trainwreck?”

Kate shrugged. “I’m good either way.”

“We don’t have to.” Victoria glanced up in thought. “We could go for a drive somewhere, if you want. Go to the park or something.”

“That sounds like fun, too.” Kate smiled as she scooped a forkful of eggs into her mouth. “I don’t feel strongly one way or-”

A vibrating sound distracted her, and she glanced toward the counter, where their purses were sitting. “Is that me or you?”

“Not me.” Victoria gestured towards the bedroom. “I plugged mine in to charge last night.”

Kate reached over and grabbed her purse, pulling her phone out. “Oh.”

“What? Who is it?”

“My mother.” Kate set the phone on the table. “It’s... not important.”

Victoria had a concerned look on her face, when Kate glanced back at her. “Are you okay?” she asked. “I didn’t want to bring it up, but...”

Kate sighed. “I know. I appreciate it.” She took a sip of her orange juice. “My mom and I got in a huge fight yesterday.”

“Why?”

“She was getting on me the whole time I was there, about not seeing Chris.” Kate shook her head. “I should have come earlier, I should have made more of an effort to see him, I should get him to cheat on his girlfriend with me, the whole nine yards.”

“Cheat on his- what?” Victoria’s eyebrows shot up. “Seriously?”

Kate rolled her eyes. “Yea. I left the house a couple of days ago, and spent the night with my friend Stella. When I got back, she started all over again. I also apparently have an attitude and behavior problem.”

One corner of Victoria’s lips tugged upward. “Well, you are a little bit of a wild child.”
Kate snorted. “The crux was yesterday morning, though, during breakfast. She wouldn’t stop going on about it, and...” she grimaced. “I yelled at her.”


“Well, I guess my mother brings out some unsavory behavior.” Kate shook her head. “I yelled that she needed to stop. I was never going to marry Chris, and she needed to get over that and drop the subject. She doubled down, and yelled back at me for yelling at her. She said that I, as the child, needed to listen to her and do as she says, which apparently involves trying to insert myself more into Chris’s life, his girlfriend be damned.”

“Wow.”

“Yea.” Kate sighed. “I just couldn’t deal with her anymore. I called the bus company and had them change my ticket, then got a cab back to the terminal when she was in the shower.”

Victoria looked like she was at a loss for words. After a few seconds, she pushed her plate aside and got up, moving so that she was sitting next to Kate. She reached over and took her hand, squeezing it tightly.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly.

“Thanks.” Kate wiped her eyes. “Anyway, she’s pissed, because apparently we weren’t done. I just sent her a text after I got on the bus, letting her know that I wasn’t going to deal with her anymore, and that I would see her at Christmas.”

They sat in silence for a minute. Kate’s phone buzzed again, and they both looked across the table at it, neither of them moving for it.

“Okay.” Victoria took a breath. “Forget it. We’re just gonna stay in all day.”

Kate looked up at her. “Really?”

“Yea.” Victoria nodded and reached around her shoulder, squeezing her tight. “Like I said, I missed you. I want a day where I don’t have to share you with anyone. Including her,” she added, jerking her chin at Kate’s phone.

“That sounds wonderful,” Kate said with a smile.

Victoria smiled back. “Good. Let’s turn our phones off and go back to bed.”
Brooke: Denim Jeans and iPhones

2018.

Brooke couldn’t stop running her hands over her pant legs. “This feels really weird,” she admitted. “It’s nice, but it’s a little... I don’t know. Restrictive, I guess.”

Emily raised her eyebrows as she sat on the easy chair across from her. “Really? I mean, even when I was with the church, I wore sweatpants as PJs. Didn’t you?”

“No. I always wore a sleep shirt.” Brooke shrugged as she pinched the fabric of her new jeans between her fingers. “I thought denim was a lot rougher than this.”

“Sometimes it is. Those are girl jeans, though.” Emily smirked. “We get the soft stuff. Next time you go shopping, you should look for some of these.” She patted the black leggings she’d changed into. “This is where the comfort is at.”

“Next time,” Brooke agreed as she leaned back into the couch. “You don’t have any homework to do or anything?”

“A little. The teachers at Blackwell try not to assign homework on Fridays.” Emily shrugged. “I have a thing for history, but I’ll do it tomorrow.”

Brooke frowned. “Why not tonight?”

“Because I’m lazy.” Emily leaned over sideways, as she threw her legs over the arm of the chair. “Let me guess, you always did your homework right away?”

“I was an honor student, back at Arcadia Bay,” Brooke answered with a smirk. “Is that a bad thing?”

“Only because you’re gonna start making me look bad, if you turn out to be a goody two-shoes.”

Brooke shook her head, but heavy footsteps behind them drew their attention before she could reply. They both turned as Jane’s husband rounder the corner, carrying a large cardboard box. He grunted as he set it down near the garage door. “That’s the last of it,” he stated as he stood, rolling his shoulder. “You’ve got your own room, now, Brooke.”

“Thank you so much.” Brooke smiled nervously; Pete hadn’t really spoken much since she’d met him at breakfast that morning. Emily had since told her that he was always quiet, preferring to let Jane do the talking for the both of them. He certainly seemed nice enough.

“No problem.” He walked into the kitchen, returning with a bottle of water. “You two girls doing okay?”

“Yea.” Emily turned and sat back upright. “Are we going to see a movie tonight?”

“No, we’re gonna go tomorrow.” He paused, a hint of a smile playing across his face. “Unless someone hasn’t finished her history homework.”

Brooke snorted in amusement as Emily squirmed. “I’ll finish. I promise.”

“Good.” He sipped his water. “Because I want to see Venom, and I’ll be very disappointed if we
“don’t go.”

“Venom?” Brooke frowned. “What’s that?”

Pete and Emily both stared at her. “Oh, you sweet summer child,” Emily said sadly. “We have so much to catch you up on.”

A knock on the door stopped Brooke from asking further, clarifying questions. They all looked over saw Miss Amber, smiling and waving through the window.

“I want you to have this.”

Brooke blinked as the social worker placed a phone down on the table between them. “What’s that?”

“It’s an iPhone 6S,” Miss Amber answered, as she pushed it towards her. “It’s an older phone, I know. But it’s not in your name. Your family won’t know that you have it, so they can’t use it to track you. And you’ll be able to contact me whenever you need to.”

Brooke picked up the phone, examining it. Her fingers slid over the smooth metal and glass screen. “And... this is mine?”

“It’s all yours.” Miss Amber smiled. “It’s a prepaid phone, though. You can use it with Wi-Fi to your heart’s content. But when you’re out and about, there’s a limit on the amount of data, texts, and minutes you can use. I want you to let me know if you run out, and can’t afford to pay for more.”

“I don’t have to share this with anyone?” Brooke asked, a smile breaking out over her face.

“Emily has her own phone, so I don’t know who else you would share it with.” Miss Amber shrugged as she produced a white charging cable, placing that on the table as well. “Listen, I don’t want you to send texts like normal. There’s a messenger app on there that I want you to use instead. You can sign up for an anonymous account that can’t be traced. Emily can show you how, if you have trouble setting it up.”

“Thank you.” Brooke hit the button and the screen popped to life. “I... wow. I never thought I’d ever get one of these. Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome. But Brooke, I really want you to be careful with that,” Miss Amber cautioned. “I don’t want to tell you not to talk to anyone back home. But if the wrong people figure out what your phone number is, they could find you, and you might put yourself and Emily in danger.”

Brooke shook her head vehemently. “I don’t want to talk to my family. And the friends I had back at First Light don’t have any phones.”

“Good. Then you’ll be fine.”

Brooke bit her lip as she put the phone down. “What about my grandfather?” she asked cautiously. “Has he...”

Miss Amber leaned forward, putting her elbows on the table. Brooke watched her chew on the inside of her cheek as she formulated words. “I don’t want to lie to you, Brooke,” she finally said. “I also don’t want to make you worry more than I’m sure you already are.”

Brooke’s gut twisted. “He’s suing you, isn’t he?”

“He is.” Miss Amber nodded. “We were served the paperwork this morning, just like Ryan Caulfield
threatened.”

The teenager exhaled slowly, trying to hide her triple-digit heart rate from the social worker across from her.

“You are not going back,” Miss Amber said firmly. “Our office has a contract with a very prestigious legal firm. A lawyer with twenty years of experience is handling the case on our end. She may have some questions for you at some point, but when she gave the issue a cursory once-over, she was not concerned.”

Her social worker’s assurances did not give Brooke any peace of mind. The teenager scratched her arm nervously. “So... what do I do?”

“Nothing.” Miss Amber shook her head. “There’s nothing you can do right now. Lawsuits take time, and lawsuits against the state take even longer. But with your statement, and First Light’s documented atrocities against rebellious teenagers, we have every legitimate reason to keep you away from your family.”

“But-”

“You are not going back,” Miss Amber repeated as she laid a hand on Brooke’s arm, stopping her from scratching. “I know you might not trust me yet. But I need you to believe me, when I tell you that it is not going to happen.”

Brooke slowly exhaled, as Miss Amber watched her carefully. “Okay,” she finally said in a small voice.

Miss Amber squeezed her arm, before she let go and reached into her briefcase. “Here, this is for you, too. Sorry it’s not as fun as a phone.” She pulled out a folder with a few papers in it.

“Is that my schoolwork?” Brooke asked.

“Yes.” Miss Amber placed it on the table. “Mrs. Grant got you exempted from a lot of it, but there are a few assignments you do have to complete, in order to finish your semester.”

“Cool.” Brooke pulled the folder towards her. “I have the weekend to finish it, right?”

“You have the next week,” the social worker corrected. “Mrs. Grant will make sure your teachers waive all the late penalties.”

“Wow.” Brooke smiled. “I... jeez. Does Mrs. Grant work for you or something?”

Miss Amber chuckled. “No. But she does work with us,” she added. “Mrs. Grant is our link, of sorts, to your old high school. She created the protocol we used to get you out of class.”

“When I asked my math teacher for a special hall pass?”

“That’s right.” Miss Amber nodded. “All the teachers in your school know that if a student from First Light asks for a special pass to Mrs. Grant, they need to give them one. And mark them as present for the class, and not say anything to anyone else.”

Brooke raised her eyebrows. “That’s some real secret agent shit.”

“Language,” Miss Amber immediately chastised.

She winced. “Sorry. I just... didn’t know anyone really cared.”
Miss Amber leaned forward. “Mrs. Grant cares very much,” she assured her. “She missed the signs on a student, once. A long time ago. She works with us to make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

“Really?” Brooke raised her eyebrows. “What happened?”

“That’s... not important.” Miss Amber shook her head. “Do you have any other questions, Brooke? Is there anything you need? I see that Jane already took you shopping.”

“Yea.” Brooke glanced down at her outfit. “Her and Emily helped me pick out some new clothes.”

“Glad to be out of those dresses?” Miss Amber smirked. “The other girls tell me that they’re not very comfortable.”

“Yea, they’re pretty hot. And heavy.” Brooke looked down at her new jeans and the t-shirt she was wearing. “Still kind of weird to wear these, though.”

“I’m sure you’ll get used to them.” Miss Amber checked her watch. “Are you sure you don’t need anything else?”

Brooke shook her head. “I’m fine.”

“Good. One last thing, before I leave.” The social worker leaned forward. “When you do start at Blackwell, you’re going to spend your first few study periods with the guidance counselor, Doctor Greene.”

“Why?”

“She’s a therapist,” Miss Amber explained. “I want you to talk to her. Let her know how you’re really doing. She can help you handle the transition from your old life.”

Brooke squirmed, looking down at her hands. “I... I don’t know.”

Miss Amber scooted her chair closer to the table. “Brooke, I can’t claim to know what you went through. But running away from home...” she paused, gathering her thoughts. “Choosing to risk everything for a better life is incredibly brave of you, Brooke. And I know it’s a hard thing to come to terms with. Did you sleep at all, last night?”

“... not really.”

“I figured.” Miss Amber smiled. “Doctor Greene has complete confidentiality, Brooke. She won’t even tell me what the two of you talk about. And she has plenty of experience with First Light teenagers. There are almost a dozen of you guys going to Blackwell right now.”

Brooke looked up. “I didn’t know that.”

“Well, it’s true.” Miss Amber checked her watch again. “Okay, I really have to go. I have someplace else to be. Make sure you get with Emily, to help set up that app.”

“Okay. Oh, wait!” Brooke had a last-second thought, as Miss Amber stood to leave. “Yes?”

“I had a couple of friends, back at Arcadia Bay High School. Amy Hayes, and Joey Williams.” She leaned forward. “Is there any way you could get a message to them? Like, through Mrs. Grant or something?”
“Probably.” Miss Amber nodded. “What do you want to tell them?”

“I...” Brooke hesitated. “I still want to talk to them, really. Can I do that, with the messenger app?”

“You can if they set up their own accounts.” Miss Amber shouldered her purse. “Tell you what. Get your phone set up, grab my account info from Emily, and send me their names. Next time I talk to Mrs. Grant, I’ll have her pass the message along.”

Brooke nodded. “I will.” She looked back at her new phone. “Thank you, again, Miss Amber.”

“You’re welcome.”

Unknown: Brooke? It’s Amy. Are you there?

<CONTACT INFO UPDATED>

Brooke: Hey Amy! Yea, I’m here.

Amy: DUDE

Amy: HOLY SHIT

Amy: What the FUCK did you do?!

Brooke: Um... wow. Little strong.

Amy: Man, I SO do not want to hear it! The entire school is talking about you right now!

Amy: EVERYONE is asking me and Joey what happened to you!

Brooke: What? Why?

Amy: Because you pulled a ninja-vanish in the middle of first period? Because your grandfather raised eight different kinds of hell in the main office, loud enough to be heard from the second floor? Because the fucking POLICE showed up two hours after you disappeared, talking about a kidnapping?!

Amy: PICK ONE

Brooke: It’s... kind of a long story.

Amy: My homework is done. Spill.

Brooke: Is Joey with you? I don’t want to go through everything twice.

Amy: We’re at his house. He’s reading over my shoulder.

Brooke: Alright.

Brooke: So... my family married me off to a boy when I was eight years old.

Amy: Ex-fucking-cuse me?

Brooke: Buckle up, it gets worse.
Brooke: Tuesday after the Chess Club, my grandpa told me that I was getting pulled out of school on Friday. He said that it was time for me to live with my husband in holy matrimony, or whatever.

Brooke: So... I called the number, on those posters at school.

Amy: Wait. The ones talking about getting forced into stuff?

Brooke: Turns out, it’s a hotline for a social worker.

Amy: Whoa.

Brooke: Yea. You and Joey should probably keep that under your hats.

Amy: No shit. So... what? Someone came and got you at school?

Brooke: Pretty much. She works for Child Protective Services. I told her what was going on, and she took me back to her office.

Brooke: I’m in a foster home now.

Amy: Wow.

Amy: Hey, Joey just did some Googling. He says the minimum age for marriage in Oregon is 17.

Brooke: Yea, I know. The social worker explained it to me.

Amy: Okay. So. Foster home.

Amy: When are you coming back?

Brooke: I don’t think I can.

Amy: For real?

Brooke: I’m pretty sure this was a one-way trip, Amy.

Amy: ... fuck.

Amy: This sucks, Brooke. We miss you. And we didn’t even get a chance to say goodbye.

Brooke: I know.

Brooke: I miss you guys, too. I am SO sorry.

Amy: You can’t tell us where you are, either?

Brooke: No. I’m not the only runaway from First Light here. If the church finds out...

Amy: Totally get it.

Brooke: Did the cops really show up at school?

Amy: Yea. Ricky Langford said Mr. Voss and Mrs. Grant left their fifth period classes to go talk to them, while he was doing something in the principal’s office. The cops left right after, but half the
school saw them.

_Brooke:_ The teachers didn’t get in trouble, did they?

_Amy:_ I mean, they were back in their classes the next period, so probably not.

_Brooke:_ Good.

_Amy:_ Do you need anything? Is there anything we can do?

_Brooke:_ No. I’m transferring to a new school. And I was able to get enough money together before I left to buy some clothes that don’t look like they came from the clearance racks in an Amish thrift shop.

_Amy:_ Really? How?

_Brooke:_ I can’t tell you. It’ll make you an accessory.

_Amy:_ Nice.
“Steph: Coke Bottle

2016. Concurrent with Ch 14 of EtL.

“That looks really good.”

Steph picked her head up, glancing to her left. “Oh. Thanks, man.”

“Is that for one of your classes?” Her boss, Hector, peeked over her shoulder as he examined the sketchbook. Her drawing was of a ghostly figure, and Steph was taking great pains to blend the shadowing, producing a wavering effect while maintaining bright eyes. “That thing is creepy as hell.”

“No, I’m working on it for my portfolio.” Steph stood, tucking her pencil behind her ear. “Sorry, man, I just figured that if the store was empty...”

“Hey, if the customers don’t complain, it’s all good.” Hector glanced around the empty GameStop. “Kind of weird, though, that it’s this quiet.”

Steph shrugged. “Football game is on tonight,” she reminded him. “Everyone’s probably at the stadium.”

Hector raised an eyebrow. “Even the video game nerds?”

“I take offense to that,” Steph countered with a smirk.

“File an HR complaint.” Hector sighed, as he leaned on the wall. “Seriously, though.”

“Dude, it’s the Civil War,” Steph stressed. “The Ducks are in town. Everyone is at the stadium to cheer for the Beavers. How do you not know this?”

“Because I hate football,” Hector said simply.

Steph narrowed her eyes. “I’m throwing a challenge flag on your masculinity.”

“You know I can fire you and just make up a reason, right?”

“If you do, you’ll have to close the store yourself.”


Steph shrugged as she closed her sketchbook. “I’ll take what I can get.”

“Why aren’t YOU at the game?” Hector asked. “You could have asked Tommy or Flynn to cover for you.”

“Because I’m broke as fuck,” Steph said simply. “I need the hours more than I need to watch the Beavers win. Also, I’m more invested in the NFL than the NCAA.”

“So I see.” Hector looked at the Seahawks logo on her ID necklace. “You know we’re not supposed to wear non-issued lanyards, right?”
Steph tilted her head. “Do you give a shit?”

“So long as a secret shopper doesn’t see it, no.”

Her phone vibrated, before Steph could retort. She pulled it from her pocket to check the incoming text.

**Rachel:** Salem next weekend?

“Ahh, fuck.” Steph closed her eyes, as she let out a slow breath. “Dammit.”

“What?” Hector had a concerned look on his face. “Everything okay?”

“My friend wants me to go to Salem next weekend.” Steph stuck her phone back in her pocket, as she leaned against the back counter. “But I can’t. I told my classmates I’d help them study for a test.”

Hector frowned. “So... why didn’t you tell her that?”

“It’s... complicated.” Steph sighed. “It’s something we said we’d do for a while.” She glanced at the door, which looked out into the empty parking lot. “You think we can close up a little early? We’ve only got forty-five minutes left, and nobody’s coming in.”

Her boss nodded. “Yea, why the hell not.”

Steph’s phone vibrated in her pocket again, as she drove back to her apartment. She studiously ignored it, not looking forward to the grief that she was going to get from Rachel for backing out of another weekend searching for Max.

The last few years had been hard on both of them. Things had gotten better, since they started at OSU; very few of their classmates from Arcadia Bay had followed them, and the ones that did seemed to show no interest in telling everyone what her and Rachel had done. Steph had actually made a few new friends, other students from her art classes, and they’d had some fun times.

Inversely, Rachel had not. She’d thrown herself entirely into her schoolwork, powering through class after class. Her GPA was a solid 4.0, and she showed no signs of slowing down; Steph had heard her talking to student advisors, about OSU’s graduate classes.

They’d also both been seeing the on-campus therapist. Steph had sessions with the doctor religiously, to deal with her guilty conscious. She still felt like an piece of shit, but she could actually sleep through the night, sometimes. And occasionally a few days went by, where she didn’t think about Max.

But then Rachel would text.

It seemed like three weekends out of every month, Rachel would want to leave and go search for Max. From the time classes ended on Friday until late on Sunday night, they would tear apart whatever town Rachel had picked for that weekend.

*This will be the sixth time we’ve searched through Salem, Steph thought morosely. We didn’t see a trace of Max the first five times. I don’t know why she thinks we’ll find her this time.*

She parked in front of her apartment, turning the car off before she finally pulled out her phone to check her texts.
Rachel: Well?

Rachel: They just opened a new homeless shelter in Eureka, too. We could check it out.

Seven. Steph leaned her head against her seat. Seven times, it will make, if we go to Eureka instead.

...

Let's just get this over with.

Steph: I can’t this weekend. I have a study group.

Rachel: Seriously?

Steph: We can’t all get grades like you without trying.

Rachel: You dodged last weekend, too. Am I going to have to go by myself again?

Steph: I had to work, Rachel. I need the money to pay my rent.

Steph: And I told people that I would be there this weekend. I committed to this. I’m sorry.

Rachel: ... fine. Whatever.

Rachel Amber, master of the guilt trip. Steph shook her head, as she got out of her car and made her way towards her apartment as she continued to text.

Steph: Look, I’m free next weekend. We’ll go to Salem or Eureka then.

Rachel: I’m still going this weekend.

“Of course you are,” Steph muttered.

Steph: Then we’ll look somewhere else. Maybe someplace we haven’t been to a dozen times.

Rachel: Can you do some research, see if there’s someplace we haven’t looked before?

Steph: You know it’ll be far. Probably California, or Idaho.

Rachel: Good a place as any.

“Fuck.” Steph sighed as she retrieved her keys and unlocked her apartment. “Talk about grasping at straws.”

Steph: Okay. I’ll let you know.

Rachel: All right.

Rachel: Hey... can I swing by, later tonight?

Steph smirked, shaking her head.

Steph: Yea, sure.

“Least I get laid,” she muttered, putting her phone away. “Small favors.”
“Why don’t you just tell her that you don’t want to?”

Steph kept her eyes on her lap, as she picked at her thumbnail. “Because... hell, I don’t know,” she muttered. “I guess because it’s my fault, too. And I know she won’t stop. It just feels wrong, to leave her holding the bag.”

The therapist nodded. “How many times have you backed out of going now?”

“I’m not sure. A couple of dozen, I think.”

“And she’s gone without you?”

“Every time.” Steph shrugged. “She’s obsessed.”

The man across from her nodded. “Do you know if she’s sleeping better?”

Steph smirked. “We don’t really sleep when she comes over, Doc.”

He didn’t rise to the bait. “Have you asked her?”

“... no,” Steph muttered.

“Have you asked if she’s considered that her cause is a lost one?”

“No.”

“Have you asked-”

“Let’s save some time, Doc, and make the grand assumption that I don’t really like to bring up this topic of conversation with Rachel,” Steph interrupted. “About how she feels, or how she’s been doing.”

He studied her. “Why not?”

“I, uh...” Steph swallowed. “I just don’t really like to talk about it.”

The therapist leaned forward. “Okay. I have another question, Steph, and I want you to answer honestly, not say what you think Rachel would want to hear.”

“What?”

“Are you trying to move on?”

She opened her mouth to deny it, but stopped before the words came out. Steph paused, giving the answer serious consideration.

You already know the answer.

“... maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“I...” she took a second, thinking about her words as she stared at her lap. “I don’t really want to stay in Oregon. My mom moved away last year, and I want to work for a video game developer. A serious one. And most of them are out-of-state. If I get that kind of job, it would definitely kill what little free time I actually have.”
He nodded. “You want to be able to focus on a career.”

“... yes.”

“Steph.” She looked up at him. “It’s okay, if you don’t want to be stuck in the past. You’re allowed to want for something else.”

She scoffed. “Am I really, after what I did?”

“Yes. You are.”

Steph blinked, tilting her head.

“You can accept that what you did was not okay. And you can be angry at yourself for doing it. But you don’t have to let it consume you, either.” He paused. “Do you honestly think that Max is still alive?”

She opened her mouth to answer affirmatively, but stopped again.

*Don’t lie.*

*He’s not Rachel.*

“No,” she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

“I’m sorry?”

“No,” Steph swallowed. “I think if she was, we would have seen something by now. An officer would have stopped her, or she would be in the system somewhere, or something.” She blinked, and felt her eyes getting wet; she wiped them quickly, before she continued. “Rachel looks all the time, and gets her dad to run out-of-state searches. But... nothing’s ever come up.”

The therapist nodded. “I think you’re right, Steph. As painful as I’m sure that is to say out loud.”

She wiped her eyes again, sniffing. “So... what do I do? What should I say to Rachel?”

“I can’t answer that for you.” He shifted in his seat. “Rachel is your friend; I only know her as a patient. But keeping these thoughts bottled up isn’t good for you. Or her.”

“Why not?”

“Because this sort of thing...” he paused. “It’s like a Coke bottle, Steph. You can keep it all forced down, but if you poke it and shake it enough... well, the bottle will eventually explode.”
Brooke licked her lips nervously, as she stood in front of the Guidance Counselor’s door.

She’d never seen a therapist before. Whenever someone back at First Light had issues, they were always brought to a pastor. The church seemed to be opposed to outside doctors at a fundamental level.

*Gee, I wonder why.*

There was also a stigma she had been trying to come to terms with for a couple of days as well. *If I see her... does that mean I have a problem?* Brooke wondered, as she shifted from foot to foot. *I don’t want to be the mentally unstable girl that came out of a cult.*

When she’d asked Emily about her, though, her new friend had nothing but good things to say. “She helped me sort through a lot of shit, when I first went to Blackwell,” she’d explained. “And she was the only one who didn’t get super-pissed when I skipped classes. The doc is legit.”

It didn’t matter. Brooke figured that if she didn’t see her, she’d hear about it from Miss Amber. With a sigh, she finally raised her hand and knocked on the door.

“Come in!”

A middle-aged woman greeted Brooke as she opened the door to the small office. Her purple sweater complimented her silver-grey hair, as did her dark slacks. The office itself was also decorated nicely; between the plants and the motivational posters, Brooke found herself a little more at-ease.

“Miss Scott.” Doctor Greene smiled as she stood from her desk. “Can I call you Brooke?”

She nodded.

“Why don’t you have a seat.” She gestured to the couch, as she sat easily on the chair across from it.

Brooke followed her instructions, dropping her backpack on the floor before she sat down. A small coffee table separated them, with a bowl full of decorative stones, a board with a chess game set up, and a small sand table with a miniature rake. Brooke eyed them all quickly before she turned back to the doctor.

“So.” The doctor crossed one leg over the other as she leaned back. “Are you doing okay, Brooke?”

The teenager nodded again.

Doctor Greene smirked. “You can talk, Brooke, if you want to.”

“Yea.” Brooke’s face flushed quickly. “... sorry.”

“That’s all right.” The doctor nodded. “You’re a little nervous?”

“Just...” Brooke searched for the words. “I’m not sure what I’m supposed to do here.”
“Of course.” Doctor Greene nodded. “I’m sure this a very confusing time for you right now, with everything you’ve been through over the past week.” She paused. “How are you sleeping? Most of the teenagers I’ve spoken to, who have left First Light, say that they don’t get a good night’s sleep for a while.”

Brooke nodded as she ran her hand over her face. “A little better,” she admitted. “But... I still haven’t really slept much, since I left. I keep waking up through the night.”

“What is it, that’s keeping you awake?” Doctor Green asked. “Or what is it that wakes you up? Bad dreams?”

The teenager bit her lip, hesitating.

“Brooke.” The doctor placed her elbows on the arms of her chair, and interlaced her fingers. “You have complete patient confidentiality in this room. Nothing you tell me will leave these four walls, not even to your social worker.”

“Yea, Miss Amber told me.” Brooke sighed, as she slouched down. “I just don’t really know where to start.”

“Hmm.” Doctor Greene pursed her lips. “Well, why don’t you tell me what you think about at night?”

“Mostly what I did.” Brooke looked away. “I get sidetracked, thinking about what my parents and grandfather will do if they get me back.”

“Are you scared of your family?”

Brooke scoffed. “Of course I am.”

“Yes, I suppose that is a silly question.” Doctor Greene nodded. “Is that what keeps you awake? Fear of your family?”

“Sometimes.” Brooke scratched at her arm. “They... hired a lawyer to get me back. Another Elder with First Light.”

The doctor studied her carefully. “You’re scared of him, too?”

“I mean, yea.” Brooke shook her head. “He killed his daughter and got away with it. And they sent him to the CPS office to get me back.”

“Hmm. This lawyer... it’s Ryan Caulfield, correct?”

Brooke looked back at Doctor Greene. “You know him?”

“Not personally, no. But I wouldn’t be very familiar with your old church if I wasn’t aware of him.” She uncrossed her legs. “I think you should know, Brooke, that he did not kill his daughter Maxine.”

“Max,” Brooke corrected quietly.

“I’m sorry?”

“She always asked us to call her Max.” Brooke perked up. “Wait. He didn’t kill her?”

Doctor Greene shook her head. “Maxine... I’m sorry, Max, was seen by a security camera buying a bus ticket after she ran away from her parent’s home.”
Brooke blinked. “How do you know that?”

“I was involved in the investigation,” she explained. “Not very much; I was consulted briefly, about where she might have run off to. But I was allowed to see the footage.” Doctor Greene leaned back into her chair. “How did you know her?”

“She was my camp counselor, a few years ago, when First Light was still running a summer camp for the other kids.” Brooke shook her head. “Everyone back home thinks she’s dead. And that Elder Caulfield killed her, on top of getting his wife off the hook for those other two girls’ deaths last year.”

“Yes, that she avoided a conviction is quite unfortunate.” Doctor Greene shook her head. “A lot of the other teenagers who ran away were extremely disheartened when she was found to be not guilty.”

Brooke sighed as she played with her fingers. “Yea. We all figured she was going to jail.”

Doctor Greene hummed. “We got off track a little bit. What else keeps you awake at night?”

“I...” Brooke glanced back at her. “It’s dumb. Sometimes I just, you know... wonder if what I did was a good idea.”

“Mm.” The doctor nodded. “Why do you think it wasn’t?”

“I mean, that’s the thing. I know that it WAS,” Brooke emphasized. “Emily told me, when I got there, to remember what I’d be doing right now if I had stayed. And... I definitely don’t want to go back, and live with my husband that I barely know.”

“You’re not married,” Doctor Greene reminded her.

“I know.” Brooke rubbed her hands together. “But... I have nothing now. I only left with what I could fit in my backpack. And it wasn’t very much. I...” she hesitated. “If I tell you I broke the law, will you tell anyone?”

The doctor shook her head. “Only if you killed somebody.”

“I didn’t. But I stole money, from my grandfather’s desk. And my dad’s wallet. That’s the only reason I have more than three sets of clothes right now.” Brooke glanced down at her outfit. “I don’t have anything else. All of my stuff could fit in a large duffle bag.”

Doctor Greene nodded. “I can see how that would be a little worrying.”

“Just a bit.”

“Let’s set aside the whole ‘marriage’ thing, for a moment.” The doctor scooted forward in her seat. “Do you think First Light would have let you go off to college?”

Brooke scoffed. “No way.”

“What about traveling?” Doctor Greene continued. “Seeing the world? Owning a house someday? Or your own car?”

“I...” Brooke frowned. “Yea, no. I don’t even think my mom’s car is in her name.”

“I doubt it.” Doctor Greene nodded. “Brooke, when you left First Light, you brought your own freedom. And you can’t fit that into a duffle bag.”
The teenager sighed. “I know that. I know all of that. There is not a doubt in my mind that I’m better off away from that church.”

“Good.”

“So.” Brooke looked the doctor in the eye. “Why the hell is it still keeping me awake?”

“My guess is that you don’t fully appreciate your new situation yet.” Doctor Greene smirked. “You’ve made a HUGE life adjustment, Brooke. This isn’t like starting a new diet. You’ve essentially entered a version of the Witness Protection Program. You haven’t gotten used to it yet, but your life is much better for having walked away from your church.”

Brooke bit her lip, as she absorbed what the woman said. “So... what am I supposed to do?”

“Whatever you want, Brooke.” Doctor Greene nodded. “First Light held you back for your entire life. You were restricted and suppressed. But now you’re free. You just have to realize that.”

“Kinda sounds like some fortune-cookie shit.”

Brooke sighed. “Yea, a little. But... I don’t know.”

Emily hummed. “Well. She could be right, though. They wouldn’t have given her a doctorate if she wasn’t smart.” She leaned back into the couch, as the girls took a break from their homework. “So. How do you want to rebel?”

“Was running away from home and irrevocably damaging my family’s reputation not enough?” Brooke rolled her eyes. “I’m not sure what else I could do. I already ditched the dresses, I use foul language, and I have a smartphone with internet access. If my grandfather could see me, he’d be having conniptions right now.”

“Hmm.” Emily pursed her lips as she thought. “Wow. I mean, this shouldn’t be hard. You’re an Elder’s granddaughter. You’re pretty much expected to be perfect in every way; grades, behavior, teeth, ha-”

Emily stopped, as she stared at Brooke.

“What?” Brooke tilted her head. “What’s that look for?”

“I think I just got an idea.”

“I REALLY don’t know about this.”

“Dude, relax.” Emily checked the box again as she mixed the hair dye with gloved hands. “It’s just some highlights. You will look great, I promise.”

“Do you even know what you’re doing?” Brooke asked, as she shifted uneasily. Emily had sat her on the toilet, and wrapped plastic around her neck to form a bib. “I’m noticing a distinct lack of color in YOUR hair.”

Emily nodded absently. “I actually did this for Sadie a few times. She said it was easier for someone else to do it.”

“She did red highlights in her hair?”
“No, she did blonde.” Emily shrugged. “She tried red, but didn’t like it. It’s the same concept, though. You’ll be fine.”

Brooke was still nervous. “I’m not sure this will look good,” she admitted. “I never, ever, thought about putting any kind of color in my hair. I liked it fine just the way it is.”

“Hey, we’re rebelling against your grandfather, remember?” Emily set the bowl down and picked up the brush, dipping it into the bright red dye. “Besides, you will totally look good with a little bit of red in your ponytail.”

“But.”

Emily grabbed a handful of Brooke’s hair and quickly hit it with the brush. “Too late. No backing out now.”

“Wha- Emily!!” Brooke exclaimed. “What the fuck?!”

“Don’t swear,” Emily sang mockingly as she brushed the dye into Brooke’s hair, before laying it onto a piece of foil. “Miss Amber would be very disappointed in you.”

Brooke blew air through her nostrils in frustration, as her friend continued brushing the dye into her hair. “Emily, if this doesn’t come out good, you’ll never have to worry about Miss Amber getting on your case ever again.”

“Yea.” Emily continued brushing Brooke’s hair. “Promises, promises.”

“Are you done yet?”

“Can I get a minute?!” Brooke yelled back at the bathroom door, while she quickly toweled herself off. The white towel she’d used for her hair was stained red, and looked like she’d spilled a gallon of paint on it. “We’re gonna have to replace this hair towel, by the way.”

“Yea, whatever. They’re, like, three bucks at Wal-Mart.” Emily pounded on the bathroom door. “I wanna see it!”

“I said ONE MINUTE!!” Brooke finished drying off, then quickly wrapped herself in a robe before she unlocked the door. “Jesus. You’re really impatient, you know that?”

Emily was smirking as she opened the door. “Is it so wrong, that I want to make sure I did a good job?”

“It had better be a good job.” Brooke picked up the hair dryer and started on her hair, the hot air drowning out whatever Emily was saying. She switched it off after a few minutes. “Huh?”

“I was saying, it looks really good.” Emily appraised her hair carefully. “Put it up in your ponytail and check it out.”

Brooke followed her instructions, doing up her hair before rubbing the fog off the mirror. She turned her head left and right, inspecting the red streaks in her hair.

“... whoa.”

“Does that mean you approve?” Emily asked smugly.

“I... yea.” Brooke pulled at her ponytail, fluffing it out. “Wow, I really like that.”
“Good.” Emily sounded pleased. “Look at that. You found your own hairstyle while flipping your grandpa a big middle finger. Can’t get better than that.”
Victoria liked to think that she didn’t hate very many people.

The list of people she liked was short, and was mostly friends and family; Kate, of course, was on top, followed by her parents, Taylor, Courtney, Dana, and the like. Most people she was neutral on, remaining professional and polite, as society and her family dictated.

There were plenty of people she disliked. A few of her professors, some of the bitchier students. The driver of the Nissan who had cut her off in traffic and almost gotten her into an accident a few years prior. People who cut in line, or brought their screaming babies to movie theaters.

But hatred. That was one of the earliest lessons her father had taught her.

“Hatred is rare,” he’d lectured after she asked him a question about his business, during high school. “Hatred is also very unproductive.”

“So...” she’d frowned. “You don’t hate Sean?”

“No.” He’d shaken his head. “I don’t like him very much, to be sure. But I’m not suing him for that, I’m suing him for the lack of services he provided, after being contracted to do so.”

“What would it take for you to hate him?” Victoria had asked, curiously.

“He would have to do something very bad.” Her father had leaned forward in his chair. “Hatred brings out the worst in people. You act irrationally, and lose your temper. You make mistakes.”

“Hmm. So... you don’t hate anybody?”

He’d smirked. “Oh, no, I definitely hate people. But that hatred is for personal reasons. And I recognize that I have it, and act accordingly.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that I don’t beat people up in the school library.”

Her father was spooky sometimes, with what he knew. Victoria, in her surprise, hadn’t replied.

“You know you could have gotten in a lot of trouble. That girl and her father could have pressed charges, which might have gotten you expelled.” He’d leaned back. “Your school has a zero-tolerance policy for bullying, Victoria. Your mother and I raised you to know better.”

“... I’m sorry.”

“I accept your apology. But that’s what I mean. You need to recognize you have that hatred, and use it constructively.”

“What, like a ‘don’t get angry, get even’ thing?”

“Exactly. Disregard your baser instincts, and be better than your enemies. Take the loss of the battle to win the war.”

Victoria had taken that to heart. The list of people she hated only included Rachel Amber and Steph Gingrich; she made a valiant effort not to expand that list.
But she couldn’t help it. She often found herself fantasizing about driving down to San Diego, and curb-stomping Kate’s mother.

As their relationship progressed, Victoria began notice a pattern. For a few days, Kate would be the girl she was when they’d first met; bubbly, outgoing, and cheerful. She enjoyed that time, and made use of it whenever she could.

And then her goddamn mother would call. Or text.

Victoria’s father sat on the board of the company that owned the cell service provider Kate used, and it was everything not to beg him to discreetly block Kate’s mother from her phone. Because when Kate did get a call, she got quiet. She’d pick at her food instead of eating it, mumble instead of talk, and generally just be a mopey person.

It had ruined more than one of their dinner dates. Victoria was NOT about to let it ruin their brief vacation.

“I had no idea you could even rent cabins in Yosemite,” Kate said brightly, as Victoria drove. “I went camping here with my dad, when I was little, but we slept in a tent.”

“Yea, this will be way more comfortable,” she grinned. By pure coincidence, they’d both had a four-day break in classes during the end of October, and she’d had the idea for a little getaway. Yosemite had appealed to her, because of the scenery and the various spots they could visit.

And because there’s, like, zero cell service.

Victoria didn’t say that out loud, though, as she pushed her sunglasses further up on her nose.

“We’ve got an actual bed and kitchen,” she assured her girlfriend. “We won’t be sleeping on the ground, or swatting mosquitos.”

“I think it’s too cold for them.” Kate tightened the zipper on her jacket. “Good thing I brought my heavy coat.”

“And your boots. You’re going to need them.” Victoria took another turn, as she drove deeper into the park. “The cabin is near the redwoods, but it’s a little bit of a hike to get there.”

“What about the Half Dome?” Kate asked. “Or the really big trees?”

“We have to drive to the Half Dome.” Victoria shrugged. “There are Sequoias nearby, but the big ones, the General Sherman and The Sentinel, are too far away. We’ll have to drive to those, too.”

“Oh well. Still.” Kate turned, looking back out the window. “Wow. It is so pretty out here.”

“Yep.” Victoria admired the scenery as she drove. “The cabin is nice, too. Wait until you see it.”

They got to the small cabin an hour later. Kate’s eyes widened as they carried their bags through the front entrance. “Whoa,” she breathed, admiring the wooden walls, spacious kitchen and living room, and giant stone fireplace. “We’re using that, right?”

“Totally.” Victoria grinned as she closed the door behind them. “There’s an item on my bucket list that involves a pretty girl, a fireplace, and a bearskin rug.”

“Oh, God.” Kate rolled her eyes.

“Was that a ‘no’?”
Victoria couldn’t help but smile as they sat on the couch after dinner. Kate curled up against her as they both sipped from their wine glasses, staring into the fire. Victoria kept one arm around her girlfriend’s shoulder, running it slowly up and down Kate’s arm. Neither of them spoke as the admired the flames.

“I could totally live out here,” Kate finally said quietly.

“Mm.” Victoria pursed her lips. “I don’t know. I’d want at least a Wal-Mart nearby.”

Kate snorted. “I’m sure there’s a delivery service, or something.”

“Maybe.” Victoria glanced down at Kate. “So, did I pick a good vacation spot?”

“You picked a great vacation spot.” Kate nestled deeper into her side. “We’re going to see the Half Dome tomorrow, right?”

“Yes.” Victoria smiled. “It’s a couple of hours away, but we don’t really have to worry about getting up early. We can sleep in.”

Kate hummed. “So we can stay up late, too?”

“Sure.” Victoria glanced down at her. “Did we have any other plans tonight?”

Her girlfriend grinned as she tilted her head back, finishing her glass of wine. “Maybe,” she said smugly. “But you have to stay here for a couple of minutes.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so.” Kate stood. “Be right back.”

Victoria watched her head to their bedroom before she turned back to the fire, unable to keep a smile from her face as she leaned back into the couch. A romantic cabin in the middle of nowhere, all by ourselves, with my girlfriend. She took her glass back up, finishing the wine that was left. Victoria Chase, you are a brilliant woman.

She sighed as she waited for her girlfriend. After a few minutes, though, she glanced back at the door to their bedroom, concerned with the amount of time Kate was taking. What in the world is she doing?

Victoria got up, quietly walking toward the door. Her heart lurched as she got closer and heard the last thing she wanted; her girlfriend talking in a low voice.

“Mom- Mom, why do you have Stella’s- no. It doesn’t matter. I don’t have time for this. I’m in the middle of- no, Mom, I’m not talking to Chris! Can I... no, Mom! Not now!”

What the fuck?! Victoria stared at the door, frozen. There’s no reception out here! How did that bitch call-

The Wi-Fi. Our phones can take calls over the Wi-Fi.

Fucking fucking FUCK.

Victoria bit her lip and slowly pushed the door open, taking in the scene. Kate was still wearing her jeans and long-sleeved shirt as she sat on the foot of the bed. The energy she’d had not five minutes
before was completely gone; she looked like she was a light breeze away from collapsing in on
herself. The arm not holding her phone hung limply by her side as she kept her eyes on the floor.

“Mom, I have to go. I- no, I’m busy, and you- Mom, I do not have time to talk right now. There’s a
reason I wasn’t answering- no, Mom, it...”

Kate glanced up, and Victoria watched her expression fall like she’d been caught with her hand in
the cookie jar. She bit her lip as she averted her gaze, the shame clear in her face as her mother
jabbered on in her ear.

Victoria didn’t say anything as she slowly walked over to the router on the dresser and reached
behind it, disconnecting the power cord. The sound from Kate’s phone immediately died as the call
dropped. Kate blinked, glancing between Victoria and her phone before she set it down on the bed
next to her.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

Victoria didn’t say anything back as she sat on the bed next to her, turning so that she was facing
Kate.

“She called me from my friend Stella’s phone.” Kate sniffed as she wiped her nose. “I don’t know
why or how my mom got her phone, but-” she paused and sniffed again. Victoria watched her eyes
get moist. “I was trying to get rid of her, but she wouldn’t stop-”

Victoria reached over and took her face, turning it so they were looking at each other. She leaned in
and kissed her softly.

“I love you,” she said quietly as they broke apart. “It’s not your fault.”

“But-”

“I love you,” Victoria blurted.

Kate froze, her wide, blinking eyes the only movement she made.

“I’m sorry your mother is crazy,” she continued. “I’m sorry you have to deal with her. But... you are
so much more of an incredible person for it.” She cupped Kate’s cheek, using her thumb to wipe the
lone tear from her cheek. “I don’t care about your mom. If I have to put up with her to be with you,
then so be it. I just... I love you, Kate.”

Her girlfriend’s lip trembled as she sniffed deeply. She quickly wiped her nose. “I love you, too,” she
replied, her voice cracking as another tear ran down her cheek. “I’m so sorry, Vicky.”

“Enough of that.” Victoria leaned in and kissed Kate again, before she stood back up. “Now, come
on.”

Kate wiped her eyes before she took Victoria’s hand, allowing herself to be pulled back to her feet.
“What are we doing?”

“We’re going back to the couch.” Victoria smiled. “Whatever you were going to do, or wear, save it
for tomorrow. Like I said, I have a bucket list entry.”

Kate smiled back. “I didn’t see a bearskin rug, Vicky.”

“I’ll consider it a technical detail.”
It's on now, bitch, Victoria thought as she led the way back into the living room. Momma Marsh doesn’t know who she’s fucking with.

“Are you sure?”

Kate nodded. It was the next morning, and they were both still in bed, laying on their sides as they faced each other. “My grades were supposed to come out yesterday,” she said. “I just want to log into my student portal and see what they were.”

“Your mom probably left messages on your phone,” Victoria cautioned.

“I’m sure she did. I have no intention of listening to them.”

Victoria pursed her lips and nodded, quickly getting out of bed. “I do want to check Facebook,” she allowed. “Dana and Courtney were going to check out some bridesmaid dresses yesterday. I’m sure they threw the pictures all over Instagram.”

She plugged the router back in and went back to bed. They both picked up their phones as they waited for the router to restart, the light finally turning green.

“Oh, they picked some cute ones.” Victoria flipped through her feed, examining the pictures Courtney had posted. “And a couple of ugly ones... good lord, I hope Dana doesn’t expect us to wear that.”

Kate looked over. “Are they really bad?”

“Depends on whether or not you think burlap sacks are in fashion.” Victoria showed Kate her phone. “I think Dana made Courtney wear this one as a joke.”

Kate giggled. “Okay, that is pretty ugly.”

“Yea. How are your grades?”

“I’m still logging in.” Kate looked back to her phone as it started jingling. “Oh, wow.”

“What? How are they?”

“It’s my voicemails. My mom left six of them.”

Victoria glanced over. “Seriously?”

Kate nodded. “I told you, I’m not listening to them.” She scrolled through her phone. “And... yay!” she squealed.

Victoria grinned. “What’s you get?”

“Three As and a B-Plus!” Kate showed Victoria her phone, as she grinned.

“Awesome!” Victoria grabbed Kate and dragged her close, wrapping her in a tight hug. “Way to rock that three-point-seven GPA!”

“Three-point-eight,” Kate corrected as she scrolled through her portal. “Oh, one of my teachers emailed me. He says I have an assignment for my next class.”

“Aw.” Victoria pouted. “Is it a long one?”
“No, it’s short.” Kate shrugged. “Quick little assignment, just to get us-”

Her phone rang, interrupting her. She glanced back at the screen, and Victoria watched her deflate.

*Oh, come on.*

“Your mother has shit timing,” Victoria scowled.

Kate didn’t reply, as she stared at her phone.

“Just ignore it,” Victoria implored her. “Send her to voicemail. She can leave a seventh one.”

“It’s ringing. She knows my phone is back on.” Kate’s eyes narrowed. “Okay. You know what? I’m taking care of this right now.”

“What does-”

Kate answered the phone before Victoria could finish her question. “WHAT, Mom?!?” she snapped.

Victoria’s eyes got wide, at her girlfriend’s outburst.

“You heard exactly what I said, Mother, and I don’t give a damn if you don’t care for my tone.” Kate crossed her arms. “Did you consider that maybe the reason I’ve been ignoring your phone calls is that I don’t want to talk to you right now?”

She listened for a few seconds.

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe it’s because I’m busy? Because I have a social life, with friends, and people I care about that doesn’t always include you? I’m sorry if that hurts your feelings, but you’re going to have to get over it.”

Victoria could only watch in awe as Kate spoke. It was probably the most forward she’d ever seen her act.

“Well, that’s too bad. And quite frankly, it doesn’t matter. I’m only talking to you now to let you know that after I hang up, I’m turning my phone back off for a few days. So calling me non-stop and leaving multiple voicemails won’t accomplish anything, unless your goal is to waste your time. Now, do you have anything important to say before I end this call?”

She listened again.

“Yea, I didn’t think so. Bye, Mom.”

With that, she ended the call and held down the power button on her phone. She swiped as soon as the prompt came up, turning the device off before she set it back on the table.

“... holy crap,” Victoria breathed.

“Yea.” Kate glanced at her. “Well. Should we get up and eat breakfast?”

“Um...” Victoria bit her lip as she set her phone down. “Not yet.”

Kate frowned. “Why n-”

Victoria rolled back over on top of her girlfriend as she squealed.
“Your hair looks good. I like the new color.”
Brooke smiled at Miss Amber. “Thanks.”
“What made you decide to do that?”
“Emily and I were talking about rebelling against my grandfather.” Brooke drummed her fingers on the conference room table at the CPS office. “She pointed out that a little color in my hair would probably get his goose.”
“No doubt.” Miss Amber tilted her head. “Are you nervous?”
Brooke nodded, as she spun her chair slowly with her foot. “I’ve never met with a lawyer before,” she said. “But... I mean, Elder Caulfield is the only one I know of.”
“Ryan Caulfield is not the bar with which to judge lawyers,” Miss Amber told her. “Mrs. Weaver is a very nice lady. She runs her own law firm, but she donates most of her personal time to women and children who need it.”
Brooke bit her lip. “Elder Caulfield is really good, though. I know he is.”
“So is Mrs. Weaver,” Miss Amber assured her, as the door to the conference room opened behind her. “And she’s not intimidated by him.”
“Damn right I’m not.” Brooke turned as an older woman with light blonde hair strolled in, looking at her with a smile. “Ryan Caulfield is my bitch.”
The teenager smirked in amusement, as Miss Amber rolled her eyes. “Language.”
“You’re a lot more fun when you’re not at work.” The woman sat down across from them. “It’s Brooke, right?”
She nodded.
“Good. You can call me Megan.” The lawyer opened her bag and retrieved a laptop and a bundle of cables, setting it up while she talked. “Now, Brooke, I’m sure Miss Amber has told you that your family is suing the state and her office for your return of custody?”
“Yea.” Brooke looked down at her lap. “I know.”
“Okay. Just so you’re fully aware,” Megan finished with the cables, revealing a pair of microphones. “I’m going to record this, but that’s only for my records. You don’t have to worry about this playing in court. And this entire conversation will be covered by attorney-client privilege, so I can’t reveal anything you tell me, even under a subpoena. Understand?”
Brooke nodded again. "Yes."
“Now, full disclosure; I’m under contract by this office to be your lawyer,” Megan continued.
“They’re paying for me to be here, and act as your counsel. But I’m under no obligation to your social workers. Which is why I recommend that you ask Miss Amber to leave.”

The social worker frowned, as Brooke looked at her. “You know I won’t say anything under oath either, Megan.”

“I know. But unlike me, you can be charged with contempt for that,” Megan explained. “Your presence in this room puts both you and Brooke at risk.”

“I’ve signed the mother of all non-disclosure agreements,” Miss Amber argued. “The state of Oregon has decreed that I am to keep my mouth shut regarding the children that pass through this office, even under oath.”

Megan pursed her lips, before she turned back to the teenager. “Brooke, I want you to answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ only. Did you pack a bag before you had Miss Amber come get you?”

“Yes.” Brooke nodded.

“You took physical objects from your home with you, when you left?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Now.” Megan leaned forward. “If ANY of the items you took did not belong to you, to include personal effects or currency? You need to ask Miss Amber to leave. Her non-disclosure agreement with the state will not cover her if she finds out that you committed any crimes.”

Brooke bit her lip as she slowly looked over at her social worker, an incredibly guilty look on her face. Miss Amber met her gaze, then sighed after a few seconds.

“Fine.” She stood to leave, but paused, reaching over and touching Brooke’s shoulder. “For the record, Brooke... I don’t care. You did what you had to do to leave, and as far as I’m concerned, you did nothing wrong.”

With that, she walked out, closing the door behind her. Brooke turned back to face Megan. “It was money,” she said quietly, her eyes on the table. “I stole cash from my grandpa’s office. And from my dad’s wallet.”

“How much was it?” Megan asked. “And where, exactly, from your grandfather’s office?”

“About a hundred and fifty bucks, from an envelope in his desk, and another fifty from the wallet.”

“What kind of envelope?”

“Just a plain envelope. Like the kind you put in the mail.”

“Was anything written on the outside of it?”

“Not that I saw.”

Megan nodded. “Okay. Brooke, I want you to listen carefully,” she said as she leaned forward. “You will never, ever, say that again. Understand?”

Brooke frowned. “Say what?”

“That you stole money. Don’t mention it to anyone, don’t admit it if asked, and don’t confess to it if questioned by law enforcement,” Megan rattled off. “If anyone DOES ask you about it, tell them to
find and speak to your lawyer, and keep your mouth shut. No matter what they say.”

“Um... okay.” Brooke blinked. “Why?”

“Because unless your family has evidence that the money was there in the first place, they have no way to pin that theft on you,” Megan told her. “The burden of proof is on them to put that money in your hands. If you admit it, then they have a case. You keep your mouth shut, they have nothing.”

Brooke nodded. “I can do that.”

“Then we need never discuss this again.” Megan tapped her laptop, and a light at the base of the microphone lit up. “Okay, this is Megan Weaver interviewing Brooke Scott on November eighteenth, two thousand eighteen, at the Oregon Child Protective Services office.” She looked back at Brooke. “Are you ready, Brooke?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” Megan retrieved a notepad and a pen, clicking it as she prepared to start writing. “Now. How old are you?”

“Fifteen.” Brooke paused. “Sixteen next week.”

“Happy early birthday.” Megan smiled as she made a note. “Brooke, I want you to walk me through the circumstances that lead to you calling the social worker, back in October. I don’t want you to leave anything out.”

It took Brooke about an hour, to get through everything. Megan didn’t ask any questions until she finished, ending with her arrival at the foster house.

“Go back to the marriage certificate,” she said. “You did sign it, back when you were a child?”

Brooke nodded, worry starting to creep in. “I... thought it was pretend,” she said quietly.

“And you said it was notarized?”

“I didn’t look that closely at that. But my grandpa said it was.”

“Okay.” Megan nodded, as she continued writing.

“Does...” Brooke hesitated, not sure if she wanted an answer. “Does that mean I’m screwed?”

Megan snorted in amusement, as she looked at Brooke. “Is that what you’re worried about?”

She nodded.

“Brooke.” Megan put her pen down. “If Ryan Caulfield produced that marriage certificate, it would be the best thing to ever happen to you.”

Her eyebrows arched. “Really?”

“Are you kidding?” Megan smirked. “Brooke, Oregon does have some religious freedom laws. But NONE of them allow for child brides. And there is no legal document, in the world, that can be signed by an eight-year-old and stand up in court. Furthermore, it has been firmly established that First Light bribed city workers to falsely notarize documents. That, alone, would put your grandfather on the hook for fraud.”
“So...” Brooke hesitated. “If Elder Caulfield brought it up in court...”

“He won’t.” Megan shook her head. “He’d be an idiot, if he did. And while Ryan Caulfield is a lot of things, he’s not an idiot.” She sighed. “Unfortunately, that means we can’t use it, either. Which is too bad, because it would make this whole thing go away in five minutes. Stealing THAT from your grandfather’s office would have been a lot better than money.”

Brooke exhaled through her nostrils. “Sorry.”

“No way you would have known.” Megan shrugged. “Don’t worry about it. My guess is that Ryan and your grandfather will stick with the ‘Brooke Scott is a compulsive liar who makes things up’ story that they tried to feed Miss Amber.”

“Great,” Brooke muttered. “What do we do about that?”

“We have a few options. Starting with having you speak with a proper psychologist, not some pastor the church is claiming you’ve been seeing.”

Brooke scoffed, as she stared at her feet. “I’ve never seen a pastor for these supposed ‘problems’.”

“Which is one of the things we can try to prove in court.” Megan nodded as she tapped her laptop, the light on the microphones turning off. “But I don’t want you to worry about it. These things take time, and we’ve got a fair amount of it. A judge won’t even see me and Ryan in court until after Christmas.”

“What for?”

“A preliminary hearing.” Megan closed the laptop, putting it away. “He’ll decide if the lawsuit has merits, and if it will go through to Family Court.”

Brooke perked back up. “So... it could get tossed out?”

Megan sighed, as she met Brooke’s gaze. “It could. I’ll do my best to see that it is. But I’ll tell you right now, Brooke, it won’t.”

Her heart skipped a beat. “Why not?!”

The lawyer closed her bag and leaned forward. “Because Ryan Caulfield will make some valid points,” she explained. “You are a minor, who was removed from your family home based only on your story, without any kind of investigation by CPS.”

“But...” Brooke’s voice trailed off. “They were going to make me..”

“Miss Amber and Miss Hemingway made a very calculated risk when they placed those posters in your old high school,” Megan continued. “For the most part, it’s paid off. Especially since Ryan Caulfield doesn’t have the time to sue the CPS office for every single runaway, and most of the First Light families can’t afford outside counsel. You’re the exception to the rule, I’m afraid.”

“But they...” Brooke’s voice caught, and her heart rate increased. She suddenly felt like she couldn’t breathe; trying to inhale felt like sucking cement through a straw. Her body started shaking, as she gasped.

“Brooke?” Megan stood quickly, making her way around the table. She laid a hand on the teenager’s shoulder. “Brooke, calm down. It’s-”
“They tried...” Brooke gasped, sucking in air as she struggled to form words. “They tried... to make me... I can’t... I can’t go back!”

“Brooke!” Megan leaned over and knocked her fist on the conference room door, not taking her eyes off the teenager. “Brooke, you need to calm down. Take some deep breaths, and try to-”

“I CAN’T!!” Brooke managed to spit out. Her heartbeat was through the roof, and she was feeling too many emotions too quickly; fear, anxiety, and despair all clawed at her mind. Tears formed in the corners of her eyes as she started hyperventilating. “I can’t go back, I don’t want to go back, I don’t want to be married to Bobby, please don’t make me go back, PLEASE DON’T MAKE ME-”

Miss Amber shoved the door open, as Brooke’s voice reached a high pitch. “What’s going on?!”

“She’s having a panic attack. Brooke!” Megan raised her voice over the teenager’s ragged breath as she tightened her grip on her shoulder. “Brooke, you’re not going-”

“NO!!” Brooke flailed in her seat, throwing the lawyer’s hand off her shoulders as she pushed herself away. “DON’T TOUCH ME!!”

“Brooke!” Miss Amber reached for her. “You-”

“LEAVE ME ALONE!!” Brooke screamed as she exploded from her chair, retreating to the corner of the room. Her eyes were wild, as she flicked her gaze between Megan and Miss Amber. “I WON’T GO!! YOU CAN’T MAKE ME GO BACK!! I DON’T WANT TO BE MARRIED!! I DON’T WANT TO HAVE SEX WITH BOBBY!! I DON’T CARE WHAT THE JUDGE SAYS!! I WON’T GO BACK!!”

Miss Amber and Megan held their hands out in a calming gesture, as Brooke screamed. They stayed silent, until the only sound was Brooke’s ragged breathing. Outside the conference room, all the sound from the office had stopped, as the social workers stood at their desks as they watched through the glass walls. Even Miss Hemingway had opened the door to her office, observing silently as Brooke had her breakdown.

“You are not going back,” Miss Amber finally said quietly. “Listen to me, Brooke. Do you remember what I said, when you called me from the phone at school that day?”

Brooke didn’t answer, as she struggled to draw breath.

“I promised you that I wouldn’t let your family take you against your will.” Miss Amber took a tentative step closer. “I meant it, Brooke. Nobody is going to take you anywhere. This entire office is fighting for your future. One that does NOT involve First Light,” she emphasized. “And nobody, not your parents, not your grandfather, not Ryan Caulfield, NOBODY is going to take that away from you.”

Brooke didn’t stop hyperventilating. She became overcome by emotion, and her lips began trembling. Her mouth opened, but only a strangled choking came out as the floodgates were unleashed. A loud sob exploded from her mouth as her legs failed her, and she slid down the wall to the floor. Her head hung into her lap as she started crying harder then she’d ever done before.

Miss Amber was on the floor next to her in a second, as she wrapped an arm around the teenager’s shoulders. Brooke let herself get pulled sideways, her face burying itself into the crook of Miss Amber’s elbow as she bawled, tears flowing freely into the plaid fabric of her social worker’s shirt.

Megan: How is she?
Rachel: Not great. But she wasn’t crying when I brought her back to her foster home.

Megan: Someone’s keeping a close eye on her, right?

Megan: You know her better than me, but she seemed ready to do something drastic.

Rachel: I told her foster mother what happened. She’s got it covered

Megan: Good. She’s a sweet kid.

Rachel: Do I have to worry about whatever she told you?

Megan: No. She’ll be fine.

Megan: Do I have to worry about what you told HER?

Rachel: ... no.

Megan: We’ve talked about this, Rachel.

Megan: You can’t keep promising these kids that they won’t go back. That’s not something either of us can guarantee, and you know that.

Rachel: We’ve done it so far.

Megan: You were removing kids who were visibly abused. Or gay, after those two girls were beaten to death and the church had established a pattern.

Megan: This is different. I have nothing to go on but Brooke’s statement. There’s no proof of what she said happened.

Megan: And while I might not be intimidated or scared of Ryan Caulfield, I’m not naïve, either. He’s one of the best lawyers in the state; this WILL be an uphill battle.

Rachel: I don’t care. None of these kids are going back.

Megan: And Linda Everett?

Rachel: ... she ran back on her own. I never got the chance to talk her out of it.

Megan: Rachel, I know how much you hate First Light. Believe me, they’re not on my Christmas Card list either.

Megan: But we can only do so much. That church, much as I hate to say it, is powerful. And I’m sure they’re playing up Linda’s return to mean that those teenagers can’t hack it on the outside.

Rachel: I know that. You don’t have to explain how First Light operates to me.

Megan: And you know I don’t want to tell you how to do your job.

Megan: But you can’t keep making promises to these kids. You’re giving them false hope, and that’s not fair.

Rachel: ...
Rachel: You might be right.

Megan: About making promises?

Rachel: False hope.

Rachel: Linda left because she thought she wouldn’t be able to live without First Light’s support system. We both know that’s not true.

Megan: That wasn’t the main focus of my argument.

Rachel: Yea. But... I might know someone who can help.

Megan: Did you take away what I said, about making promises you might not be able to keep?

Rachel: I have every intention of keeping my promise. To Brooke, and all the others.

Megan: And if a judge says that you have to give her back?

Rachel: Then I’ll do what I have to do.

Megan: ...

Megan: I don’t ever, EVER, want to know what that statement means.

Rachel: Understood.

Brooke: Are you there?

Joey: Hey! Long time, no talk! What’s up, orphan?

Brooke: Ha ha, you’re so fucking funny.

Brooke: I need your help.

Joey: With what?

Brooke: This needs to be kept quiet. Not even Amy can know about it.

Joey: Seriously?

Brooke: Yes. I... have something.

Joey: ... is it a crush on Amy?

Brooke: No!!

Joey: Hey, you know I won’t judge, so long as I can watch.

Brooke: Shut the fuck up and listen, you perv. I took some stuff from my grandfather’s house before I left, but I don’t know exactly what it is.

Joey: What kind of stuff?
Brooke: Bank statements, I think. I’ve been looking over them, but a lot of it is beyond me.

Brooke: I’m pretty sure that it’s proof that my grandpa is doing shady shit.

Joey: Then you should probably give it to the cops.

Brooke: I was going to, but... my family is suing the state to get custody of me back.

Brooke: I think I might need something in my back pocket, just in case they win.

Joey: Okay, game face is on. What do you need from me?

Brooke: Well, you’re way smarter than me. How hard is it to find out stuff about a business?

Joey: Depends on the kind. We talking corporation, sole proprietorship, limited liability?

Brooke: Hell if I know. The company is called Abel Industries.

Joey: Gimme two minutes.

Joey: Okay, Google doesn’t have much. It’s an LLC, but that’s all I could find.

Joey: Can I get some context?

Brooke: Like what?

Joey: Where did you get the name from?

Brooke: It’s at the top of the bank statements I grabbed.

Joey: Okay, we might be able to work with this. I think I can file a records request electronically.

Brooke: Records request? Where? And for what?

Joey: With the state, and for the names attached to that company. Business dealings are private, but information about an LLC is not. The owners and officers of the corporation will be a matter of public record.

Brooke: I understood some of those words.

Joey: Was that a pop culture reference? I’m so PROUD of you!!

Brooke: Blow me. How long, do you think?

Joey: Could take a while. Bureaucracy, and all. Want to make this go faster?

Brooke: How?

Joey: Look over the rest of those statements. Figure out how many accounts they move money through, and see if there are any patterns.

Brooke: Like what?

Joey: Do they make certain transactions every week? Every month? Does the same dollar amount
pop up over and over? Stuff like that.

**Brooke:** Alright. I’ll channel my inner Nancy Drew.

**Joey:** ANOTHER pop culture reference?

**Brooke:** I knew about her before I ran away. Shut up.
“Fuck this.”

Steph dragged her hands along her face, as she looked hopelessly over the pile of schoolwork in front of her.

It was finals week. Crunch time. Her first test was in two days, and she felt woefully unprepared. She’d just spent thirty minutes reading from one of her textbooks, and when she sat back and thought about it, she couldn’t recall any of it.

“Come on.” Steph picked the textbook back up, a pen in her other hand to take notes. “You can do this.”

She started reading again, and watched helplessly as the words slid around the page on her.

“Shit.” She sighed and glanced at her window, noting the darkening sky; she’d sat down three hours before. “Okay, time for a pick-me-up.”

Steph shoved the book aside and got up, walking to her fridge and opening it. She reached in and retrieved a blue and silver can, popping the tab and taking a large gulp.

“Come on, baby,” she muttered as she took her seat again. “Momma needs her some wings.”

The Red Bull helped, a little. Steph spent another hour reading, and managed to pull herself together enough to take some notes. She was flipping to a new page when her laptop started beeping, the sound startling her so much she jumped in her seat.

She glanced at the open screen and her face fell.

_I do not need this right now._

Sighing, she reached over and answered the Skype call.

“There you are.” Rachel folded her arms, as she looked at Steph through the camera. “I’ve been calling you. Where have you been?”

“I turned my phone off.” Steph rubbed her eyes. “I’m trying to study.”

“All day?”

“It’s finals, remember?”

“Oh, right.” Rachel paused. “Are you still coming with me to Seattle this weekend?”

Steph looked at the screen, exasperated. “Really? Do we have to do this right now? I’m busy, Rachel.”

“Too busy to give me an answer?” Rachel retorted.
“Kinda, yea.” Steph leaned back. “Look, I don’t know, all right? I have finals that Monday, too. I need to study this weekend.”

“Come on, Steph.” Rachel gave her a look. “You’ve ducked out of this for the past six weeks. You can’t just—”

“Dude, it’s the end of the school year,” Steph shot back. “They’re our final classes. It’s my last chance to boost my GPA.”

“I have classes too,” Rachel retorted. “And I’m on the Master’s track this summer! I can still find time to look for Max!”

“Well, good for fucking you.” Steph glared at the screen. “This might be a foreign concept to you, but I actually have to put effort into my schoolwork to pass my classes with flying colors. I don’t have time to run all over the Pacific Northwest to look for Max right now.”

Rachel stared at her through the camera for a few minutes, before she sighed and turned away. “I always wondered which one of us would try to forget about her first,” she muttered.

Between the lack of sleep, the stress of her studies, and that statement, something inside Steph’s head broke.

“Hey, FUCK you!” she snapped. Rachel blinked in surprise, as she turned back to the camera. “Forget about Max? How the FUCK can I possibly forget about Max?!”

“Steph, I—”

“There isn’t a week that goes by where I don’t feel like a piece of shit!” Steph continued. “Not when we’re constantly updating that Facebook page, and running all over the place, and tearing up the state looking for her! And Seattle?! We’ve been to that city NINE FUCKING TIMES, and haven’t seen any sign of her! What the HELL makes you think the tenth is going to be any different?!”

“I don’t know!” Rachel’s face flushed in frustration. “I just thought we should keep trying to, you know, find the friend we abandoned to the fucking wolves!”

“We HAVE tried!!” Steph blinked rapidly, trying to keep her tears at bay. “Literally NOBODY else is looking for her anymore! Even her most high-and-fucking-mighty Victoria Chase gave up after one weekend! Everybody has moved on but us, Rachel!”

It was Rachel’s turn to glare at Steph. “So is that it, then?” she asked. “You’re just going to forget about her?”

“I CANNOT fucking forget about her!” Steph yelled, taking a deep breath. “I am always going to feel like a piece of shit for what happened. But I want to move on. I want to have a life that does not revolve around trying to find a girl who’s most likely dead.”

“She’s NOT dead!!” Rachel exclaimed. “You know how I know? Because I actually looked! I call and email hospitals and medical examiners! I check the FBI’s page for unidentified Jane Does! Max is still alive!”

“I...” Steph took a deep breath. “Fuck. Rachel, I don’t want to do this anymore. She’s gone. But if you really want to hang onto that pipe dream, I can’t stop you.”

“Well, good for you,” Rachel seethed. “I guess I’ll be the only one who hasn’t given up on her then.”
“Oh, fuck you.” Steph rubbed her forehead, as she leaned forward onto her elbows. “Save your guilt-tripping bullshit for someone who hasn’t heard it before.”

“Fuck you too!” Rachel fired back. Her face was a bright red, as she glared daggers through the screen. “Why does it have to be me? Why am I the only one who still gives a shit about Max?!”

“I do care about Max!” Steph exclaimed. “What the FUCK makes you think I-”

“Then why do I have to be the only one with faith that she’s alive?!”

“BECAUSE IT WAS YOUR IDEA THAT GOT HER KILLED!!”

As soon as she said it, Steph regretted it.

She desperately wanted to take it back. In the seconds of silence following her outburst, she would have given anything to turn the clock back, and stop the words from exploding from her mouth.

But she couldn’t. It was done. And there was no putting the cookie back in the jar.

Rachel blinked on her laptop screen, her words failing her as she stared at Steph. She didn’t seem hurt, or surprised, or angry. Steph tried to come up with something, words to tell Rachel that she was sorry, and that she didn’t mean it, but nothing came. They both stared at each other, a look of shock on their faces.

Finally, Rachel averted her eyes. Steph watched as she moved her hand towards the mouse.

“Ra-”

The screen went black.

YOUR CALL HAS ENDED.

... fuck.

Fuck.

FUCK!!!

Steph threw both arms on the table and swiped everything off of it. Her books, notes, and laptop went flying onto the floor.

“FUUUUUUUUUUUCK!!” she screamed at the top of her lungs, squeezing her eyes shut against the burning tears.

Finally opening her eyes, she stood there looking at the pile on the floor, breathing heavily.

... I have to go.

I don’t know where. But I have to leave. Right now.

Steph had no idea what brought her there.

The church was several blocks from her apartment. She’d left and started walking, not having a clue
where she was going, and wound up in front of the large white building about half an hour later.

She stared at the front of the building, looking up at the steeple, before she walked inside, opening and closing the door quietly.

It was a nice enough church. It seemed well lit, and the carpet on the floor looked new. Steph took a seat on one of the pews, leaning forward and resting her forehead on the seat in front of her.

*I can’t believe I just said that.*

...

*I can’t believe she didn’t immediately tell me to go fuck myself.*

Steph closed her eyes, as she took deep breaths.

*Fuck.*

*I’m sorry, Max. I am so sorry.*

She sniffled, feeling the tears slide down her cheeks. *I miss you so much. I wish you were here. I’d give anything to go back and stop us from asking you to steal your dad’s emails. I would trade places with you in a heartbeat, wherever you were, alive or dead.*

*I am so fucking sorry.*

“Miss?”

Steph’s eyes opened, and she felt the moisture on her eyelashes. She wiped her face quickly as she looked up, seeing the priest in front of her.

“Are you okay?” A worried look was on his face. “You’ve been sitting there for a while.”

“I have?” Steph glanced at her watch. “How long have I been here?”

“About twenty minutes.”

“Oh.” She sighed, as she looked him over. “I, uh... this place isn’t, like, closed or anything, is it?”

“No, not really,” the priest replied. “I just didn’t think anyone would be here today.”

“My bad.” Steph shrugged. “I’ll go. Sorry to bother you.”

“You’re okay,” he assured her. He sat down sideways on the pew in front of her, turning and resting one arm on the back so he could keep eye contact. “Do you need to pray?”

“I’m, uh, actually an atheist.”

“Ah.” The priest nodded. “Are you lost, then?”

“I...” she tried to come up with an answer. “... I don’t know.”

He hummed. “What’s bothering you?”

“Um...” Steph hesitated. “I got someone killed.”

The priest blinked. “I’m sorry?”
“I’m not, like, on the run or anything,” Steph explained quickly. “I’m not a fugitive. The cops aren’t looking for me. It was years ago.”

“Ah.” The priest nodded. “What happened?”

Steph sighed. “My friend and I asked a girl to take something from her father. She did, but she got the crap beat out of her for it. And she ran away from home. Nobody’s seen her since.” She averted her gaze. “I’m pretty sure she’s dead now.”

“How long ago?”

“Four years. Almost five.”

“And...” the priest leaned against the wood of the pew. “What brings you here tonight?”

“I have no idea.” Despite her mood, Steph still had it in her to throw the priest a smirk. “I’m a gay atheist who was raised by a single Protestant mom, and I have no idea who my father is. I’m just happy that I wasn’t struck by lightning as soon as I touched the door.”

The priest returned the smirk. “An unlikely soul indeed.”

“Yea.” Steph bit her lip. “I had a fight with my friend tonight. I said something I shouldn’t have, and... ah, fuck. She’ll probably never speak to me again.”

“What did you say?”

“Among other things... that the girl who ran away is probably dead, and it’s mostly her fault.” Steph dropped her gaze. “She didn’t like the insinuation.”

“Your friend still hopes she’s alive?”


“You want to move on,” he stated.

“I’ll never forget what I did,” Steph clarified. “I’m going to hate myself for the rest of my life. I just... I can’t think about her anymore. It hurts too much.”

The priest nodded. “I understand.”

“Yea?” Steph scoffed, looking him over. “I doubt it, Padre.”

“Better than you think, child.” He smiled sadly. “One of my best friends died in middle school, because I bet him that he couldn’t grind the entire railing on the front stairway with his skateboard. He fell halfway down, and his head hit an edge on the concrete.”

He shook his head. “He wasn’t wearing a helmet. He suffered a brain bleed and died after a few days in the hospital.”

“Oh, shit.” Steph looked at him with wide eyes. “I’m so sorry.”

“It was almost thirty years ago.” The priest got a distant look in his eyes, before he looked back at Steph. “It took a long time to move past it.”

Steph bit her lip. “How long?” she asked quietly.

“Great,” Steph muttered.

“Well...” he paused. “Actually, I’m not sure if a walking affront to God wants the advice of an old codger who believes in imaginary friends.”

Steph snorted in amusement. “At this point, Padre, I’ll take what I can get.”

“All I have for you is that moving on is part of the healing process.” He nodded. “You’ll carry your guilt with you wherever you go; very little can be done about that. But you can learn from your mistakes. And you can promise to become a better person.”

“I don’t think it’s that simple,” Steph sighed.

“No, it’s not.” The priest shook his head. “You’ll have to come to terms with that. But you won’t do it if you can’t let go of the past.”

Steph chewed on the inside of her lip, as she considered his words.

“You’re pretty helpful,” she admitted. “For a guy who makes a living selling an afterlife.”

The priest raised an eyebrow. “Have you considered that God is waiting for you to leave my church, before he strikes you with lightning?”

“I am now.” Steph shook her head, as she sighed again. “Um... thanks. I think. Not sure if this stuff is going to stick with me, though.”

“Like all things, it takes time.” The priest paused. “Would you like to pray with me?”

“Don’t push your luck, Padre.”
The Small Business Owner

Chapter Notes

We're gonna take a quick break from our regularly scheduled characters for a few chapters.

We'll get Back to Kate, Victoria, Rachel, Steph, and Brooke shortly.

You can do this.

Sarah breathed deeply as she looked in the mirror, trying to gain confidence while ignoring the fact that she was in the bathroom of a dive bar. *You had a 3.84 GPA, she thought to herself. You nailed college. Channel Dad and sack the fuck up already. You can do better than this.*

*Just go out there and tell him what’s wrong. And that you can fix it.*

The bartender he’s met three times and spoken to twice.

*Christ, this is stupid. She let her forehead hit the mirror, as she exhaled. He’s a business owner. He HAS to know what’s going on with his reviews.*

Then again, if he did, he’d probably know how to handle it.

Know what? *Fuck it.* Sarah stood back up, straightening her tank top. *Remember what Dad said. Opportunities don’t just happen; sometimes you gotta go out and fucking make them.*

Please, God, don’t let him fire me.

Still jittery, she wiped her sweaty palms on her jeans and walked back out into the bar she worked at. Lazy Susan was about as nice as a place could get while still staying in the ‘dive bar’ category; it had a somewhat dim atmosphere, but the place was clean, and the food wasn’t too bad. The clientele was mostly the blue-collar workers that lived in the nearby apartment complexes, with the occasional motorcycle club. And most of their patrons were single men, which is why the majority of the bartenders were female, like her.

At least it wasn’t a complicated gig. Sarah mostly poured beers and shots. She’d only made six cocktails in the five months she’d worked there, and most of the people who’d ordered them hadn’t come back.

As she took her place back behind the bar, she glanced over nervously at her target. The man at the end of the bar was the owner, and currently one of three customers; the other two were friends chatting at a far table. The owner was content to sip at his amber beer while perusing some paperwork. Checking to see that the other two men didn’t need anything, she slowly started to make her way down the bar.

Halfway there, the door opened, and a blonde woman strolled inside. Wearing jeans and a white hoodie, she looked very casual; her face was the only indication that she meant business, as she focused entirely on the back of the bar owner’s head.
“Do you have any idea how far out of my way this is?” she said by way of greeting. “We could have met at Riccardo’s.”

The bar owner, Jake, glanced over his shoulder. “Riccardo’s is a lot further out of my way than this place is of yours,” he replied casually. “Besides, I know you were at your dealership, not the restaurant.”

“And how do you know that?”

“Because I called Oscar and asked if you were there.”

“... fucker.” The blonde woman sat next to him with a sigh. “Fine. Still. Please tell me you’ve looked at the numbers?”

Sarah finished walking over, as she resigned herself to having to wait. Though she was a little relived that she’s have more time to get psyched up. “What can I get you?” she asked the newcomer.

“Nothing.” The blonde didn’t look at her. “Well?”

“I’ve looked at the numbers, Penny. And don’t be rude to my bartender,” Jake added, as Sarah made to leave. “If we’re gonna be here for a bit, you might as well order a beer.”

Penny sighed, looking back at Sarah. “Sorry. Can I get a Dos Equis?”

“Sure thing.” Sarah smiled as she got a glass and took it to the taps, still listening to their conversation.

“Numbers?”

“I like them. Better than I expected.” Jake put the paperwork down. “I am prepared to concede the argument we had about the chef.”

Penny tilted her head. “Really? I came spoiled for a fight.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but I can admit when I’m wrong.” Jake smirked, as he glanced at her. “The extra money will go a long way towards the invoice from the GC.”

“Ugh.” Penny rubbed the bridge of her nose. “I knew that was going to come up. We didn’t go TOO far over budget.”

“What, exactly, IS your definition of ‘too far’?” Jake didn’t lose his smirk. “Because mine is a lot less than fifteen grand.”

Penny rolled her eyes, as Sarah came back with her beer. “You want another?” she asked Jake, indicating his mostly-empty glass.

“Yes please.” He picked up his drink and finished it. “Thanks, Sarah.”

... he knows my name. Sarah took his empty glass, quickly replacing it and working a new tap. Huh.

“Look, it clearly doesn’t matter,” Penny pointed out. “I mean, that was our first quarter. Riccardo’s is still building its reputation. And two food critics gave us rave reviews.”

“I saw that.” Jake nodded. “Those probably helped.”

“They did. And our online reviews don’t hurt either.” Penny pulled out her phone and tapped it a
few times, showing him the screen. “Look. We’re sitting at four-point-eight stars, with eleven reviews.”

Jake glanced over. “Wow.”

“Which is another reason we should have met there.” Penny took a sip of her beer before she continued. “Instead, we’re in your bar that’s barely breaking three.”

“Yea.” Jake sighed, as Sarah brought over his beer. “I need to work on that.”

She blinked, as she set the glass down in front of him. That’s...

...

Know what? Fuck it.

“You could start by sending an email to Yelp’s administrators. Getting three clearly-false reviews taken down would bump you up to four stars.”

They both looked at her. Penny’s eyebrows arched in surprise, as she continued.

“Also, this bar doesn’t have a Facebook page. Or any online presence aside from online review sites that make them automatically. When people Google this place, the first thing they see is the Yelp rating, which is headlined by one of those false reviews.”

Jake blinked. “... how do you know they’re fake?”

“Because two of them were from accounts that have scored multiple places around San Francisco with only one star; they’re basically troll accounts.” Sarah stopped to take a breath. “The third only has one other review, for the bar across the street, which is five stars. Bet a paycheck that it’s probably from the owner of your competition.”

“Huh.” Jake leaned back. “And... what? You just email Yelp, tell them, and they’ll take it down for you?”

“They have a team that deals with stuff like this; it happens all the time.” Sarah nodded. “It takes about a week or so, but they can make the reviews vanish. And you SERIOUSLY need to make a Facebook page for this bar, like you have for the other three you own.” She paused. “Two of which, by the way, also have fake reviews on Yelp.”

Jake frowned. “I didn’t make Facebook pages for my other bars.”

“Well, somebody did. Probably the managers. The one for Patrick’s is pretty well done; they have good pictures, the operating hours, and post their specials every week. Railroad has an okay profile, but it needs work. But the one for Worm Wood hasn’t been updated in months, and barely has any photos.”

She took a deep breath. “You know that online appearances are just as important as what you do in-person. It’s the first thing people my age look at, before they go someplace new. Online reviews make or break businesses. You really need someone professionally managing your online presences, if you and your managers don’t have the time to do it yourselves.”

“How do you know all this?” Jake asked.

“I have a degree in Marketing from UCSF.”
“What the hell are you doing here?”

Sarah shrugged. “My best, in an economy that the Baby Boomers fucked up,” she answered. “But if you don’t know how to manage everything I just said, or don’t want to…”

Penny smirked, as she leaned in towards Jake. “I think your bartender is angling for a better job,” she stage-whispered.

Sarah blushed, but didn’t respond, keeping her eyes on Jake.

“Okay, Sarah,” Jake said slowly, as he leaned back on his bar stool. “You have my undivided attention. Keep talking.”

He woke up the next morning to a buzzing phone.

“Urgh.” Jake rolled over, rubbing his eyes as he retrieved his phone from the nightstand. He noted the time; just after ten in the morning. About twenty minutes before his alarm went off. He blinked his way to wakefulness as he unlocked his phone and read the new text.

**Mitch:** Why the fuck do I have to hire a new bartender?

He smirked, as he typed out his response.

**Jake:** I stole your old one.

**Mitch:** Why?! She was a good one!

**Jake:** She said she hated her job.

**Mitch:** She was good-looking, and showed up on time and sober. You know how hard it’ll be to replace her?

**Jake:** I’m confident in your abilities as a manager to make do.

**Mitch:** What did you do with her?

**Jake:** I hired her to manage our online presence.

**Mitch:** We have an online presence?

**Jake:** We will when she makes one. She’ll be in later to take some pictures, by the way.

**Mitch:** She showed up on time. And sober. Did I mention that she was good-looking?

**Jake:** Toughen up, buttercup.

“Ugh.” Jake closed his eyes and collapsed back into his pillow. “It’s too early for these shenanigans.”

His alarm went off twenty minutes later. He silenced it, not having gotten back to sleep, and pushed himself upright, scratching his leg before he rolled on the padded sleeve and slipped into his prosthetic.

Giving it a couple of shakes to make sure it was seated correctly, he finally stood, stretching as he
threw on a shirt and made his way into the kitchen for breakfast.

He liked multi-tasking; while he ate his cereal, he browsed through his email and messages, catching up on anything he’d missed. Most of it was simple, business-related, and full of FYI stuff. Only a couple of messages really caught his eye.

Including a mass email, sent out from his old platoon sergeant, about the annual get-together in Kentucky.

As he read through the message, he felt the phantom itch in his right leg, just below the knee. The rest of it had been blown to pieces by the mujahedeen back in 2005. The memories of his time in the army flew through his mind quickly. In flashes, bursts of color, and noise.

Massing at in Kuwait in 2003, waiting to receive the go order.

Driving north. Listening to General Petraeus announce over the radio that their next rendezvous with destiny was in Baghdad.

Fighting in Karbala, clearing the city block by block. Two members of the Republican Guard had set up a machine gun nest, and he’d used the M203 grenade launcher under his M16 to clear them out. He’d been too busy shaking in fear and adrenaline to fully process that he’d just killed two people.

Downtime with the other soldiers. Listening to updates on the radio. Cheering when their friends killed Saddam’s sons, Uday and Qusay.

Finally returning home in 2004. Rest and refit, they called it. A lot of soldiers left. He’d stayed, since he had nowhere else to go. Made Sergeant. Trained new soldiers. Prepared to go back.


And, of course, his final patrol through Mosul.

He hadn’t seen it coming. He’d just finished talking to an Iraqi policeman through their interpreter. Turning to get back to their route, he’d heard the familiar double-boom of a launched and armed rocket-propelled grenade. Before he could even yell for the other soldiers to take cover, he felt the tremendous impact at his feet. He remembered cartwheeling through the air, but he didn’t remember landing.

Next thing he knew, he was waking up in a hospital in Germany. Heavily medicated. Covered in bandages, and stuck with multiple IVs.

He still remembered the sinking feeling, when he looked down and saw his leg missing just below the knee.

The vibrating of his phone startled him so much that he almost jumped out of the chair. He sighed, hand on his chest as he realized that he’d spaced out again. Grateful for the interruption, he pulled up the new text.

Patrick: Hey, you coming by tonight?
“Ghosted, huh?”

“All three of them.” Patrick shook his head, as he leaned against the bar. “Last time I hire three girls from the same sorority at the same time, I’ll tell you that right now.”

“Yea, I bet.” Jake smirked. “Any idea why?”

Patrick scratched his chin. “One of the other girls is friends with them on Facebook. She said they posted pictures of themselves in Cancun.”

“Seriously?” Jake raised an eyebrow. “They all ghosted you to run off to Mexico? Without even a text?”

“Man, I can’t force these kids to have a good work ethic.” Patrick shrugged. “I already replaced one of them. I got another girl coming to see me tomorrow afternoon. Speaking of which,” he added. “You know we got the fights on?”

Jake nodded. “Everything ready to go?”

“I already paid DirecTV, we’re getting our beer topped off in the morning, and I’ve got an extra bouncer to work the floor.” Patrick glanced up. “Can’t think of anything else. You?”

“Bartenders?”

“I’ll have three of them working, plus a barback.” He nodded. “You gonna swing by?”

Jake checked his watch. “Probably. It is Friday; I’ll be making the rounds, at least. Anyway, I-”

“All done, Patrick.”

He blinked at the intrusion, as a small brunette girl pushing a mop and bucket interrupted him. Patrick turned to look at her. “Oh. Thanks, Max.”

“You need anything else?” she asked as she put everything back in the storage closet.

“No, good work today.” Patrick nodded towards her. “I’ll get your money in a second.”

_Must be the new girl._ Jake looked at her and smiled. “Oh, hi there! Are you our new bartender?”

“Uh... no?” The girl looked at him with a confused expression.

“She’s our new barback-slash-cleaning lady,” Patrick explained. “Max, this is Jacob Franklin. He owns the bar.”

“Jake, please.” He stuck his hand out. “Nice to meet you, Max.”

“You, too.” Max shook his hand, and he noted that she looked a little apprehensive. “This is your place?”

“This one, and a few others.” Jake nodded before he looked back to Patrick. “Anyway, I need to get going. I’ll see you tomorrow.”
“Later.” Patrick nodded as Jake walked out.

Female barback. Jake hummed as he got in his truck. Jeez. She barely looks big enough to carry those cases of beer we’re getting. And since when does Patrick hire barbacks for weekdays?

Ah, I’m sure he knows what he’s doing. He shrugged as he started the truck. Need to meet Penny before she kills me.

“Okay, this looks a lot better than I thought it would.”

Sarah sat across the table from him at Lazy Susan the next day, seemingly pleased with herself. “You can do a lot with a proper Facebook page and some good pictures.”

“So it would appear.” Jake scrolled through the photo album Sarah had put together. “How much shit did Mitch give you about leaving?”

“He mentioned that I would be hard to replace, on account of being so punctual and filling out my tank top.” She nodded as she smoothed out the wrinkles in what Jake suspected was a new blouse. “He’ll get over it. Have you looked at Worm Wood’s page yet?”

“One sec.” Jake changed tabs, taking in the new Facebook page Sarah had made for his other bar. “Wow. It looks good.”

“Also, I heard back from the Yelp people,” Sarah added. “They’ve taken down the reviews from those troll accounts. They’re still looking into the third, from the guy across the street. But we’ve already gone up to four stars.”

Jake smiled. “That’s not bad. I’ll take it.” He pointed to the screen. “What are those notifications?”

Sarah took her laptop back and clicked the button. “We got a couple of messages,” she said distractedly. “Someone wants to know if they serve food.”

“No.” Jake shook his head. “Worm Wood doesn’t have a kitchen. But food trucks park in the lot every Friday and Saturday night.”

“Alright.” Sarah typed rapidly, hitting enter after a few seconds. “The other one’s just people liking the Lazy Susan page.”

“How many?”

“About twenty, so far.” Sarah spun the laptop back around, showing him the number. “It just went live last night, so that number will go up.”

Jake nodded, before leaning back in his chair. “So. What do we do now?”

Sarah frowned. “I’m sorry?”

“You made the Facebook pages, you’re managing our Yelp reviews, and you’re getting people interested. How can you make more people come give us money?”

She leaned forward. “Well... there’s a couple of other things we can do. But they’ll cost some cash.”

“Like what?”

Sarah nodded at the front of the bar. “Aside from the sign over the door, how do you advertise these
Jake shrugged. “They’re local bars and grills. It’s mostly just word of mouth. I’ve got some ads out in the local papers, and I know we’re listed on Google and Yelp, but that’s about it.”

“Okay, you can do a lot better than that.” Sarah smirked. “I mean, it’s clearly working pretty well, otherwise you wouldn’t be here. But we can make more people aware of these places.”

“How? Film a commercial or something?”

Sarah snorted. “No. We can take advantage of systems already in place for a LOT less money that will get seen by a LOT more people.”

Jake tilted his head. “What system is better than commercials?”

“First of all, if you want to shoot a proper commercial, you’re gonna need about twenty grand or so,” Sarah informed him. “And you should know that about thirty percent of households have DVRs, or some method of watching television later that allows them to fast-forward through commercials. It’s a good system, but maybe not the best for a place like this. You want to look into targeted advertisements.”

“I’m not as familiar with those as I feel I should be.”

“Oh...” she pursed her lips. “You ever Google something, and then go onto Facebook later and see an advertisement for what you were just looking at?”

“Yea, those are kind of disconcerting.”

“Okay...”

Sarah glanced up in thought. “For a local area ad, for four bars? Call it...”

“Maybe make it five.”

She paused. “I thought you only owned four businesses.”

“I’m half-owner of a Mexican restaurant, too.” Jake waved his hand dismissively. “So, five businesses.”

Sarah pursed her lips. “Probably a few grand. But they’ll get seen by thousands of people.”

“That... seems worth it,” Jake allowed. “You said there were a couple of things. What was the other one?”
“The other one is some good SEO.”

“Bless you.”


“I know, I was being funny. I’m not COMPLETELY ignorant.” Jake looked at the laptop. “Though I thought the point of SEO was to hide stuff on Google?”

“You can do that, too. You can also use it to make stuff more visible, if you know how.” Sarah smiled smugly. “Like I do.”

Jake hummed. “How would it work?”

“Well, it’s kind of complicated. But the short answer is that I can make it so that when people search for terms like ‘bars around San Francisco’ and ‘good San Francisco Mexican food’, your businesses go further up on the list of results. And on that note,” she added. “I’d like to talk about my pay.”

“Oh, yes. That’s right.” Jake scratched his nose. “I remember this part of my classes; goods and services cost money.”

“I think you’ll find that a good marketing expert will be worth what you pay them,” Sarah told him. “It’s true that this stuff doesn’t take up a ton of time. But it will be a daily task to keep everything up-to-date. And hiring contractors for each individual task will get expensive.” She dug into her laptop bag, retrieving a few pieces of paper stapled together and placing it on the table between them. “I think my monthly rates are more than reasonable.”

Jake took the paperwork, reading through it silently. He noticed Sarah squirming across from him, as he got to the last page with the final numbers.

He let her stew for a few moments as he pondered her proposal. She’s not wrong. The quotes I got yesterday were about twenty percent higher than this total. And she’s already done a bunch of the legwork.

Plus, it takes the load off my plate for dealing with everything.

“Okay.”

She smiled, relieved. “Okay?”

“Yep. Deal.” Jake laid the paperwork down in front of him. “For now, though. I’ll be honest, Sarah, I’m not a hundred percent that having a dedicated expert for five bars and restaurants is worth the money. I’m going to want to see a marked difference in the next six months, if you want this to continue.”

Sarah was already nodding. “I think you’ll notice at least a ten percent increase in the number of customers,” she stated. “Which will more than make up for my rates.”

“We’ll see.” Jake nodded back. “I’m going to have my lawyer look at this first, before I sign anything. But you’ll hear back next week.”

“Understood.”

Business with Sarah taken care of, Jake started his rounds for the night.
On busy days like Friday and Saturday, Jake tried to spend at least a half-hour in each business he had a vested interest in. Besides the four bars he owned himself and Maria’s Kitchen, he also stopped by the two restaurants he shared with Penny.

During his second visit, he saw his investment partner in the kitchen, eyeballing everything that left. “Stop,” she ordered a waiter, as he was about to take a plate. “John, this pasta is overcooked.”

Her chef stepped over and took a quick look at the plate. “You’re right,” he conceded, as he lifted the plate and turned to a sous chef “Christy! New plate of Garlic Pesto! And check the fucking Penne before it leaves the pot!”

Jake smirked, as he stepped into Penny’s view. “You enjoying busting your kitchen staff’s balls?”

She didn’t bother to look at him. “Somebody’s paying thirty dollars for that plate. Least we can do it cook it right.” She picked up a fork and pressed it into a steak that was about to leave, turning to the waiter with a frown. “What was the order for this one?”

“Well done,” the waiter replied.

“Take it to the heathen, then.” Penny stepped back. “Why the hell would someone order a steak well done, Jake?”

“Fuck if I know. I always order it rare.” Jake shrugged. “But I like to taste my food.”

“On that, we can agree.” Penny finally looked at him. “Have you been by Riccardo’s yet?”

Jake nodded. “I just left. It’s packed. There’s a fifty-minute wait for a table, and the bar is full.”

“Ooh, I love the sound of making money.” She smiled. “You gonna stick around?”

“Not if you’re here. I’m going to Patrick’s; he’s got the fights on, and I need to make sure it hasn’t turned into a free-for-all.”

“Sounds like fun. Throw a punch for me.”
“We’ve only thrown out two people!” Patrick yelled over the noise of the packed bar, as he worked the POS terminal. “Couple of assholes tried to fistfight each other!”

“That’s all?” Jake yelled back, raising his voice as the crowd cheered for something on the TV. “Figured it’d be higher!”

“Right? And it’s the third bout!” Patrick replied. “Not too bad for fight night!”

Jake smirked as he looked around. Three bartenders were running back and forth, fixing drinks and handing out bottles of beer. He watched the barback, Max, bring out the third case of beer since he’d been there. She ripped it open and jammed the bottles into the ice four at a time, emptying the box out before going back for more; the bartenders were grabbing bottles before she could even finish. “How’s everything else?”

“Smooth!” Patrick finished with the POS and turned back to survey the bar. “We’re firing on all pistons, but we’re making it work!”

“Anything I can do?”

“Well, we’re running out of bottles faster than we can stock them!” Patrick thumbed towards the storage room in the back. “If you gave Max a hand for a few minutes, I’m sure she’d appreciate it! Girl’s been running back and forth nonstop!”

Jake nodded as he turned, sliding through the crowd towards the back of the bar. He pushed the door open and looked around, seeing Max just as she picked up two cases of beer at once.

His heart rate spiked. Too much! WAY too much!

He was moving before he could even say anything; Max was already starting to collapse backwards under the weight. He slammed his hands around hers, alleviating the weight as fast as he could.

“I got it, I got it,” he said quickly, pulling back so she was standing more-or-less upright. “Here, put it down slowly, okay?”

“Yea, okay, okay,” Max gasped. They slowly eased it to the floor.

That was close. Jake sighed in relief. Don’t need to clean up broken glass and spilled beer right now. “You alright?” he asked.

“I’m... okay.” Max replied, clearly shaken up. “I just... thought I could... sorry.”

“It’s all good.” Jake leaned forward, grabbing the top case. “You’ve been going back and forth like a madman. Take a few minutes, catch your breath. I got these.”

Max nodded, sitting down on another box as Jake took the case of beer out to the bar and jammed the bottles into the ice box. A resounding cheer went up as he finished, and he looked up in time to see one of the fighters on TV take a staggering hit that knocked him over.

He made two more trips while Max rested. After the fourth case of beer, he watched the fighter get take another bad hit just as the round ended. Finally.

Jake grabbed a bottle of water and brought it back to Max. “The fight’s almost over. I think it’s...
finally starting to calm down out there,” he stated as he sat down next to her. “You okay?”

“I’m good.” Max nodded. “Thanks for the save.”

“You were busting your ass all night, figured you could use a break.” He handed her the water, and she took it and from him, immediately cracking it open and chugging. “Pretty good workout, right?”

“No kidding,” she gasped, still sipping from the bottle. “Good way to burn calories.”

Jake rolled his shoulder. “You’ve barbacked before? Patrick said you had some experience.”

“Back in Oregon,” Max replied. “Did it at a strip club for a few weeks.”

*Talk about a long way from home.* “Is that where you’re from?”

“Got into town a couple of weeks ago. Still trying to find a steady job.”

“Well, hard as you work, I got no problem keeping you on the payroll.” Jake nodded with a smile. “Anyway. You still good to move stuff around?”

Max nodded. “Yea. Just needed a minute,” she breathed as she put the empty bottle down.

“Take a couple more, if you want.” Jake stood back up and took the case of beer he’d been sitting on. “Grab some more Coors when you head back out, these guys are going through it like water.”

Jake spent the next few minutes afterwards moving through the crowd, checking to see that everything was going smoothly. He was interrupted by his vibrating phone after about twenty minutes by another one of his managers.

**Angel:** I just had to call the police out here.

“Oh, fuck,” Jake muttered, closing his eyes. The bar Angel managed, Railroad, was his newest and nicest establishment; it didn’t need a hit to its reputation.

**Jake:** Why?

**Angel:** Some asshole pulled a knife on our bouncer.

**Jake:** He okay?

**Angel:** Larry’s fine. Asshole nicked his arm. Guy won’t even go to the hospital, says his balls are too big.

Jake shook his head. Of all his bouncers, Larry was the last one he’d ever pick a fight with; the former Division 2 linebacker was built like a tank, and loved throwing punches.

**Jake:** What about the asshole?

**Angel:** Broken nose, lost a couple of teeth.

**Jake:** What a shame.

**Angel:** Yea. You want to come down here? Or you want to call in and talk to the cops?

Railroad was almost forty-five minutes away from Patrick’s. Jake considered his options for two
seconds.

Jake: I’ll call you. Gimme a few seconds.

He made his way back over to Patrick. “I need to use the computer in your office!”

Patrick looked at him, confused. “Why?”

“Someone pulled a knife on Larry over at Railroad!”

Patrick laughed. “What a dumbass!”

Jake was in the back of Patrick’s bar for close to two hours.

The first thirty minutes were spent talking to Angel and the police over the speaker phone, and giving them permission to pull the security camera footage. Jake examined it remotely, watching the drunken man pull out a pocket knife after getting a talking-to from the bouncer. The altercation itself only lasted a couple of seconds, and he had to re-wind it several times to get the full effect of Larry using one arm to sweep the man’s knife away and the other to hammer him in the face.

The rest of the night was spent composing an email to the lawyer Jake kept on retainer. He detailed exactly what had happened, and attached the security tape; he wasn’t expecting to get sued, but he was going to be prepared for it nonetheless.

He finally got out of the office as Patrick was locking up the building. “Shit, man, I forgot you were still here,” he said. “Thought you left a while ago.”

“Had to send an email to the lawyer.” Jake rubbed his forehead. “Assholes ruining my fucking night.”

Patrick smirked. “How bad was the hit?”

“Pretty bad. I’ll show you the tape next time.” Jake checked his watch. “I’m going home.”

“Yea, I’m leaving in two minutes.” Patrick unlocked the door and held it open for him. “See you later.”

Jake bid him good night and headed for his truck, sighing as he finally got in the driver’s seat. Definitely deserve a beer tonight, he thought idly as he started the truck.

He backed out of the spot and drove out, turning right out of the parking lot. But as his headlights swept over the alley, he could have sworn he saw...

was that a foot?

Hitting the brakes, he put the truck in reverse and backed up. The headlights flashed back over the alley, and he stopped; someone’s sneakers were clearly illuminated, their leg sticking out from behind the dumpster.

Oh, shit. He drove forward, pulling up next to the sidewalk and getting out. Crap, I hope someone’s just passed out...

He walked around the dumpster and did a double-take.

“Max?”

She didn’t respond. The brunette lay sleeping with her head against the dumpster. A green backpack
was in her lap, her arms looped through the straps.

Jake took a couple of steps closer. “Max?”

She stirred, but didn’t respond. *What in the world is she doing out here?* he wondered, looking around. *Does she live so far away that she would rather fall asleep in an alley than catch a cab or something?*

He bent over and took her by the arm, shaking as he called her name louder. “Max!!”

She woke with a start, throwing his hand off her shoulder as her whole body jumped. Her other fist came up to punch him, and he immediately stepped back, holding his hands out. “Whoa, easy,” he said reassuringly. “Max, are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“Yea,” she answered as she shot to her feet. “I’m fine.”

“Were you sleeping out here?” Jake asked, as she spun her backpack and put it on her shoulders.

“I, uh, I just got really tired and wanted to sit for a minute. I didn’t mean to fall asleep. I was just leaving.”

Jake opened his mouth to ask more questions, but Max was already walking away. “Max, Max, hold on, wait,” he said as he reached out and took her bicep again.

She flicked her arm, pushing his hand off. “Please don’t touch me,” she gasped.

*Don’t touch. Got it.* He stepped back and lowered his hands. “Max, I’m not gonna hurt you, I promise. I just want to make sure you’re okay. I saw your leg sticking out, from behind the dumpster. Are you sure you’re not hurt?”

“I’m fine,” Max said quickly. “I just... like I said, I wanted to sit for a minute. I’m gonna head home now.”

“I can give you a ride.” Jake thumbed over his shoulder, towards his truck. “You don’t need to walk.”

“I, uh... I’m good.” Max shook her head and tried to step around him.

He side-stepped to block her. “Max, it’s almost three in the morning. I don’t want you running around the streets at this hour, it’s dangerous. I can give you a lift wherever you need to go.” He paused. “I’ll drop you at a corner, if you don’t want me to know where you live.”

“I don’t need a ride, I’m not that far away.”

*In this part of town?* The area around Patrick’s was pretty safe, but Jake knew there was some petty crime at night. “I’ll walk with you, then. Where are you going?”

“I’m good, Jake.” Max shook her head. “I’ll be fine.”

Okay, *time out. Nobody close enough to walk home just stops and sits for a minute at this time of night. Especially next to a rank dumpster. And if she did live further away, why not call a cab, or catch a bus? I know Patrick gave her at least a couple hundred bucks tonight. He glanced at the backpack. And why a backpack? Why doesn’t she have a purse?*

... *oh.* His mind flashed back to Dallas, the time in his life right after his father had kicked him out. “Max,” he asked carefully, “you do have a place to sleep tonight, right?”
“I said, I’m fine,” Max to get around him again.

Jake sidestepped a second time. “Max, I’m trying to help. I don’t want you to sleep on the street.”

“Please let me go,” Max said quietly.

Ah, fuck. Jake sighed as he stepped back. “Max...”

“I’ll see you next week, Jake.” Max walked past him.

... shit.

*I can’t just let her walk away.*

“Max. Max, wait.” He took a few steps to catch up to her, as she paused. “Max, I’m sure you’re fine. You look like you can handle yourself,” he assured her. “Do you... look. I have a guest bedroom at my apartment. I don’t use it, and you look like you need it.”

She didn’t answer, staring at him.

“Max, if you don’t have a place to stay tonight, you can stay with me. It’s just one night.” Jake looked her over. “You can get your clothes washed. And a shower.”

“I... uh...”

“I’ll bet my spare bed is a lot softer than the pavement, too.”

Max didn’t answer for several seconds. She seemed to be analyzing him, as she looked him up and down in silence; he could practically feel the apprehension in her gaze.

“Max,” Jake repeated, as he gestured towards the truck. “Please.”

After what felt like forever, she gave the tiniest of nods.

He gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile as he guided her towards his truck, opening the passenger door for her.

She didn’t speak for the entire ride.

Jake picked up that she was nervous. *No shit,* he thought wryly, as he drove. *Someone she barely knows is offering her a place to sleep for the night. You’d be nervous too.*

When they got to his apartment, and he opened the door for her, he saw that she was actually trembling. She clutched her bag tightly with two hands as she walked inside, looking around with careful eyes. She even jumped, when he closed the door behind them.

“You can leave whenever you want, Max,” he assured her. “It’s okay.”

She gave him another small nod.

“Th, uh, guest room is down the hall. The shower’s right there...” he trailed off as he pointed, realizing something. “Do you have any clothes to sleep in?”

Max shook her head.

“Okay... gimme a second.”
He went to his bedroom, opening up his closet. He reached deep into the back, pulling out an old Army shirt and some sweatpants he didn’t wear. *A little big, but they’ve got a drawstring. She’ll be fine,* he figured as he retrieved an old mesh bag from the shelf.

Max turned away from the pictures on his wall as he walked out. “Here, you can sleep in these,” he said as he held the clothes and mesh bag out to her. “You can put your dirty clothes in here, if you want. I can run them through the washing machine—”

“I won’t sleep with you.”

Her outburst surprised him. “Okay. I, uh, wasn’t going to suggest it. Or ask.”

That didn’t seem to reassure her. *I guess that’s an appropriate fear for a girl like her,* Jake reasoned as he sighed. “Max, if that’s why you really think I brought you here, then you will be happy to know that I am very, incredibly gay.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Really?”

“Yea. Like, you are so far from my type it’s not even funny.” He smirked. “Unless you can transform into a lumberjack.”

“Oh.”

“Yep. So, now that we’re established that...” he shook the clothes for her. Max took them, and he noticed that her hands were still trembling. “You should probably shower first,” he said, deciding to try and lighten the mood. “I, ah, don’t want to insult you, but you kind of smell like garbage.”

Max nodded as she took the mesh bag. “Thanks,” she muttered.

“You’re welcome.” He nodded. “The, uh, towels in there are already clean. Let me know if you need anything else, okay?”

He watched her head into the bathroom, and stepped into his kitchen as she closed the door. Opening the fridge, he popped open a beer and slowly drank it while he listened to Max shower.

*Man, she’s taking a while.*

*Then again, so did you.*

Jake remembered when he’d enlisted in the Army. He’d spoken to a recruiter and signed the paperwork within a couple of hours. Afterwards, the recruiter brought him to the entry processing facility, and due to their backlog he’d been put in a hotel room for a couple of nights.

It was the first real place he’d stayed in by himself in months. He’d stood in that shower until the hot water had run out.

He finished the beer just as the shower turned off. As he dropped the empty bottle in the trash, he noticed the letters on the table he’d meant to go through that morning. He was still flipping through them as Max came out of the bathroom. “Feel better?” he asked.

“Yea.” She nodded. “Sorry. I, uh, didn’t mean to take so long.”

“It’s alright.” Jake looked at the mesh bag in her arms. “Is that all your clothes?” Max nodded, and he took the bag from her and walked back through the kitchen, tossing the whole bag into the washing machine and starting the timer.
“Are you hungry?” he asked as he came back out.

Max shook her head.

“Okay. Well, if you change your mind...” he thumbed at the fridge.

“I, uh... I’m just pretty tired,” she replied, still sounding nervous.

“Right.” He tossed the letters aside, as he looked at the clock on the wall. “Yea, it’s kind of late, isn’t it? The guest room is down there. Like I said, let me know if you need anything, okay?”

She nodded and disappeared down the hall. He heard the door close a few seconds later, and sat back down at the table; he still had some stuff to go over, and he figured Max would appreciate it if he threw her clothes in the dryer when they were finished in the washing machine.

*Boy, I hope she’s not crazy.*
Jake woke up about half an hour or so before Max did, pulling his prosthetic on and showering.

As he waited for the coffee maker to do its thing, he took out a box of cereal and finished looking at the mail, setting aside when he still needed to go through. Then he picked up his phone and, on a hunch, did a Google search for the phrase ‘Max, homeless’.

Nothing substantial came up. A few resources, and pictures of homeless men. *It might not even be her real name*, he thought dryly. *She might have given Patrick a fake one.*

*No, it’s probably real. He wrote her a check. She wouldn’t be able to cash it if the name was fake.* He smirked to himself. *No check cashing place is THAT shady.*

Jake almost didn’t hear the door open, as he picked up the pot of coffee. He looked up just as Max walked around the corner, her hair still mussed from the pillow. “You’re awake!” he said, smiling as he poured his coffee. “I thought you were going to sleep all day. How are you feeling?”

“Good,” Max replied quietly.

“Cool. Are you hungry?” Jake gestured to the cereal. “I was just about to eat.”

Her stomach growl was louder than he would have thought possible.

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes’, then.”

Watching her eat would have been funny, if it wasn’t so depressing. He kept an eye on her as she wolfed down two bowls of cereal while he ate his, reading emails on his phone. *Wonder how long it’s been since she actually had a decent breakfast,* he thought idly.

“Thank you,” she finally muttered.

“Hmm?”

“For, uh, letting me stay the night. I appreciate it. And breakfast, too.”

“Well, nobody should ever have to sleep on the street.” He put his phone on the table, meeting her gaze. “Do you... uh, do that often?”

Max bit her lip. “Only if I have to,” she replied after a few seconds.

He nodded. “So you don’t have anyplace to go, do you?”

“I got out of work too late last night, to go to the shelter on 3rd Avenue. I usually sleep there.”

Jake shook his head, as he remembered his time in the shelters. The beds were terrible, everything smelled, and they never really got quiet; it always seemed like someone was making noise somewhere. “You want some coffee?” he asked, as he stood. Max nodded, and Jake poured a second cup, setting it in front of her before he took a seat. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-one.”

He looked her up and down, taking in her very slim figure and youthful face. *The fuck she is.* “No, really.”
She met his gaze. “Is it... like, really obvious?”

“No, but I’m intuitive.” He leaned back in his seat. “Plus, I own a bar, so it’s not like you’re the first kid to try and convince me they were twenty-one.”

Max shook her head. “Nineteen. Almost twenty.”

“And how long have you been, you know, homeless?”

“Almost four years.”

“You’ve been on the street since you were...” he looked up, as he did math. “Fifteen? Sixteen? What happened?”

“Sixteen.” Max scratched at her neck, clearly uncomfortable. “And, uh... a lot of things.”

“Hmm.” He took a sip of his coffee. “You don’t have any family, or anyone to stay with?”

“No.” Max shook her head. “No family.”

Me either, kid.

“Friends? Anyone?”

Max shook her head again.

Jake inhaled slowly, through his nose. “Do you... want to talk about it?”

She shrugged. “I turned my dad in to the police for conspiracy to cover up a crime, and he got disbarred. Then he found out I was the one who turned him in. And also, that I like girls. So he tossed me around the kitchen until I knocked him out with a frying pan, ran to my room, grabbed what I could, broke the window, and left.”

Jake leaned back in his chair, as he listened to her very familiar story. “Wow.”

“Right?”

*Getting kicked out for being gay. Talk about clichéd.* Jake flashed back to when he was seventeen, trying desperately to block the punches his father threw at his face while his mother screamed obscenities and bible verses in the background. *Least I got to graduate high school first. Poor kid doesn’t even have a GED. She’s got, like, no chance.*

*Unless you give her one.*

“Okay.” He took a deep breath. “Look, Max, I know you don’t know me very well. Or at all, really. Except that I’m gay and not creepy.”

That finally got a smirk out of her.

“But, you work for me. Well, you work for Patrick, but you work for me indirectly,” Jake took another sip of his coffee. “I don’t really like one of my employees not having a place to stay. So... if you want to stay here until you figure stuff out, you’re welcome to the guest room.”

Max looked at him and blinked. “Are... are you serious?”

Jake shrugged. “Somebody might as well use it. You’re the first person to sleep there in months.”
“Why?” Max asked. “You don’t know me. I’ve worked for you for, like three days, and I don’t think the first two really counted.”

“Max, nobody should be forced to sleep on the street. Believe it or not, I’ve been where you are.”

She tilted her head. “Really?”

Jake took a breath. “My parents kicked me out right after I graduated high school. The old man didn’t particularly care to have a gay son. I spent a few weeks living in a shelter in Dallas. If it wasn’t for the Army, I’m not sure what I would’ve done.”

“Yea, I... saw the pictures on the wall.” Max looked back at the photos. “You were in Iraq? Afghanistan?”

“Iraq. One-and-a-half tours with the 101st.” He chuckled. “Would’ve been a full two, but...” he reached down and pulled on his pant leg, exposing the plastic limb.

“Oh, wow,” Max breathed as she stared, a reaction he was very used to. “What happened?”

“I got shot in the foot with an RPG while walking through Mosul.” He let go of the pant leg. “But I digress, Max. You’re clearly a tough kid, but you look like you could use a hand.”

She drummed her fingers on her mug, as she seemed to think it over.

“I, uh... well, I’m... definitely... not really in a place to turn down some help,” she muttered, looking back at him. “I, um, don’t have a lot of cash for rent or anything. I got about a hundred bucks or so from-”

Jake waved his hand, thinking about a conversation he’d had with Maria a few weeks prior. “I know, I know. Look, you’re not really going to make a lot of cash barbacking a couple of times a week. Plus, Patrick’s bar is pretty far away, and I can’t always get you over there. Would you rather work as a waitress?”

“I did, for a couple of weeks, last year.”

“Well, I own half of a Mexican restaurant about three blocks away.” He gestured out the door. “You’ll make more money there anyway, and they just lost two waitresses last week. Do you think you’re up for it?”

A smile slowly came over her face. “I could definitely get behind that.”

“Good.” He took another sip from his mug. “Your clothes are probably clean by now, and Maria’s Kitchen is open. We can head over when we finish our coffee, so you can meet your new boss.”

“Okay. Um...” she hesitated. “Are you sure about this?”

“Yea.” He smirked. “It’s gonna be hard for you to get your life back together without any kind of job.”

“No, I mean... this is just... I don’t know. Fast, I guess.” She shrugged. “I just met you a few days ago. You don’t even know that I’m not a serial killer.”

Jake maintained his smirk. “Well, you had plenty of chances to kill me while I slept last night, so I like my odds. Also, I’m pretty sure I could take you in a fight.”
“I did manage to get one over on my father with a frying pan.”

“Did your father ever go through the Army Combatives school?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“As I said, I like my odds.”

They spent most of the morning talking, Max finally opening up a little about herself. He listened to her talk about the crush she’d had on her former high-school classmate, and some of what she’d been through on the street. And exactly what had happened, when she’d had her fight with her family.

“Okay,” he acknowledged, as Max finished her story, and he picked up his phone. “Look, Max, there’s someone I think you should talk to before we go too far in getting your life back on track.”

She frowned. “Who?”

“My lawyer.” He flipped through his contacts before finding her. “She’s really, really good. And she owes me a favor. I think you need to tell her everything that you’ve been through, and see what she thinks.”

“Why?” Max asked. “I mean, It’s not like-”

“Trust me,” Jake assured her, as he sent the lawyer a text message. “Talking to a lawyer, despite what the movies might have you believe, is rarely a bad thing.”

Around noon or so, they both got dressed and headed over to Maria’s Kitchen, so Jake could introduce her to the boss. “Fair warning, she’s got a little bit of a temper,” Jake cautioned, as he drove. “But she’s a nice enough boss to her employees, or so I’m told.”

Max looked at him. “So you’re told?”

“Maria and I don’t always see eye-to-eye,” he explained. “Her cooking is in a class of its own, but she went looking for investors because she’s not as good at running a business as she likes to think. She was only a few months from closing down when I bought fifty percent of her restaurant.”

“Ah.” Max nodded, pressing her hands into her pant legs. “So... she’ll hire me?”

“She’s out two waitresses, so she doesn’t have a reason not to.” He turned the wheel, pulling into the parking lot. “Just, you know, don’t be surprised if she’s a little short.”

They walked in to a crowded waiting room; close to two dozen people were sitting around, waiting for tables. “It’ll be about a thirty-minute wait,” the hostess was explaining to a couple, as she handed them a flat buzzer. “We’re so sorry for the inconvenience. This will go off as soon as we’re ready for you.”

Jake smiled as they walked away. “Thirty minutes, huh?”

The hostess brightened, as she saw him. “Hey Jake! Yea, we’re slammed right now. Nobody’s leaving, though.”

“Good.” He nodded. “Where’s your mom, Beth? Her office?”

“No, she’s helping out in the kitchen.” Beth nodded towards a hallway. “She’s pretty busy, though.”
“This won’t take long. Thanks.”

Jake led the way down a short hallway, past an office and into a large kitchen. A short woman was running around the room, keeping an eye on everything as she barked orders like one of his old drill sergeants. “Put down more chorizo and peppers!” she ordered a chef. “And someone get more chicken out, we’re running low!”

He stepped out of the way of a women who moved past him quickly, carrying a large bag of tortilla chips. “Everything okay in here, Maria?” he asked over the commotion.

“You!” Maria shot him an evil look, as she picked up several plates and brought them to the counter. “Tables six and ten up! And I told you we need another line cook in here. We’re running at sixteen-minute ticket times.”

“The standard is twenty minutes,” Jake replied. “You don’t need another line cook.”

“This is MY kitchen.”

“It’s OUR restaurant.”

“Hmpf.” Maria crossed her arms, an irritated look on her face. “Is that why you’re bringing random people in here?”

Jake rolled his eyes, as he felt Max shrink back behind him. “Don’t be mean. I brought you a replacement waitress.”

Maria looked Max up and down. “Just one?”

“I can’t pull people out of thin air, Maria.”

“Right.” She stepped forward. “You, what’s your name?”

“Um... Max,” she said in a small voice.

“Have you ever waited tables before?”

Max nodded. “Last year,” she added. “At a diner up north.”

One of the cooks put some more food out on plates. Maria grabbed them quickly, checking the tickets. “Table nine!” she called, as she move them to the counter. “And why is table ten’s food still here?!”

A waitress quickly took the food away as Maria turned back to Max. “You know how to use a POS terminal to input orders?”

Max shook her head. “I, uh, did everything on paper at the diner.”

“Well, it’s not hard. We’ll have another waitress teach you. Can you start today?”

Max blinked. “Today? What, like, right now?”

“Yes. I’m down three waitresses, and we need the help.”

Jake frowned. “I thought you were down two.”

“Melissa called in sick.” María didn’t look at him, keeping her focus on Max. “Can you start now or
“Um...” Max glanced at Jake, who shrugged, putting the ball in her court. After a few seconds, she nodded. “Yea. Sure.”

“Perfect. Go see Beth out front, she’ll get you an apron and show you the table numbers.” Maria turned back to the kitchen staff. “Where is my chorizo?!”

Jake went back to the restaurant after a few hours to find Max waiting for him on a bench.

“How was it?” he asked, as she slowly climbed in the car.

“A lot harder than it was at that diner.” Max sagged into the seat, exhaustion clear in her voice. “But Maria said I did pretty good. She wants to keep me as part-time for a couple of weeks, and if I keep doing well she’ll bring me on full-time.”

Jake nodded. “Yea, she usually does. You sound tired.”

“I am tired. And my feet are killing me.” Max lifted one foot onto her lap, pulling her sneaker off and massaging her ankle. “I don’t remember the last time I walked so much, so fast.”

“I imagine those shoes aren’t helping, either.” Jake looked disapprovingly as Max’s sneaker. It looked like it had been white, once, years ago. And the treads on the bottom were almost completely gone. “How much did you earn today?”

“About a hundred and fifty bucks. Why?”

Jake shifted, driving out of the parking lot. “We’re gonna make a stop on the way home.”

“Oh my God.”

He smirked. “That good, huh?”

“Like wearing pillows on my feet.” Max stood in a pair of Nikes and took a few tentative steps. “Man, I forgot what new shoes felt like.”

“You should try them with some of these.” Jake reached over and plucked a package of memory-foam insoles off a rack. “Most of the waitresses and bartenders that work for me put new insoles in their shoes. And they tell me that memory foam feels better than the gel.”

Max took the package and felt them. “Oh, wow. Those are soft.” She looked at the price and winced. “Also... kind of expensive.”

“It’s twenty-five bucks.”

“Yea, for a couple of pieces of foam.”

“It’s an investment, Max. You’re going to be working as a waitress for at least a little bit, which means you’ll be spending a LOT of time on your feet. Do you think that avoiding hurt feet is worth twenty-five bucks?”

She bit her lip, absorbing what he said as she examined the insoles in her hands. “Fair point,” she admitted quietly.
“And yet, you don’t sound convinced.”

Max sighed, as she looked from the insoles to the shoes on her feet. “I don’t know,” she muttered. “I mean... it’s been a whole since I had this much cash, between the two hundred I made at Patrick’s last night and the money I made this afternoon. And I’m about to blow a third of it on new shoes.”

Jake raised an eyebrow. “What were you going to do with the money?”

“Food, mostly. And probably some new underwear or something.” Max shrugged. “My old shoes were still functional. I hadn’t planned on replacing them until I had to. And I still don’t know if I really should.” She looked at him. “I mean, as much as I appreciate your help, I can’t just freeload off you.”

He let out a long breath, as he walked over and sat on the bench next to her. “I figured we would talk about it later,” he admitted.

Max shrugged.

“Look, Max, I don’t really need your money as much as you do,” he started. “That said, paying for living expenses is part of getting your shit back together. Plus, if you’re a tenant instead of just some girl using my spare bedroom, you have a lot more protection under the law.”

She blinked. “I do?”

“Well, I wouldn’t, but technically I could kick you out right now,” he explained. “When you’re paying rent, you can rest assured that you’ll still have someplace to live tomorrow morning.”

“Oh,” Max nodded. “Um... how much is rent?”

Okay, I seriously don’t need her cash. He bit the inside of his cheek, as he considered his answer. But there will be two people eating from the fridge now. And using electricity and water. Let’s just call it...

“Four hundred,” he answered.

Max played with her fingers, then nodded. “I can do that,” she agreed. “Assuming what Maria paid me today is the usual, and I can keep my other job at Patrick’s.”


“Well, I figure if I don’t make enough during the week, I can make up for it barbacking on Fridays and—”

It clicked, when Jake figured out what Max thought he’d meant. “Not per week, Max,” he assured her quickly. “Jesus, that’s close what I pay in rent for the whole apartment.”

She paused. “So... four hundred bucks... per month?”

He nodded. “I figure that would offset what you eat. In food and utilities, anyway.”

“Are... you sure?” She looked nervous, as she asked. “I mean, I’m not stupid. I know what rent prices are in San Francisco.”

“I don’t have a problem paying my rent, Max. You don’t have to worry about that.” Jake shrugged. “In any case, you’re starting at the bottom. You need to work on expanding your stuff to more than what you carry in your backpack.”
She chewed on her lip, looking between him and the sneakers on her feet.

“I do like these shoes,” she allowed quietly.

“Then the point is settled.” Jake stood. “Come on. I have an idea.”

On the way back to the apartment, they stopped at an alley with a dumpster in it.

Max got out and walked up to it, carrying her old sneakers in her hands. “I don’t know about this,” she said apprehensively. “I mean, they’re still—”

“How long have you had those shoes?”

She squirmed, looking down at them. “I was wearing them when I ran away from home.”

“One more reason to get rid of them,” Jake told her. “I mean, four years? Goodwill wouldn’t even take those things, Max. They’d do exactly what you’re about to. That life is behind you, and you don’t need them anymore.” He reached out and opened the dumpster lid for her. “Come on, Kobe. Toss them in.”

She frowned. “Kobe? Who’s that?”

“Just...” Jake gestured towards the dumpster.

Max hesitated for a few seconds, then nodded. She took a step forward and pushed her old sneakers into the dumpster, Jake letting the lid fall shut on top of them. Neither of them spoke until they got back in the truck.

“Okay, I have to know if you’re serious. Do you really not know who Kobe Bryant is?” Jake asked.

Max looked at him blankly. “No. Who is he?”

“Basketball player for the Lakers? One of the greatest of all time?” Jake had an incredulous look on his face. “Did you guys not have sports back in Oregon?”

She shook her head. “My church said that it was heresy, that people worshiped professional athletes. Something about stealing faith from God, I think. We weren’t allowed to follow them.”

“That might be the most depressing thing you’ve said since we met,” Jake sighed. “What else, exactly, did your church not let you watch?”

“A lot.” Max looked up in thought. “Most movies and television shows. The only things I ever saw on TV were reruns of really old sitcoms that my dad liked, and a couple of those evangelical sermons.”

“Okay. We might have to make a list of stuff for you to watch.” Jake smirked. "A pop culture catch-up list, or something."
Max: Hey... is it cool, if I use the TV?

Jake: Yea, of course.

Max: Can I watch some of your movies?

Jake: Sure.

Max: Can I have one of your popcorn bags?

Jake: Tell you what; you have my permission from now until the end of time to use any appliances, help yourself to whatever’s in the fridge and pantry, and do anything you want in the apartment besides run around my bedroom.

Max: Sorry. I don’t mean to keep bugging you.

Jake: It’s fine. What movie are you gonna watch?

Max: I don’t know. A few of them looked really good.

Max: Where should I start?

Jake: What kind of movies do you like?

Max: You get that I’ve never really watched anything that wasn’t bible-related, right?

Jake: Oh, boy. Well, I think most people would agree that my movie collection is pretty good, so I guess just find one that looks interesting and go for it.


Jake: ... maybe start with literally anything else.

Sarah: Hey, just out of curiosity, has the number of customers increased since I started working?

Jake: Yes. Like I said, though, I’m waiting for the six-month mark to make a decision.

Sarah: No, absolutely. I just wanted to make sure that what I was doing was working.

Jake: Definitely. You’re pretty close to the money with your original estimate of ten percent, actually.

Sarah: How far off am I?

Jake: Not much. It’s gone up 8.7% since you started, last I checked.

Sarah: Super. So, I’ve been doing good work?

Jake: ... I feel like there’s a reason you’re making sure that you’re on my good side.
Sarah: Are you aware that the fire sprinklers malfunctioned at Worm Wood this evening?

Jake: Yes. I just got a text from Jeff an hour ago. There was a power surge when a car hit the junction box outside the bar.

Jake: Wait, how did you know?

Sarah: Because I was there, too.

Jake: You were?

Sarah: Sitting at the bar, using my personal MacBook to update their Facebook page with pictures they took from their first Ladies’ Night.

Jake: Ah ha.

Jake: And how is said laptop?

Sarah: Swimming with the fishes. Pun intended.

Jake: Unfortunate.

Sarah: I’m hoping you have insurance for this kind of thing?

Jake: Take it to a repair shop, have them document that it’s toast, and send it to me with an invoice; I’ll need it for the claim. I’ll tack the cost of a new one onto your next check.

Sarah: Thank you so much.

Jake: You okay besides? I heard it got a little slippery. Jeff said a bartender twisted her ankle.

Sarah: I’m fine, other than being wet and cold.

Sarah: At least the firefighters are cute.

Jake: Yea, they are. Any prospects?

Sarah: One of them asked for my number. We’ll see how that goes.

Max: So... is Cobb still in the dream world at the end of the movie?

Jake: What?

Max: I just finished watching Inception. I’m confused.

Jake: Oh. Yea, that movie got a lot of people.

Max: Why does it cut out with the top still spinning?

Jake: The message is that it doesn’t matter. Cobb has his kids back, and he’s happy.

Max: But what if it’s a dream?
**Jake:** He doesn’t care. Again, kids.

**Max:** And why does he use a top anyway, as his totem thing? Couldn’t someone make a dream world where the top stopped spinning?

**Jake:** ... I have no idea.

**Max:** And if they can put anything in the dream world they want, why didn’t they make a safe room or something? Or give themselves tanks? And why did Ariadne make the last dream level a snowy mountain, when she could have done something easier to navigate?

**Jake:** These are all great questions for the guys who made the movie. You should ask them.

**Max:** What, just send an email to Leonardo DiCaprio?

**Jake:** Exactly. I’m sure he’ll get back to you.

---

**Penny:** FUCK YOU, YOU FUCKING MOTHER FUCKER

**Jake:** And good morning to you, too.

**Penny:** Shit. Sorry. That wasn’t for you.

**Jake:** Who pissed in your Cheerios?

**Penny:** Ex-boyfriend named Jason. His name is right next to yours in my phone.

**Penny:** I just got a call from a recruiter. Asshole put my name down as a reference for a job he’s trying to get.

**Jake:** What kind of job?

**Penny:** I don’t care! That bastard put six hundred bucks worth of video games on my Visa! If he thinks I’m giving him a reference for ANYTHING, his brain has finally fried!!

**Jake:** Six hundred? Damn, that’s dedication.

**Penny:** That’s one word for it. Not the one I use.

**Penny:** I don’t know how you guys justify paying for those video games at all. It’s sixty bucks for a disc in a green case.

**Jake:** We pay for the hours of enjoyment we get out of those games.

**Penny:** WHY DON’T YOU JUST GO FUCKING MARRY HIM THEN?!

**Jake:** Yea, I’m out. See you at Riccardo’s later.

---

**Max:** I hate you so much.

**Jake:** Huh? Why?
Max: You said this was a good movie!

Jake: Which one?

Max: Paranormal Activity!

Jake: I didn’t think you’d watch it alone.

Max: Do you have ANY idea how much noise your apartment makes?

Max: When are you coming home?

Jake: Not until really late, probably. The band is playing at Railroad until three in the morning.

Max: Well, I’ll still be awake. The water in the pipes sounds like demons. And every time the people above us walk around, I have heart palpitations.

Jake: Uh, nobody lives in the apartment above us, Max. It’s vacant.

Jake: Max?

Jake: You went up to check, didn’t you?

Max: Paul and Amy say hello.

Max: Asshole.

Jake: What are the protected classes in California?

Hayden: Um... there are a lot.

Jake: Like what?

Hayden: Off the top of my head? Race, ancestry, religion, gender, physical and mental disabilities, sexual orientation, age, marital status, certain medical conditions, political affiliation, and being a victim of domestic violence.

Jake: I noticed height isn’t in there.

Hayden: Actually, in San Francisco, height is another protected class.

Jake: Are you kidding me?

Hayden: I don’t make the rules, man.

Jake: What if a potential employee is too short to reach the cash drawer?

Hayden: Okay, no more hypotheticals. Please tell me what, exactly, you’re dealing with right now.

Jake: Patrick and I elected not to hire a woman who was only three feet, four inches tall. Even if she jumped, she couldn’t reach the touch screen. Now the girl’s mother is threatening to sue us for discrimination if we don’t give her the job.
Hayden: Okay, then it’s not about being a protected class anymore. It’s about not being able to physically do the work you’re hiring people for. You’re fine.

Jake: That’s what Patrick said. The girl’s mother is telling us to get a stepping stool.

Hayden: Yea, no. More than one bartender works back there, and a stepping stool presents a tripping hazard. Furthermore, can this woman maneuver beer kegs? Re-stock bottles of liquor? And if she’s too short to get to the register, how is she going to make drinks on top of a bar?

Jake: So what do we do?

Hayden: She threatened a lawsuit? Stop talking to her. Any more communications need to go through the lawyer.

Jake: She’s in the bar right now. Patrick is trying to talk her out.

Hayden: Inform her that she needs to leave. If she refuses, call the police. Do not, under ANY circumstances, put your hands on her or her daughter. And stay in view of your security cameras.

Jake: Got it. Call you later.

Max: Is Hurt Locker what you did in Iraq?

Jake: No. Those guys are EOD.

Max: EOD?

Jake: Explosive Ordinance Disposal. The Army’s Bomb Squad, basically. I was with the 101st.

Max: 101st... what?

Jake: 101st Airborne Division. 502nd IR.

Max: IR?

Jake: Infantry Regiment, 1st Battalion, 2nd Brigade Combat Team.

Max: I’m so lost.

Jake: I was a soldier on the ground. I didn’t do anything specialized.

Max: Is there a movie about what you did in Iraq?

Jake: Not really. Closest you might find is Generation: Kill on HBO.

Max: What’s that about?

Jake: A bunch of Marines who took part in the invasion back in ’03, like I did.

Max: I thought you were in the Army?

Jake: I said it was the CLOSEST.
Max: Why hasn’t a movie been made about you guys?

Jake: There are movies about the 101st. Screaming Eagles, Band of Brothers...

Max: IMDB says those are old. Is there anything recent?

Jake: Do you know how impressive the 101st history is? Our soldiers were the first ones to parachute into France during D-Day in World War II. We escorted the Little Rock Nine to and from school. Our helicopters fired the first shots in Desert Storm. We killed Saddam Hussein’s sons during Iraqi Freedom. We ARE the movies.

Jake: And 2001 is not ‘old’.

Max: Sounds like someone’s a little salty.

Jake: Sounds like someone wants a new place to live.

Max: ... I guess 2001 wasn’t THAT long ago.

Jake: Attagirl.
“How’s it feel to be old enough to drive?”

Brooke shrugged, as she picked at her slice of cake. “Like another checkmark on the list, honestly.”

Emily scoffed from her seat across the kitchen table. “Seriously? I was stoked, when Jane took me to get my permit.”

“Yea.” Brooke took another bite of cake. “It probably just hasn’t kicked in yet.”

Emily studying her friend carefully as she ate. “Are you okay?” she asked, a look of concern on her face. “You’ve been really mopey ever since you met with that lawyer. And I know you’re not sleeping worth a shit.”

Brooke glanced at her. “How do you-”

“We share a wall, remember? I can hear you tossing and turning.” Emily scooted her chair closer. “Seriously, Brooke. What did the lawyer say?”

“She...” Brooke bit her lip. “It’s stupid.”

“I doubt it.”

Brooke sighed. “Basically, my family has a case to sue for my return to First Light. She said my statement is really all she has to go on, because Ryan Caulfield isn’t stupid enough to produce the marriage certificate my grandfather had me sign when I was a kid. So she’s basically arguing my case with a weight around one foot.”

“... oh.” Emily bit her lip. “Sorry.”

“Yea.” Brooke set her fork down and pushed the plate away. “Not really hungry anymore.”

“Dude, don’t do that.” Emily pushed the cake back towards her. “You can’t get fatalistic before your trial. You know Miss Amber is going to kick lots of ass to keep you from going back.”

“She’s a social worker, not a lawyer,” Brooke muttered.

“She...” Emily paused, then sighed. “Okay, Brooke. Maybe. But that’s no reason to give up yet.”

Brooke shot Emily a look. “I’m-”

“Do you want to go back?” Emily interrupted.

“No.”

“Then don’t.” Emily leaned forward, looking at Brooke intently. “At the end of the day, Brooke, this is on you. It’s your life. Miss Amber, your lawyer, your parents, the judge, they can say whatever they want. But they,” she emphasized, poking Brooke in the shoulder, “are NOT the boss of you.”

Brooke considered her friend’s words silently.

“You ran away once before,” Emily added. “You can do it again.”
She’s...

... ...

Huh.

I guess she’s not wrong.

“Okay,” Brooke breathed.

“Okay, what?”

“You’re right.” Brooke met her eyes. “I’m not going back.”

Emily smirked. “Damn straight.”

“Language, Emily.” The two girls craned their necks as Miss Amber walked into the kitchen, a smirk on her face. “What are you right about?”

“Nothing, Miss Amber.” Emily sighed, as she slouched in her chair. “Anyone ever tell you that you should put a bell around your neck?”

“I’m sure a few people would find it very preferable.” Miss Amber set her purse down and reached inside, producing a white envelope. “Here you go, Brooke.”

“What’s this?” Brooke asked, as she took it.

Miss Amber smiled. “What do you think? I know when your birthday is, too.”

“Oh.” Brooke ripped the envelope open, a red gift card dropping into her hands. “Ooh! Cool! Thanks Miss Amber!!”

“I know Jane and Pete gave you Target gift cards, too.” Her social worker nodded. “Figured you could use a little more help with expanding your wardrobe.”

Brooke smiled. “I kind of want to get some headphones, too, so I can listen to music.”

“Whatever you want.” Miss Amber patted her shoulder. “Just don’t get the stupidly expensive ones. Make sure you get some more clothes too, okay?”

“I will.” Brooke slipped the gift card into her pocket. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“What do you think about these?”

Emily looked over to see Brooke holding up a pair of black headphones with silver skulls painted on the sides. “A little... gothic, don’t you think?” she offered. “What are those?”

Brooke double-checked the label. “Skullcandy? Jeez, that’s a weird name. They’re for a pretty good price, though. Only thirty bucks. And they are TOTALLY cute.”

“Let me check.” Emily opened the app on her phone and ran a quick search. “Hmm. They’ve got good reviews on Amazon, and they’re selling for thirty-five.”
“Sold.” Brooke dropped them in her basket, on top of a few pieces of clothing. “And I’ve still got about forty bucks. I don’t know what else to get, though.”

“How about some iTunes gift cards?” Emily nodded at the rack behind her. “You could stand to expand your music library, too.”

Brooke thought about it for a second. “Fair enough,” she agreed, taking one of the cards. “Fifteen bucks left now. Any more suggestions?”

“Hmm.” A grin spread over Emily’s face. “You could go get yourself a pair of slutty underwear.”

“Wha—” Brooke whipped her head around, staring at Emily in shock. “No! Dude!”

“I was kidding, you prude.” Emily snickered at the look on Brooke’s face. “Jesus, you’ll never keep a boyfriend with that attitude.”

Brooke shot her a dirty look. “I’m not the only one here that can’t keep a boyfriend. Why don’t YOU go get yourself a pair of slutty underw-”

She caught herself before she could finish, slamming her mouth shut and desperately wishing she could take it back. Emily blinked, her expression dropping. She averted her gaze after a couple of seconds, staring at the wall.

“I am so fucking sorry,” Brooke whispered.

“... guess I walked right into that,” Emily muttered.

Brooke set her basket down and hurried over, throwing her arms around Emily. “I’m sorry, Emily, I’m so sorry, I didn’t think, and—”

“Dude, calm down.” Brooke felt Emily shake her head. “I’m not a china doll that’ll shatter with the wrong breeze.”

“That was still a really shitty thing to say.” Brooke squeezed tighter. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.” Emily patted Brooke’s arm, as they separated. “Like I said, I kind of walked right into that. Sometimes I don’t really think before I speak, either.”

“Are... you okay?” Brooke bit her lip. “I just realized, you always ask about me, and I’ve never asked about you. I’m a real asshole friend.”

Emily scoffed. “You’ve needed more help than me over the past couple of months.”

“Still.”

“... I’m fine. Mostly.” Emily looked down and scratched at her arm. “Doctor Greene helped me work through a lot of stuff, when I first got to Blackwell.”

“Mostly?” Brooke tried to meet Emily’s gaze. “What does that mean?”

“It’s nothing. Just... you know, every once in a while, I have nightmares.” Emily shrugged. “Not a big deal. It just means I get a little less sleep than usual.”

Brooke blinked. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because there really isn’t anything you can do, Brooke.” She sighed. “Besides, you’re still dealing
“with your own shit. I’m not going to lump my mental health on top of that.”

“Are you- dude!” Brooke exclaimed. “You’re my best friend. You’ve been my rock since I got here. Why the fuck wouldn’t I want to help you?”


Brooke raised her eyebrows. “Is that so surprising?”

“I mean, a little. We’ve only known each other for a couple of months. It’s-”

“You are literally the only person I’ve ever met who I can come close to relating to,” Brooke interrupted. “I could never talk about any of the shit I’m going through with anyone from back home. Even the other kids I hung out with at high school, away from the church.” She paused. “You’re the only person who’s ever tried to help me, besides Miss Amber. So, yea, you’re my best friend.”

Emily didn’t seem to know how to respond.

“Also,” Brooke added, “it’s not like there’s any competition.”

The snort of amusement exploded from Emily’s nostrils before she could stop it. Both girls dissolved into giggles.

“Jeez.” Emily sighed, as she finally composed herself. “I mean... yea, I guess.” She hesitated. “I never even told Sadie about Martin. She was so much older than me, it was like I had a third foster parent. So...”

“Look, I need you to promise me something,” Brooke told her. “Next time you have a nightmare, and you can’t sleep, just... promise me you’ll come to me, all right?”

Emily shook her head. “I’m not waking you up in the middle of the night for my head shit, Brooke.”

“I don’t care.” Brooke folded her arms. “Promise me.”

“... fine,” Emily agreed. “I’ll wake your ass up at two in the morning next time I have a bad dream.”

“Good.” Brooke glanced at her watch. “We should probably hurry this up, before Pete starts wondering what’s taking us so long.”

“Hey, he volunteered to take two teenaged girls shopping.” Emily smirked. “He should have known what he was getting himself into.”

Brooke found herself thinking less and less about the lawsuit, as time went on.

She tried to focus on her schoolwork, and her sessions with Doctor Greene; she continued to see her guidance counselor as the school year pushed forward. Jane and Pete put together a Thanksgiving dinner that outclassed all the previous holidays Brooke had ever been through with First Light. Miss Amber had even stopped by for a few minutes, to enjoy the food.

November turned into December, and Brooke almost completely forgot about the preliminary hearing. She also hadn’t heard from Megan in weeks, though Miss Amber assured that she was still actively working.

It wasn’t until the second or third week in December, that Brooke found herself being woken from a deep sleep.
“Brooke?” A small voice asked from the dark.

She blinked her way to wakefulness, as she felt the hand shaking her arm. “Emily?” she asked sleepily, trying to push herself upright.

“... yea.”

Brooke reached over and turned on her lamp, revealing her friend in a state that deeply worried her. Emily’s eyes were wet, tears etching their way down her face. Snot flowed freely from her nose, and she couldn’t stop sniffling. And her lips trembled as she tried to hastily wipe her eyes.

“Emily, what...” Brooke sat up. “Did you have a nightmare?”

She nodded, snorting back mucus as she rubbed her nose.

“Jesus.” Brooke grabbed her arm. “Come on.”

Emily let Brooke pull her down until she was sitting on the bed. Her friend’s head fell onto her shoulder as Brooke hugged her tightly, gripping the back of Emily’s shirt.

“... I’m sorry,” Emily whispered.


“I can’t...” Emily sniffed deeply, as she let Brooke hold her. “I can’t close my eyes.”

Brooke squeezed her tighter.

“I can’t close my eyes,” Emily repeated hollowly. “Every time... it’s... Martin’s there, and he’s... he’s holding me down...” she sniffled. “He’s holding me down, and it hurts, and I can’t get away, Brooke, I can’t-”

“Martin’s not here,” Brooke whispered. “Emily, where are you? Where are you, right now?”

Emily sniffed again. “Your bedroom.”

“That’s right. You’re here. Martin’s not.” Brooke looked down, though all she could see was the top of Emily’s head. “Martin’s not here. You left, Emily. You’re never going to see him again.”

“... I know,” Emily whimpered. “But he won’t go away.”

“Yes, he will,” Brooke assured her. “He’s not here. He can’t hurt you anymore. Tell me where you are again?”

“... your bedroom.”

“Is Martin here?”

“No.”

“That’s right.” Brooke rubbed Emily’s back. “Martin’s gone. He’s not here. He can’t hurt you.”

“But-”

“He’s not here,” Brooke repeated. “He’s not here. Say it. Where is he?”

“... not here.” Emily sniffed. “He’s not here.”
“Keep saying it.”

Brooke didn’t let Emily go for several minutes. Her friend repeated the mantra ‘he’s not here’ over and over, softly and to herself, while Brooke rocked her gently. After the several minutes, Emily wasn’t sniffling as much, and her eyes were drier, though still rimmed with red and puffy.

“He’s not here,” she whispered again.

“Are you doing better?” Brooke asked quietly.

“A little.” Emily rubbed her nose again.

Brooke pulled at her. “Come on, lay down. You can sleep here tonight.”

Emily put her feet up, letting Brooke tug her into bed. The teenager threw the comforter over both of them before she turned off the light. The bed wasn’t very big, so Brooke had to hug the wall to give Emily the room she needed to curl up facing her.

“Brooke?” Emily asked quietly.

“What?”

“No homo.”

Brooke rolled her eyes in the dark. “Can you not be a smart-ass for five minutes?”

“Sorry.” Emily sniffed. “... thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Try and get some sleep, okay?”

“Okay.”

Emily looked a little better, the next morning. She was still pretty quiet as she picked at her eggs.

“You okay, kid?” Pete asked, looking at her carefully.

“Yea.” Emily sighed. “Just not very hungry.”

“Does that mean you don’t want your bacon?”

She picked up her last strip and tossed it towards him. Halfway through the air, though, Brooke’s hand flashed out and snatched it. “Hey!” Pete complained.

“Too slow.” Brooke bit down, grinning as she chewed. Emily snorted in amusement at Pete’s dejected face.

“You don’t need any more bacon anyway,” Jane chided her husband. “You heard what Doctor Patel said. You need to cut back.”

“Doctor Patel isn’t the boss of me,” Pete huffed.

Jane raised one eyebrow. “Are you implying that I’m not, either?”

“... damn it.”

Brooke and Emily both snickered, as Jane’s phone vibrated. “Oh, it’s Miss Amber,” she commented
as she read the text.

“What does she want?” Brooke asked.

“For us to bring you girls to her office next month.” Jane shrugged. “Looks like she wants all the kids from your old church there, that first Saturday in January.”

Emily and Brooke exchanged glances. “Why?” Emily asked.

“Some kind of meeting, but she doesn’t say what for, or who with.” Jane put the phone back down. “If it’s for all you kids, I’m sure it’s important.”
“I don’t want to go.”

“I don’t want you to, either.”

Kate and Victoria were sitting in her Audi, gripping each other’s hands tightly as they stared ahead of them at the bus station. It was three days before Christmas, and Kate was about to go back to San Diego.

“I want to go with you,” Victoria said quietly.

“Me, too.” Kate bit her lip as she glanced down. “Vicky...”

“Don’t do that.” Victoria squeezed her hand even tighter. “I will not be that girlfriend who insists that you come out to your parents. You know that.”

“I do.” Kate glanced over at her. “I want to. I’m just...” she hesitated. “I don’t know if I’m ready for that yet.”

Kate would admit that she’d been doing better at handling her mother, since the Yosemite trip. Her mom still bugged the crap out of her about Chris, but after several affirmations of boundaries, when Kate hung up, her mother didn’t blow up her phone trying to get ahold of her again.

Too much, anyway.

“You’re coming back on the twenty-seventh, right?” Victoria asked.

“Yep. Early afternoon.” Kate nodded. “It’s only five days. I can handle five days. Or run away to Stella’s, if I have to.”

Victoria cracked a small smile. “Will your boyfriend be there?”

Kate snorted. “Yes. We’re going to see him on the 24th.” She glanced over at Victoria. “His girlfriend will be there, too. He’s bringing Jaime to meet his parents.”

“Well.” Victoria shook her head. “What does your mother think of that?”

“Oh, she hasn’t said.” Kate rolled her eyes. “I’m sure her opinion on the matter hasn’t changed, though.”

Her phone beeped. “It’s two o’clock,” she muttered, checking the screen. She glanced over at Victoria, a sad look on her face. “I have to go.”

“Yea.” Victoria sighed. “Did you change my name in your phone back to Victor?”

“I did. You’re Victor Jameson, and we have a group project due in my Primary Education class two weeks after the holiday break. Since you’re not going home for Christmas, you’ve volunteered to stay back in LA and try to get ahead of the curve. Which means you’re going to text me every so often for my input.” Kate smirked. “Alyssa helped me come up with a backstory.”
Victoria chuckled. “Remind me to buy her a drink when I see her again.”

Kate smiled as she leaned over the center console, giving her girlfriend a goodbye kiss. “Have fun with your parents back in Seattle,” she said as they broke apart.

“I won’t, without you.” Victoria smiled back.

“And try not to smoke, okay?”

“Yes, babe.” Victoria rolled her eyes. “Try not to let your mom drive you crazy.”

Kate matched her eye roll as she got out of the car, grabbing the duffle bag. “Yea. Right.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to put on a little more makeup?”

“Yes, Mom,” Kate said dryly from the back seat of the family SUV.

Her mother glanced at her over her shoulder. “You could have done with a little more eye shadow,” she said accusingly. “And you might have applied a little bit of-”

“I didn’t put on any eye shadow,” Kate retorted. “I’m not here to impress anybody.”

“Kate Beverly Marsh, you can make yourself look nice for one evening without it killing you. Or without the attitude.” Her mother glared at her, then turned back to the front of the car. “I don’t want you running off with Stella, either. You haven’t seen Chris in years, you can at least talk to him for a little while about his school.”

“Is he even going to be here?”

“His father said he was coming down.”

Kate suppressed a smirk. “Did he bring his GIRLFRIEND with him?”

Her mother shot another glare over her shoulder. “I am sure that whoever he brought will let you catch up with him,” she said, her jaw set.

Kate rolled her eyes. Lynn, in the seat next to her, rolled her eyes as well; at fourteen years old, her sister was quickly losing her blinders to their mother’s obsession with Kate and Chris. “Can I talk to Chris?” she asked, in what Kate recognized as her smart-alleck tone. “I want to know about Berkeley’s science program.”

“Lynn, if adults are conversing, then you need to leave them alone.” Her mother turned back towards the windshield. “That includes Kate and Chris.”

*So I am an adult. At least when it suits her.* Kate traded a glance with Lynn, who smirked. Jessica, sitting on the other side of Lynn, ignored the whole exchange as she stared out the window. *Probably wishes she could have brought her violin,* Kate thought sadly.

They pulled up to the Hill’s house a few minutes later. “Did... this place get bigger?” Kate asked with a frown.

“It did. Gerry had an addition put on last year,” Her father explained. “An extra two bedrooms upstairs, and a billiards room downstairs. He did a fair amount of the work himself, too. It was very well done, but I wouldn’t bring it up, if you don’t want him to talk your ear off about it for an hour.”
Kate snickered as they parked, and got out of the car. “Look, Kate, Chris is here!” Lynn exclaimed as she pointed to a red sedan. “He came down after all!”

“How wonderful!” Her mother looked back at her. “Make sure you speak to him!”

Kate shot her little sister a glare. Lynn smirked back, waggling her eyebrows.

Chris’s father, Gerry, greeted them all at the door. “Merry Christmas, Marshes!”

“Merry Christmas!” Her mother’s voice exuded a glee that Kate was pretty sure was fake. “How are you, Gerald?”

“Well, my brothers are here, and all of our kids are home.” He smirked. “So I’m ready to start drinking heavily.”

They all laughed like they were supposed to, including Kate.

“Come on in, guys. Food’s in the kitchen, party’s in the dining room.” He waved them inside, pausing. “Kate!”

“Hi, Uncle Gerald.” She smiled.

“Wow, I was starting to forget what you looked like!” He gave her a big hug. “You run off a few hours down the road, and we never see you anymore. How’s life in Los Angeles?”

“It’s good!” Kate nodded. “Bigger than San Diego, that’s for sure. How are-”

“Where is Chris?” her mother interrupted. “We saw his car outside. Did your son come home, too?”

Really? Kate scowled for a quarter of a second. Way to be subtle, Mom.

“He did!” Gerry nodded. “And he brought his girlfriend, Jaime. Wait until you guys meet her, she’s an absolute sweetheart.”

“How lovely!” Her mother was smiling, but Kate could tell it was plastered on.

“Yea, he’s really smitten. Head over heels.” Gerry gestured deeper into the house. “He’s out there somewhere, I’m sure.”

“Well, let’s not be rude.” Kate’s mother gestured. “Come on, let’s go say hi to everybody!”

Kate took a deep breath as she followed her mother into the living room. It’s one night. You can survive one night without wanting to scoop your eyeballs out with spoons.

Or your mother’s eyeballs.

Kate blinked. Wow. Maybe I have been hanging out with Vicky too much.

“Look, Kate, there’s Chris!” Her mother pointed, and Kate saw the object of her mother’s attention, standing in the corner as he checked his phone. “Kate, why don’t you go see how he’s been?”

“Sure thing, Mom,” Kate said half-heartedly, as she walked over as slowly as possible.

Chris noticed her as she approached. “Hey, Kate!” he greeted her with a smile as he put his phone away. “Long time, no see!”
“Good to see you, Chris.” Kate embraced him quickly. “How have you been?”

“Busy.” He sighed. “They never show, on all those medical dramas, how intense medical school is.”

“I bet.” Kate smiled. “I heard you brought your girlfriend home, too?”

He glanced around. “I did, but I don’t know where she is,” he said with a frown. “I think she ran off to help my mother with something, but I haven’t seen her for a while.”

Kate smirked. “You’re already losing her? How long have you guys been together?”

“Eleven months. More, actually; we met at a New Year’s Eve party.” Chris grinned. “I needed a girl to kiss, she was alone, so…”

“Very smooth,” Kate remarked dryly.

“Yea, I thought so. She thought I was an idiot.”

Kate shook her head. “Well, she obviously came around. Is she in your class?”

“Yes. She wants to be a pediatrician. I guess she-”

“Hey!”

Kate jumped as a hand grabbed her elbow. She whipped her head around and saw Stella’s grinning face. “What the heck?!” Kate exclaimed.

“Sorry. I couldn’t resist,” Stella said smugly.

“Real nice, Stella.” Chris rolled his eyes. “Does this mean you’re ready to steal Kate away?”

“In a minute.” Stella quickly looked over Kate’s shoulder. “Her mother’s giving me the stink eye. God forbid I interrupt the lovebirds.”

Chris sighed, turning back to Kate. “How has she been lately?”

“Oh, more of the same.” Kate sighed. “She’s not bugging YOU, is she?”

“Only through my mother.” Chris shrugged. “And I think my mom is starting to get weirded out by her. I don’t know how much stronger I can emphasize that I’m not interested in you.”

“Ditto.” Kate glanced at Stella. “Is she still looking at us?”

“No. Looks like she’s talking to my mother now.”

“You guys better take off, then.” Chris glanced at her. “Quickly, before she comes back.”

“Ok, seriously, what IS that?”

Stella looked at Kate, confused. “For real?”

“Yes.” Kate waved her hand in front of her face as she studied the box in her friend’s hand. “That smells terrible.”

“You’re kidding me. You live in LA, and you’ve never seen a vape before?”
“That’s not—come on, of course I have,” Kate clarified. “I was talking about the smell. Most of the people around campus that use those things smell better than that. My friend Alyssa used to use one that smelled like strawberries.”

“Yea, this isn’t fruity.” Stella smirked, as she inhaled some more. “Or tobacco.”

Kate frowned. “Then what is it?”

Stella let out yet another long, smoky breath before she answered. “Cannabis.”

“Ca—” Kate gaped. “Stella! You’re getting HIGH right now?!”

“Oh, calm down.” Her friend rolled her eyes. “It’s not that potent. Not more than drinking a couple of glasses of wine, anyway.”

“You’re smoking pot, Stella! That’s illegal!”

“No, it’s not. This is medical marijuana. I buy this stuff with my credit card at a dispensary in town.”

Kate stared at her. “What about school? Doesn’t SDSU have a zero-tolerance policy about marijuana usage?”

“Not if you have a medical condition that gets treated with it. What else you got?”

Kate’s face twisted as she struggled with an argument. “You still shouldn’t do it,” she got out. “It’s not good for you.”

“There are literally dozens of medical benefits from using pot.” Stella took another inhale from her vape. “You want a hit?”

“No, I do not.” Kate sighed as she leaned against the side of the house. Her and Stella, unable to find someplace to hide inside, had snuck out the back door. “Does your mom know that you have a medical marijuana card?”

“Oh, hell no.” Stella shook her head. “She’d come all the way to my apartment to beat my ass. And then Eric would try to protect me, and it would get real awkward, since they haven’t met yet.”

Kate raised her eyebrows. “Eric’s living with you already?”

“Well... sort of.” Stella grimaced. “His apartment building caught fire while he was at work last month. He lost everything that he wasn’t wearing, or in his truck.”

“Oh my God!” Kate gasped. “What happened?”

“It was an electrical fire. The circuit breakers weren’t up to code, or something, I don’t know.” Stella sighed. “He didn’t have any place to go, and his renter’s insurance hadn’t paid out yet. So I let him stay with me, and...” she scratched her neck. “I mean, I was nervous about it at first, since we’d only been dating for four months. But we’re totally making it work.”

“Wow,” Kate said quietly. “That... sounds pretty nice, actually.”

“Yea. I mean, I’ve had to bug him a few times about leaving his underwear on the floor, but that’s it.” Stella smirked. “And him not wearing it doesn’t bother me very much, if you know what I mean.”

Kate rolled her eyes. “Classy.”
A woman walked around the side of the house, stopping in her tracks as she saw the two of them. “Oh... I’m sorry,” she drawled. “I didn’t know there was anyone out here.”

“Hey, Jaime,” Stella greeted her. “What’s up?”

“Nothing, I just needed some air.” Jaime sighed as she rubbed her neck. “Chris’s mother is kind of overbearing.”

“Yea, she is.” Stella smirked. “Have you met Kate yet?

Jaime blinked as she faced Kate. “No, I haven’t.”

Kate pushed herself off of the side of the house, smiling. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“You, too.” Jaime shook Kate’s hand stiffly. “Chris has told me a lot about you.”

Kate raised her eyebrows. “He has?”

“Well.” Jaime paused. “ Mostly your mother.”

“... oh.”

Kate shifted uncomfortably. Neither of them spoke for a few seconds.

“I have no desire to hook up with your boyfriend,” Kate finally said. “At all. Even a little bit. We’re just friends who barely see each other.”

“Yea.” Jaime crossed her arms. “That’s what he said, too.”

“She really doesn’t, Jaime,” Stella interjected.

Jaime sighed. “I... believe you,” she said, though not very convincingly. “Sorry. I just...” she scratched her arm. “I’ve heard all about how you two are friends, and I overheard some woman in there saying how much you two meant to each other...”

Kate rolled her eyes. “Little taller than me, middle-aged, light blonde?”

Jaime snorted. “Your mother?”

“Yea.”

“I’ve heard she’s a little...” Jaime hesitated. “I don’t know the polite word for it. Still.”

Kate bit her lip as she quickly glanced around, making sure they were alone before she pulled her phone from her pocket. “Look, I’ll prove it to you.”

“What?” Jaime raised her eyebrows. “You have a picture of your boyfriend?”

Stella snorted in amusement.

“Sort of.” Kate tapped her phone a few times and handed it to Jaime.

The other girl looked and saw the selfie Kate had taken with Victoria in Yosemite. They were both posing in front of the General Sherman tree as they embraced, smiling, Kate’s face pressing sideways into Victoria’s chest while her girlfriend held the camera.

She inhaled sharply, after a few seconds. “... oh,” she muttered, her cheeks coloring as she handed
Kate her phone back.

“Yea.” Kate put the phone away. “I have no interest in Chris, I promise.”

Jaime bit her lip. “Um... back in Mississippi, when we fuck up, we usually cook our way into an apology. I can’t do that here, so...”

“It’s fine, really.” Kate smirked. “Please don’t tell my mother.”

Jaime shook her head vigorously. “Never.”

“How Chris, either,” Kate added.

“I won’t tell a soul.”

Stella looked at Kate with an apprehensive expression. “Does this mean you’re going to start coming out?”

Kate sighed. “I want to,” she admitted. “I don’t like having to hide Vicky from people. Or that I have to change her name in my phone when I come home, so my mother doesn’t see an ‘I love you’ text from a girl’s name.”

“You mother doesn’t care for gay people?” Jaime asked.

“She doesn’t think we exist.” Kate leaned back against the side of the house. “It’s not natural, you see. Gays are just confused, and going through a silly phase until they see what they truly are, and come back to the light.” She scoffed. “Or some variation of that.”

Jaime blinked. “Um... your mom kind of sounds like Pat Robertson.”

“Yea, she used to watch him on TV a lot.”

Stella shook her head. “I don’t know,” she said carefully. “Kate, you know if your mom finds out, she’s going to flip her lid. Especially when she hears that you’re never going to fall head over heels for your one true love, Chris.”

“I’ve been telling her that for almost a decade now, so I would hope it wouldn’t come as a surprise.” Kate glanced at Jaime. “My mother doesn’t think very much of you, either. She used the word ‘hussy’ a few months ago.”

Jaime rolled her eyes. “Hussy? What is this, 1992?”

The three girls giggled. The sound of a door opening came from the back of the house, before they could collect themselves. “Stella? Are you out here?”

Stella cursed as she turned off her vape, waving the smoke away. “What is it, Mom?”

“What are you doing?”

“Just getting some air with Kate and Jaime.”

“Well, come back inside. I need your help. And bring Jaime with you, Lisa’s asking for her.”

Jaime groaned quietly, as the door closed. “I’m pretty sure that Chris’s mother thinks that just because I have a southern accent means that I’m a wizard in the kitchen,” she griped. “I don’t have the guts to let her know I just follow my grandmother’s cookbook.”
“Well, look at all of us.” Stella smirked. “Disappointing parents left and right. We’d better go, before she comes back.”

**Victor:** Hey, have you had a chance to look over the presentation I sent you?

**Kate:** My mom went to bed. I’m alone.

**Victor:** I love you. And I miss you so much.

**Kate:** Me, too. On both counts :)

**Victor:** How was your Christmas party?

**Kate:** Meh. I met Chris’s girlfriend, Jaime. She was very nice.

**Victor:** And your mother?

**Kate:** Refused to acknowledge her. Or say her name.

**Kate:** She kept pushing Chris and I to get closer. She actually shoved us under a mistletoe.

**Victor:** ... do I have to kill her now?

**Kate:** No. His dad was next to us, and I was tired of dealing with my mom, so I asked him about the new addition he built onto his house.

**Victor:** A new addition?

**Kate:** He’s very proud of it. Did most of the work himself. He showed me around for forty-five minutes.

**Kate:** Do you know how many differences there are between hard woods like oak, versus soft woods like pine?

**Victor:** I do not. How many?

**Kate:** Enough that I was about to burn the entire house down by the time he finished.

**Victor:** Threatening property damage? Who is this, and what have you done to my girlfriend?
Rachel didn’t answer her call, when she tried to get ahold of her the next day.

Or the day after that.

After a week straight, Steph gave up. She finished her finals, graduated, and received her degree in Graphic Design. While she kept her job at the GameStop, she started doing freelance work to keep her skills up and expand her portfolio. At the same time, she stayed on top of job websites and sent out her resume whenever she saw something she liked.

It was a couple of months before a good job opening came up. One of her old professors mentioned that a video game company she liked was looking or new artists, and she was able to secure a letter of recommendation. After a few days, she received an email with the time and date of a Skype interview.

She absolutely nailed it. It was a very productive conversation, and she clicked well with the interviewer. And he made several positive comments about her work.

“I’ll be frank with you, Steph,” he told her. “I’ve spoken to a few people already, about the position, and you’re definitely my choice. But the department head is going to make the final call. If he likes your work, and asks you to come out to San Francisco for a face-to-face, the job is pretty much yours.”

“That sounds awesome!” Steph said excitedly.

“It’s not a problem, then, for you to relocate to California?” the interviewer asked. “We can reimburse you for some moving expenses.”

“I have no problem with that,” Steph stressed to him. “I’m not really attached to Oregon that much.”

“Perfect.” He nodded. “If he agrees, you’ll get a phone call around dinnertime. And I suggest you try to stay available this weekend.”

Steph spent the rest of the day in her apartment, too nervous to do much besides mindlessly watch TV and doodle. When her phone rang with a San Francisco number, right as she was about to order pizza, she practically tripped over herself to answer it.

“I’ll be honest, Steph, this wasn’t really what I expected to see.”

She arched her eyebrows, as the man she hoped would be her boss examined her iPad. “Um... I’m sorry, I thought it was in line with your email.”

“No, it is. It’s actually very good,” Mark assured her. “I just wasn’t expecting your character to be a woman. Literally every other piece of concept art has been of a male character.”

Steph smirked. “How many women do you have in your department?”

“That’s the interesting thing, there are three others.” Mark lowered the iPad. “We did set the premise as a black ops soldier in a futuristic setting. I think everyone is so used to it being a male role that we just went with it.”
“Well, if it is in the future, I didn’t think it would be that much of a stretch.” Steph crossed her legs. “There are plenty of women on the front lines in Iraq and Afghanistan. Besides, there aren’t a lot of strong female leads in video games as it is.”

“Lara Croft... Samus Aran... Chell...” Mark frowned, as he looked up in thought. “Huh. I feel like I should be able to name a lot more.”

“I promise I’m not, like, a raging feminist or anything,” Steph assured him. “I just thought that it would be an interesting twist, to see the lead soldier as a female character. It isn’t very common, and I think it’s something that would catch the eye of anyone browsing the aisles at GameStop.”

Mark nodded. “I like it. That’s a good point, too. I’d probably pick up the case to see what it was about, at least.” He handed her the iPad back. “And honestly, this is the kind of stuff we’re looking for in our artists; outside-the-box thinking that sets us apart. I think you can be a real asset here.”

Steph smiled excitedly. “Does that mean I get the job?”

“It does, in fact, mean that you get the job.” Mark grinned as he stood, holding his hand out. “Welcome to the team, Steph.”

“Thank you so much!” Steph exclaimed as she shook his hand.

“Come on.” Mark gestured towards the door. “Let me show you around.”

“Wow.”

Steph sat in the chair at her new desk. It was far bigger than she imagined, and she had room to spare, even with the latest Apple computer and an angled drawing board. “Man, you guys don’t screw around.”

“Not bad, right?” Mark smirked. “One of the perks of working here. We have to stay up to date with the latest tech, so our stuff stays cutting-edge. Gamers don’t want to play on less than the best these days.”

“And who could blame them?” Steph couldn’t keep the smile from her face as she ran her hand along the edge of the monitor. “Man, this thing is wicked.”

“We’ll have to bring you by the equipment people, too, when you start,” Mark added. “We issue our artists iPads. I know you already have one, but we prefer that all your work be on company equipment.”

“Are they new iPads?”

Mark nodded. “Best on the market.”

Steph grinned. “Sold.”

Her new boss’s cell phone beeped, and he retrieved it from his pocket. “Ok, I got an answer from HR,” he said as he look at the screen. “There are two options for transport reimbursement; you pay for it yourself and give Accounting all your receipts, or we give them your origin city and they cut you a check.” He looked back at her. “HR recommends the second method. They said from Corvallis, the check will probably be about fifteen hundred.”

“Sounds good to me.” Steph spun in her chair. “Will I get it right away?”
“You give Accounting your bank info, they’ll wire the money in a couple of days.”

“Okay. Any apartment recommendations?”

He nodded. “Rent’s expensive out here, but there are some reasonable complexes nearby. Most of them will require first month’s rent up front, though. Do you have some savings built up?”

Steph winced. “Not as much as I’d like.”

“We can help with that, too. Accounting can arrange for some advanced pay, and take it out of your first few paychecks.” He leaned back against the other side of her desk. “We’ll pay for five days worth of hotel rooms, too. But Accounting will make you sign a bunch of paperwork for all of that.”

“Saying... what?”

He smirked. “That if you quit within a year after you get here, you have to pay us back.”

“Figured.” Steph shrugged. “Well, I have no plans of running off. Something like this was near the top of my list of dream jobs.”

“Good to hear.” Mark put his phone away. “You ready to move down here?”

“More like ready to get out of Oregon.” Steph shook her head. “Definitely eager for a change of scenery.”

“Well, you’ll get it.” Mark nodded, as he glanced over her shoulder. “And there’re some of your new coworkers.”

Steph glanced over her shoulder as a blonde man and a woman with dark hair appeared, leaning on the wall over her cubicle. “Tarek said he like the concept,” the woman reported. “He wants more examples to give the animators by next Friday.”

“Good.” Mark nodded. “Jesse, Lars, this is Steph, our new artist from Portland.”

“Oh, hey!” The man smiled. “Nice to meet you!”

“You too!” Steph stood and shook their hands, looking them over. They were both dressed very casually; Lars wore ragged jeans and flip-flops, and a graphic t-shirt under a long beard. Jesse wore tight khakis, which Steph appreciated for a few seconds, and a green blouse with rolled sleeves. Detailed tattoos flowed over both of her arms, and a couple of them dotted her neck. “So there’s, like, no dress code?”

Lars scoffed. “If there was, they’d have to fire all the artists here. Except him,” he added, nodding at Mark.

“I rebel against the system in my own ways,” he assured Steph.

“Sure he does,” Jesse said dryly. “Hey, we were just talking about getting some lunch. You guys want to come?”

“Maybe.” Mark tilted his head. “Where are you going?”

“We’re feeling some Mexican,” Lars answered. “I took a girl to this restaurant last week, and the food was better than I could ever hope to describe. Pretty sure it was part of the reason she agreed to a second date.”
Mark hummed. “I can get behind some good Mexican.” He glanced at Steph. “You hungry?”

“Oh yea.” She nodded. “Mexican sounds good to me.”
Kate brushed her teeth vigorously as she stared in the mirror.

*One more day,* she thought to herself. *One more day. You’re heading back to LA tomorrow. You can survive your mother for another sixteen hours.*

*I hope.*

She finished brushing and spit her toothpaste out. Picking up her bottle of mouthwash, she tilted her head back and poured some into her mouth, swishing it around.

*Almost done. Sixteen hours. Eight of which you’ll spend asleep. And remember, if you kill your mother, you can’t see Vicky.* She smirked. *Jails in California don’t do conjugal visits.*

She suppressed her snicker as she bent over, spitting her mouthwash into the sink.

“Who’s Victor?”

Kate jumped as she looked back up. Lynn was staring at her through the mirror as she leaned against the door frame, her arms crossed.

“Jesus!” Kate wiped her mouth on the back of her hand, trying to stop her heart from hammering its way out of her chest. “Lynn! You startled me!”

“Sorry.” Her sister shrugged. “So. Who’s Victor?”

Kate turned to face her. “Huh? What are you talking about?”

“The guy who’s been texting you for the past few days,” Lynn replied. “Who is he?”

*I guess I couldn’t get completely lucky. At least it’s her, not Mom.*

“He’s one of the other students in my Psychology class,” Kate said, repeating her rehearsed answer. “We have a group project due after the holiday break, and he’s been working on it back in LA. He’s texting me to get my input.”

“Ah.” Lynn unfolded her arms and held Kate’s phone up, looking at the screen. “You must really be helping him a lot, if he loves you and misses you.”

“Gimme that!” Kate snatched her phone from her sister’s hand, her face flushing. “Why are you looking at my phone? And reading my messages?! Do you know what kind of invasion of privacy that is?!”

Lynn shrugged unapologetically. “It went off in your room, and I was curious. The text was displayed on your screen. It wasn’t much of an invasion.”

“I still don’t appreciate you snooping at my phone!”

“Hey, it could have been Mom that saw it.”

Kate was about to retort, but hesitated. She glanced over Lynn’s shoulder into the hallway.

“Relax. She’s still downstairs,” Lynn tilted her head. “So. Who is Victor really?”
“I told you who he is already.” Kate crossed her arms, glaring at her sister. “Please move, so I can go to bed.”

Lynn narrowed her eyes. “Kate, you are so full of shit.”

“Excuse me!” Kate gaped. “Since when do you use that kind of language?!”

“I was trying it out. It seems to fit the situation.” Lynn shrugged. “Come on. You have a secret boyfriend, don’t you?”

“I do not want to talk about this right now,” Kate shot back. “Victor is not my boyfriend, Lynn. Now, move. I’m tired, and I want to go to sleep.”

Lynn kept her eyes on Kate’s, not moving for a couple of seconds. Without warning, she turned her head. “MOM!!” she called over her shoulder.

“What, Lynn?”

Kate reacted before she thought about it. She reached out and grabbed Lynn’s collar, yanking her so they were almost nose to nose. The move and quick reaction surprised both girls, and Lynn stared at Kate with wide eyes, her eyebrows raised as she glanced between her sister’s hands and face.

“Lynn, don’t,” Kate begged in a whisper. “Please!”

Her sister’s face didn’t change for several seconds. Kate felt her heart race.

“Lynn?” their mother called.

“Are my slippers downstairs?” Lynn looked back over her shoulder. “I can’t find them.”

There was a brief pause. “Yes. They’re in the living room. Please come and get them.”

Kate exhaled in relief, letting go of her sister’s shirt. “Thank you,” she breathed.

“Jeez.” Lynn pulled her shirt, smoothing the wrinkles. “I was kidding, Kate. I wouldn’t tell Mom something like that, I was just giving you a hard time. I’m sorry.”

“It wasn’t funny.” Kate put her hand on her chest. “I almost had a heart attack, Lynn.”


... there’s worse lies to tell.

“Fine,” Kate sighed. “Yes. Victor is my boyfriend.”

Lynn grinned. “I knew it,” she said smugly. “Oh, man, I wish I could be there to see the look on Mom’s face when she finds out you have the hots for someone who isn’t Chris.”

“Lynn...”

“Kate, I already told you I wouldn’t say anything.” Lynn smirked. “So. Is Victor trying to become a doctor, too?”

“No. He wants to be a lawyer.” Kate glanced nervously over Lynn’s shoulder, making sure the hallway was clear. “He’s applying to go to UCLA’s law school next year.”
“Wow.” Lynn pursed her lips. “Lawyer versus doctor... feels like kind of a lateral move, don’t you think?”

“God.” Kate rolled her eyes. “You sound like Stella.”

Lynn snorted. “And... he loves you?”

“Yes.”

“Do you... love him back?”

Kate smiled. “Definitely.”

Lynn pondered Kate’s answers. “Huh. That’s... cool.”

Kate tilted her head. “Interesting choice of words.”

“Sorry.” Lynn bit her lip. “I just... figured that you would tell people, if you had a serious boyfriend. I mean, I get why you wouldn’t tell Mom and Dad.” She glanced towards the stairs, at the end of the hallway. “I...”

Kate raised her eyebrows. “Are you upset I didn’t tell you?”

“... no.” Lynn shrugged. “I mean, I just... never thought you wouldn’t.”

“Oh.” Kate shifted uncomfortably. “I’m sorry, Lynn... I just didn’t want to put anyone in a position where I would ask them to lie to Mom.”

Lynn scoffed. “Mom would have to take an interest in what I had to say, for me to lie to her. Also, I’m assuming Stella knows, too; you don’t have a problem with HER lying to Mom?”

“Stella and Mom don’t really converse,” Kate reminded Lynn. “And even if they did, Stella would actually relish the chance to pull the wool over our mother’s eyes. You know that.”

“... true.” Lynn sighed. “Sorry. It’s stupid.”

“I’m sorry, too.” Kate hugged Lynn. “And you know our mother loves you, too. You shouldn’t say things like that.”

“Are we talking about the same parent?” Lynn raised her eyebrows again, as they separated. “The one who just gave you a two-hundred-dollar bottle of perfume for Christmas, and got me a robotics kit that Amazon sells for fifty bucks?”

Kate hesitated. “... yea, okay,” she said with a sigh. Then a corner of her mouth tugged upwards. “Would you rather the bottle of perfume?”

“Oh, hell no. I’ll take the robotics kit all day.” Lynn rolled her eyes. “It just would have been nice to see some balance, is all. The two-hundred-dollar kits are WAY cooler than the one she got me.”

“I hated lying to her.”

Victoria ran her thumb over Kate’s knuckles, as they lay in bed that next night. “Are you worried that she’d have a problem with us?” she asked carefully.

Kate hesitated before answering. “I honestly don’t know,” she said. “I don’t think so. But it doesn’t
matter. I don’t want to put her in a position to have to lie to our mother about it.”

They sat in silence for a minute, before Victoria picked up her hand and kissed the back of her fingers. “Sorry, Kate. But unless you want to call her back and tell her, I think you have to live with it for now.”

“Yea.” Kate sighed. “I know.”

“Did you at least get anything good for Christmas?”

Kate smiled. “My parents got me this,” she said, as she reached over to the nightstand for her purse and retrieved the bottle of perfume. “What do you think?”

“Let me see.” Victoria took the bottle and uncapped it, sniffing the top. Her nose immediately wrinkled. “Oh, Jesus. Please don’t ever use this.”

“Is it that bad?”

“It smells like diesel fuel.” Victoria glanced at the front of it. “Oh, I know this brand. These people paid a ton of money to have a celebrity endorse it, because that was the only way it would sell.” She glanced back at Kate. “... not to, you know, belittle your parent’s choices or anything.”

“I didn’t have any intention of wearing it anyway.” Kate shrugged as she took the bottle back. “I don’t know why my mom brought it for me, either. Only reason I can think of is for when I see Chris. But he doesn’t live anywhere nearby.”

A smirk slowly came over Victoria’s face. “I bet she brought it so any boys you do try to date would run for some clothes pins when you met.”

Kate blinked as she glanced back at her purse. “... huh. That makes a terrifying amount of sense.”

“Yea. Again, please don’t wear it.” Victoria smiled as she reached around Kate’s shoulders, gripping her tightly. “Not like you need it or anything. I already love you.”

“I love you, too.” Kate smiled back as she squeezed Victoria’s hand. “I missed you. A lot.”

“Me, too.”

“How was Seattle, though?” Kate asked. “You weren’t there for very long.”

Victoria shrugged. “I didn’t get to see my dad; he got stuck in Tokyo because of a snowstorm. My mom and I tried to make the best of it; we went shopping, saw a movie, and ate at some nice restaurants.”

“That sucks. Sorry.” Kate smirked. “Did YOU get anything good for Christmas?”

“... sort of.” Vitoria winced. “My parents and I... well, we already have anything we want. Or need. So Christmas is kind of hard. We usually go for oddball stuff. I gave them those Sequoia seeds we got at that store in Yosemite.”

“Oh, that’s cool.” Kate smiled. “Are they going to plant them?”

“My mom already did, behind the house. But, you know, they do take a few decades to grow, and Mercer Island isn’t really their climate.” Victoria shook her head. “That’ll probably be the end of it. Anyway, they gave me this,” she added as she reached for her phone. She pulled up a photo and turned the phone so Kate could see it.
The picture was of a narrow wooden pen, laying in the middle of a soft case. The wood was a rich black, with silver accents. “Wow,” Kate said. “That... looks really pretty.”

“Yea. It’s made of African Ebony wood, and solid silver.” Victoria put her phone back on her nightstand, then reached into the open drawer next to her. “Anyway...”

“What?”

Victoria came back up with a small box wrapped with a red ribbon, handing it to Kate. “Merry Christmas.”

“Ooh. Oh!” Kate sat upright. “Shoot! Your present is still in my duffle bag!” she exclaimed as she jumped out of bed, opening her bag on the floor.

Victoria snickered as her girlfriend rummaged through her clothes. “Did we forget?” she teased.

“No!” Kate’s face was red as she finally came back with her gift bag. “I just... I wasn’t sure when I was going to give it to you.”

“Well, Christmas was yesterday,” Victoria reminded her. “I think it’s time.”

“Yea, true.” Kate looked nervous as Victoria accepted the box. “I hope you like it. Like you said, you’re really hard to shop for.”

Victoria smirked as she opened the bag, reaching through the tissue paper. She pulled out a pair of red flannel pajama pants. “Oh, nice!”

“I... noticed you wear the same pair all the time,” Kate said anxiously. “I figured, you know...”

“These are awesome!” Victoria exclaimed as she felt the material. “Wow, they’re soft... jeez, they’re REALLY soft.” She grinned as she looked back at Kate. “I love them.”

Kate smiled. “Do you really?”

“Of course I do.” Victoria leaned over and kissed her girlfriend. “They’re perfect. And seriously, SO soft.” She couldn’t stop running her hands over the material. “Mine are really old and worn out. I’ve been meaning to replace them. Thanks, babe.”

Kate exhaled in relief. “You’re welcome,” she said, smiling. “Merry Christmas.”

“Hey, you haven’t opened yours yet.” Victoria nudged her with an elbow. “Come on.”

“You...” Kate hesitated, looking at the box. “... didn’t spend, like, a lot of money on me, did you?”

“Oh, yea, totally.”

Kate whipped her head around. “Huh?”

“Babe.” Victoria reached over and took Kate’s hand. “I have money to burn. And I want to spoil you. So, yes, I brought you something nice.”

“Vicky-”

“Look, I didn’t spend a TON of money on it, okay?” Victoria sighed. “Please open it and tell me if you like it.”
Kate looked apprehensive, but she undid the ribbon and opened the box. “Oh, wow!”

“What do you think?”

She lifted the watch, getting a better look at it; a white face, with a silver frame and white leather band. The roman numerals made it look very exquisite, without being too gaudy. “I... wow, Vicky, this looks amazing!”

Victoria smiled. “Yea?”

“Oh, yes.” Kate buckled it onto her wrist. “Oh, this looks SO pretty.” She glanced at the flannel pants on Victoria’s lap. “Although now I feel bad.”

“Don’t even,” Victoria started. “Kate, I love my gift. And you really needed a new watch. Seriously, that funky Casio was driving me nuts.” She smiled. “Do you like it?”

“I love it.” Kate turned back to her wrist as she admired the watch. “I can wear this every day, right? It’s not one of those watches you need to keep in a safe?”

“It was not THAT expensive.” Victoria nodded at Kate’s wrist. “There’s, uh, an engraving on the back.”

“Oh?” Kate took the watch back off, flipping it over. She read the note to herself, her throat bobbing. “On our first Xmas, because time flies when I’m with you. Love, Vicky.”

Kate looked back up at her girlfriend, smiling as she sniffled, wiping her nose on the back of her hand. “I love you too,” she said, her voice thick with emotion.

Victoria leaned down and kissed Kate deeply. “I love you,” she said as they broke apart. “And my gift. Seriously, I cannot wait to wear these tomorrow.”

“Yea.” Kate sniffed again, then frowned. “You’re not going to wear them tonight?”

“Well... I was kind of hoping I wouldn’t have to.” Victoria grinned. “Want to disappoint your mother for a little while?”

Kate snorted in amusement. “Yes,” she said with a smile, as she put her watch on the nightstand. “Yes, I do.”
Steph: The Waitress

“They cannot be that good.”

Steph chuckled, as Jesse looked at her from the front seat with questioning eyes. “They are, I promise. Totally worth it.”

“To wait in line for an hour?” Jesse scoffed. “I like donuts just as much as the next girl, but there’s no way I’m going to wait that long for them. Not when Krispy Kreme only takes five minutes.”

“They’ve got dozens of flavors,” Steph elaborated. “More than Krispy Kreme will ever have. And they’re the best donuts in the country.”

“Says who?” Lars asked, as he drove.

“Literally everyone.” Steph waved her phone. “Google them sometime. Or just Google ‘top ten donut shops’. Guarantee one of the entries will be Voodoo Donuts.”

Next to her, Mark pulled out his phone. “So what kind of donuts are we talking here?” Jesse continued. “Like, glazed, chocolate filled, what?”

“Their signature donut, the Voodoo Donut, is filled with blueberry jam,” Steph replied. “And it’s shaped like a voodoo doll. Even has a pretzel stick poking through it.”

Jesse frowned. “That’s weird.”

“That’s Portland,” Steph corrected.

“She’s right,” Mark cut in. He held up his phone. “This list puts them at number three.”

“Shit.” Jesse blinked, as she looked at the phone. “Alright, fine. I still don’t know if I want to wait an hour for them.”

“You know, I think that’s part of the experience,” Steph said. “Like, you get to brag to other people that you got the best donuts in the country, and you waited an hour for them, and they were so, totally worth it.”

Jesse hummed. “Okay, I’m sold.”

“Really?”

“Yep.” She grinned. “If I ever go to Portland, I will wait in line for your stupid donuts.”

“They’re not MY d-”

“There is it,” Lars interrupted.

They all looked forward, as the restaurant came into view. “Maria’s Kitchen?” Steph frowned. “Weird name.”

“Yea, but the food makes up for it,” Lars assured her. “I got their enchiladas last time, and I almost ordered seconds. You’ll love it, trust me.”

“Is it cool if we get some drinks?” Jesse asked Mark, as Lars parked the car. “I mean, if we’re
celebrating a new artist and all...”

Mark shrugged. “So long as Lars is good to drive us back to work, I’m all right with it.”

Awesome. Steph couldn’t help but smile, as she got out of the car. **Kick-ass new job, in a new city I’ve always meant to visit, with cool coworkers.**

**Talk about a new chapter in life.**

She felt a pang of guilt, thinking about Rachel, but she quickly suppressed it. *I’ll try to call her again, later. Leave a voicemail, at least, and try to smooth things over.*

The four of them walked inside, and the hostess turned to face them with a smile. “Hi! Welcome to Maria’s Kitchen! Are all four of you together?”

“Yep.” Jesse nodded, returning the smile.

“Excellent...” She checked the board in front of her, jotting something with a grease pencil. “Okay, Max will be your server today,” she remarked, looking at a brunette waitress to her left that was in the middle of tying her apron. “Go ahead and put them at table ten. You good?”

“Yea.” The waitress turned back to look at them with a smile.

Steph blinked, as her heart shot into her throat, the smile disappearing from her face. A shaky breath exploded from her lungs when the waitress started to greet them but tapered off, as she saw Steph and froze.

Oh my God.

It’s...

Max’s notepad fell to the floor as she stared at Steph. No words came out of Steph’s mouth, as she looked at the friend she thought was dead.

“Max?” she managed to gasp out, blinking rapidly. She couldn’t believe her eyes, as she watched Max take a step backward with a shocked expression on her face. “Oh my God,” Steph whispered, her voice starting to crack as she took an involuntary step forward. “Max... it’s really you...”

*She’s alive.*

*She’s here.*

*She’s alive. She’s fucking alive!* Steph began hyperventilating. **Oh my God oh my God fucking SAY SOMETHING**

Max spun on her heel and started walking away before she could.

“Max!” Steph called, but the brunette didn’t stop. She turned and power-walked down a side hallway, and Steph scrambled to follow her. “Max! Max, WAIT! Come back!”

Too late. She rounded the corner just in time to see the door to an office slam shut. Steph raced up to it and practically collided with the door, trying to turn the handle to no avail. She started beating on the door. “MAX!” she begged, gasping for breath as she pounded. “Max! Max, please come out! I just want to talk! PLEASE!!”

The door clicked, and Steph took a reflexive step backwards. But it wasn’t Max that came out. A
short, plump Hispanic woman breezed into the hallway and swept the office door closed behind her. “Miss, you need to go,” she ordered forcefully.

“No!” Steph gasped, tears leaking from her eyes; she was so close, and all she could think about was apologizing to her friend. “No, please, I just want to talk! I just want to talk to her!” She reached over the woman’s shoulder and banged on the door again. “MAX!!”

“Miss!” The woman put her hand on Steph’s chest, just below her neck, and tried to push her away. “Step back!”

Steph’s lips trembled, as she slowly started to realize that Max didn’t want to speak to her. Still hyperventilating, she gave one more half-strength bang on the door, as she took a deep breath. “MAX! I’M SORRY!!” she cried. “I’M SO SORRY, MAX!! PLEASE!!”

“Miss! Enough!” The woman finally managed to push her away from the door. “Back UP!”

Steph stumbled away, finally tearing her gaze from the door to look at the woman. She had a serious expression on her face, as she planted herself firmly between Steph and the door. “Please...” Steph croaked, clasping her hands together as she begged. “I just want to talk to her...”

“She doesn’t want to talk to you.” The woman stepped forward, forcing Steph to back further down the hall. “Ma’am, you need to leave. If you don’t, I’m going to have to call the police.”

“I...” Steph snorted deeply, the tears flowing freely from her eyes as she tried to wipe her face. “Please... I’m sorry, I’m so sorry...”

“You have to go.” The woman had forced her back into the lobby, and looked at the others while they stared with wide eyes. “I’m afraid you all need to go. Please come back another time.”

“Okay.” Mark materialized at Steph’s elbow, taking her gently by the arms. “Come on, Steph, let’s go.”

Steph sniffed again. “Please...” she begged the woman, in a weak voice.

“We’re going,” Mark said quietly. “Come on, Steph.”

He guided her through the restaurant’s doors, Jesse and Lars following behind them silently. Steph tried to keep her gaze behind them, hoping to see another glimpse of Max, but all she saw was the woman standing next to the hostess with her arms crossed. And then the doors closed, sealing the restaurant behind them.

Mark got Steph back into Lars’ car, putting her in her seat and closing the door. As soon as the door shut, Steph buried her face into her hands and started to cry.

Jesse had a worried look on her face, as she got back into her seat. “Are you okay?” she asked carefully.

Steph managed to pick her head back up, looking at the other woman as she snorted deeply, trying to stifle the flow of mucus. “I thought she was dead,” she sobbed, before she dropped her face back into her hands.

By the time they’d gotten back, she’d calmed down a little bit.

Mark had brought her back to his office, and she explained herself quietly as she sat on his couch.
and stared at her feet, stopping on occasion to rub her eyes.

“Wow,” he remarked when she was done.

“Yea.” Steph glanced up at him. “Am I fired?”

Mark scoffed. “For having some heavy personal baggage? Of course not.” He shook his head. “You’re not the only one in this office who has a sordid past.”

“Mm.” Steph looked back at her feet. “Thank you.”

She drove herself back to the hotel afterwards. As soon as she got to her room, she plugged in her phone, kicked off her shoes, and collapsed onto the bed.

_Max is alive._

Steph couldn’t stop thinking about it, as she curled up and hugged a pillow. Tears streamed down her face silently, as she stared at the wall.

_Max is alive._

_And she doesn’t want to see me._

Steph sighed, wiping her eyes. _Come on. Do you really blame her, after what you did? It’s your fault that she got the shit beat out of her, and had to run away from home._ She sniffed. _She probably never wants to speak to me again. And why the fuck would she? My apology probably isn’t worth shit to her._

She looked at her phone.

_I should try and call Rachel again._

...

_And say what?_

_“Sorry I was such a fucking asshole. Sorry I laid all the blame at your feet. But hey, the good news is that Max is alive. She wants nothing to do with us, of course, but we didn’t get her killed.”_

_Fuck._

Her mind wandered as she stayed in bed. She didn’t even get up for dinner. She watched the shadows on the wall slowly get longer and longer, until the sun eventually dropped below the horizon and disappeared. She didn’t bother to turn the lights on as the room got dark, electing to remain in bed.

It wasn’t until her phone buzzed on the nightstand, that she moved for the first time in hours. She reached over with a sigh, bringing up the Facebook message.

_Max:_ There’s a coffee shop on 23rd and Union, a couple of blocks from the restaurant. Do you think you can meet me there tonight, so we can talk?

Steph immediately sat upright, planting her feet on the ground as she stared at her phone. After a couple of seconds, her thumbs raced across the screen.

_Steph:_ I’ll be there in a few minutes.
Two weeks later

Rachel was already walking out of her house as Steph pulled up.

She didn’t bother to greet her, as she opened the back door of Steph’s car and tossed her duffle bag in. “Let’s go,” she said as she jumped into Steph’s passenger seat, slamming the door and buckling her seat belt.

“Okay.” Steph put the car in gear and backed out of the driveway, before turning back towards the main road. “You know it’s going to be, like, a ten-hour drive?”

“Yea.” Rachel nodded, keeping her eyes on the road. “Let’s get a move on.”

“Right.” Steph bit her lip. “Um... look, Rachel, I...”

Rachel turned to her. “What?”

“I’m sorry.”

The other girl blinked, as she looked at her.

“For what I said during Finals,” Steph clarified quietly. “I didn’t mean it. I was angry, and stressed, and I lashed out...” she paused. “Fuck. Those are just excuses. Rachel... I understand if you still hate me for it. But I really am so sorry.”

Rachel chewed on her lip and didn’t respond.

“You were right.” Steph swallowed. “I was a fucking asshole. I shouldn’t have given up either. You were right, and I was wrong.”

“It...” Rachel paused. “You weren’t entirely wrong. It was my idea.”

“It was still a fucked-up thing to say,” Steph muttered as she took a turn. “I’m sorry for saying it.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Rachel turned back to the road. “You found Max. And she’s actually willing to speak to us again. Let’s just...” she sighed. “Let’s just get to San Francisco.”

Steph nodded. “You got it.”
“You sure you want to do this?”

Victoria smiled. “I’ve never been more sure about anything,” she assured Kate, as they sat at her kitchen table. “Is there any reason I should be hesitant?”

“No,” Kate said quickly. “I just... I don’t know. This is big.”

“No really. I already told them about you.” Victoria shrugged. “I still need his permission, though. It might be my apartment, but it’s in his name. He’s responsible for everything, pays the bills, deals with the landlord, all of it.”

Kate fidgeted. “Still. I haven’t even met him yet. And... he sounds really intimidating.”

“He is. To potential investors, and business partners. You’re my GIRLFRIEND,” Victoria reminded her. “He’s not going to try to intimidate you.”

Kate sighed. “If you say so.”

“I do say so.” Victoria turned back to the laptop and hit the button, to connect to her father over Skype. “Relax. It’ll be fine.”

The call took a few seconds to connect. When the feed did come up, though, it was decidedly not Derek Chase. An Asian girl with black hair, maybe a few years older than Victoria, appeared on the screen with a wide smile. “Victoria!”

“Kimiko!” Victoria exclaimed, then said something Kate didn’t understand. She blinked as the foreign language fell out of her girlfriend’s mouth, and the other woman responded in kind, the two going back and forth in... is that Chinese? Kate sat next to Victoria, flabbergasted, as she stared. Since when does Vicky speak Chinese?!

Whatever it was, both of the women laughed after a few minutes. “So, yea, VERY glad that’s over with,” the woman said with a grin. “Hey, is that your girlfriend, staring at you in shock?”

“Oh!” Victoria turned to Kate. “Sorry. Kate, this is Kimiko Takahashi. She’s one of my father’s assistants.”

“His executive assistant, thank you very much,” Kimiko corrected her. “It’s been too long since we last spoke, if you didn’t know I got promoted. It’s nice to meet you, Kate.”

“Ah... nice to meet you, too.” Kate shook herself free of her surprise and smiled. “I’m sorry, I thought we were going to talk to Vicky’s father?”

Kimiko raised her eyebrows. “Vicky?”

Victoria blushed. “Look, just... where is he?”
The Asian girl smirked before she answered. “Your father is in the air, I’m afraid. He’s on his way to Montreal, and he won’t be back for a few days.”

“Damn.” Victoria frowned. “I didn’t know he was leaving.”

“It was last-minute,” Kimiko shrugged. “Why did you want to talk to him? I can make sure he gets a message, when he lands.”

Victoria fidgeted. “Um... I wanted to ask him if he would be okay with...” she glanced at Kate. “… my girlfriend moving in with me.”


“Yea.” Victoria scratched at her neck. “I mean, this is HIS apartment, so...”

“Right.” Kimiko turned and started typing on her computer. “Okay, so all Kate has to do is fill out a paper for the building manager. It’s pretty standard, if she’s rented before then she should be familiar with-”

“Whoa, whoa, hold on a minute,” Victoria exclaimed. “Don’t I need my dad’s permission? I mean, I appreciate your help and all, but-”

“You have his permission already.” Kimiko nodded, not looking at the camera as she typed. “Your father knows how long you’ve been with your girlfriend. He figured this was coming sooner or later, and he told us to handle this if it came up while he was unavailable.”

Kate blinked. “He did?” she asked.

“Yea. He’s pretty intuitive.” Kimiko grinned as she hit a button on her mouse. “Okay, Victoria, I just sent you an email. Like I said, Kate needs to fill it out for the landlord’s records. As far as an application fee-”

“I can handle that,” Kate interrupted. “I mean, when I get my old deposit back from my last apartment.”

Kimiko glanced at the camera. “I’m sure you can. I was about to say, Mister Chase will waive it.”

“But- wait, he doesn’t have to-”

“It’s done,” Kimiko cut in. “Trust me, Kate, there’s no use arguing with him.”

“Kate.” Victoria laid a hand on her girlfriend’s arm. “Let it go.”

She pouted, but Kate sat back. “Okay,” she sighed. “What about rent? How much a-”

“There is no rent, Kate,” Victoria interrupted.

“Excuse me?”

Victoria squirmed. “Kate, my dad owns this apartment outright. We pay property taxes and utilities, that’s it.”

“Well, then I can pay for my part of those, at least!”

“No,” Kimiko interrupted. “You can’t, actually. The utilities aren’t in Victoria’s name. She has no way to pay for anything; it’s handled by the building manager, just like the property taxes.”
Kate furrowed her brow. “Why does the building manager handle the bills for one apartment?”

Kimiko snorted in amusement. “Mister Chase doesn’t own the one apartment, Kate. He owns that entire building.”

Kate gaped, as she tried to come up with a response, but failed.

“In any case, there’s no point or reason to accept rent from you to live there,” Kimiko stated. “Mister Chase doesn’t charge Victoria anything, so her certainly won’t charge her girlfriend. And the effort it would take to process any money from you is literally not worth our time.”

“But I-”

The sound of a ringing phone drew Kimiko’s attention from the camera. “I’m sorry, you guys, I have to go.” She turned back. “Just send that form back when you’re done, Victoria. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

Victoria said a quick goodbye, as Kimiko hung up.

“...you have got to be kidding me,” Kate moaned.


“Yea, as a freeloader,” Kate sighed.

Victoria raised one eyebrow. “And what am I, exactly?”

“That- I mean-” she froze, trying to come up with something, but... “Nothing. I have no way to recover.”

“Yea, I know.” Victoria smirked. “Kate, really. Any rent you gave my dad would be LESS than a drop in the bucket.”

“Did you know, that I wouldn’t have to pay any rent?” Kate asked incredulously. “Or utilities?”

Victoria nodded.

“Why didn’t you-”

“Kate, stop.” Victoria reached over and took her hand. “I love that you refuse to let me pay for everything, or be your sugar-momma, or use my family money to make your life easier. But you need a place to live. Alyssa is moving across town, you can’t go back to the dorms, and you don’t earn enough for rent on your own.” She smiled. “I can help you. Just... please, Kate, for once, let me do something.”

Kate wrestled with herself mentally, before slouching in her chair. “Okay,” she agreed, exhaling slowly. “Can I at least pay for something, so I don’t feel like a total freeloader? Groceries, Netflix, anything.”

Victoria snorted in amusement. “Fine. Pick one, whichever you want.”

“Thank you.” Kate paused. “Also, since when do you speak Chinese?”

“I don’t.”

“I just HEARD you, Vicky.”
Victoria grinned. “That was Japanese.”

Kate folded her arms. “Fine. Since when do you speak Japanese?”

“I’m not fluent. Or very good. Kimiko more or less entertains me, when I try,” Victoria explained. “She says I’m at a fourth or fifth grade level. I’m still learning.”

Kate eyeballed her girlfriend. “Any other surprise languages you speak?”

“I mean, yea.” Victoria nodded. “I’m pretty fluent in French and Italian. Not so much with German; I know enough to get by, if a local takes pity on me. And I can understand Spanish, if the speaker is slow.”

“How do I not know any of this?” Kate asked incredulously.

“Well, we haven’t been anywhere that required me to speak any of it.” Victoria shrugged. “It was part of my earlier education. My parents put me through public school, but they insisted I learned at least one other language.”

Kate shook her head and sighed. “So... now what?”

Victoria clicked through her computer to her email. “The form Kimiko sent us is pretty simple,” she said absently. “You could probably fill it out in five minutes. But the landlord isn’t here today; he takes the weekend off.” She glanced back at Kate. “Want to go back to your apartment? Start gathering up your stuff?”

“Oh...” Kate blinked. “Wow. I didn’t expect to be at that level, mentally, today.”

“Well, it’s not like we have anything better to do.” Victoria took Kate’s hand and squeezed. “So?”

“I...” Kate hesitated, then nodded. “Yea. I guess there’s no reason not to.”

“Good.” Victoria smirked. “Then I guess I should try to clear out some room in the closet.”

Kate rolled her eyes. “Are you going to get rid of some of those shoes you never wear?”

Victoria looked like she’d just been slapped. “I cannot believe you just suggested that.”

“Vicky, I was kidding.”

“Yea, well, it wasn’t funny.”

__________________________

Just ask her.

Kate looked out the side of her eyes at her girlfriend. It had been three weeks since she’d moved in, and the two of them had fallen into an easy routine of winding down for the night. Kate was on her phone, browsing Facebook, while Victoria tapped away at a school assignment on her laptop.

She’s never mentioned it. Even though she’s shared the status a bunch of times. Kate bit her lip, as she looked back at her Facebook feed. Geez, one of these days, my curiosity is going to kill me.

“Hey, Vicky?”

Victoria stopped typing and looked at her. “Hmm?”
“Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.” She smiled. “What is it?”

Kate took a deep breath. “Who is Maxine Caulfield?”

Victoria’s whole face changed, as she blinked. The smile vanished, as she turned back towards her computer, and Kate watched her eyes grow distant. A look of incredible sadness came over her face, as she slowly closed her laptop. Kate immediately regretted asking, but she stayed silent as her girlfriend searched for words.

“She didn’t like Maxine,” Victoria said hollowly. “She preferred Max. And... she was a girl I went to high school with, back in Arcadia Bay. We met in gym class, and I asked her to join the Quiz Bowl team with me.”

“Oh.” Kate glanced back at her phone. “And she’s... missing?”

“She ran away from home.” Victoria looked at her. “She was sixteen years old. Nobody’s seen her in four years. I’m pretty sure she’s dead.”

“God.” Kate’s face dropped. “Vicky, I’m so sorry.”

Victoria nodded, turning away. “I’m guessing you saw me share the Facebook page?”

“Yea. A few times.” Kate put her phone down. “Your friends still look for her?”

“They’re NOT my friends,” Victoria said forcefully, startling Kate; she’d never heard her girlfriend use that sharp of a voice. “Those bitches can rot in in the deepest level of hell for all I give a damn.”

“Vicky!” Kate gasped.

Victoria’s face softened. “Sorry,” she said quietly. “I just... I don’t like those two girls very much.”

“Why?” Kate scooted closer to Victoria, taking her hand. “What happened?”

Victoria sighed, glancing at her lap. She didn’t speak for several seconds.

“I met Max when I was a Junior. She was a brand-new Freshman.” Victoria looked back at Kate. “Remember how I told you about that church, First Light of Christ, and how they were based in my hometown?”

“She was one of their parishioners?” Kate asked.

Victoria nodded. “Her father was a higher-up of some kind,” she explained. “Max had all kinds of restrictive rules to follow. Like, she wasn’t allowed to wear anything but long sleeves and long pants. The first time we met, I actually gave her some shorts and a t-shirt for gym class, because her parents wouldn’t buy them for her.”

“Wow.” Kate squeezed her girlfriend’s hand. “That was really sweet of you.”

Victoria squirmed. “Well... watching her drown in sweat was pretty depressing. And I kind of wanted to help her.” She smirked. “I had a pretty good crush on her.”

Kate raised her eyebrows. “You did?”

“Yea.” Victoria shook her head. “It was stupid. She grew up in, like, the most homophobic
environment you could have imagined. I knew nothing would come from it. It was a dumb high-
school infatuation.”

“Mm.” Kate frowned. “So... why did she run away?”

Victoria pressed her lips together. “The girl who runs that Facebook page,” she started. “Rachel
Amber. Her father is the District Attorney back home. He was prosecuting one of the church pastors,
for almost beating a kid to death because he was gay.”

“He was?”

Victoria nodded. “Rachel and another girl, Steph, were friends with Max at the time. They
manipulated and guilt-tripped her into stealing emails from her father’s computer, so Rachel’s dad
could get a conviction.”

“Oh. Oh, no.” Kate blanched. “What happened?”

“Max did it,” Victoria said simply. “She took a flash drive, copied all of her father’s emails, and gave
them to Rachel. Who turned right around and gave them to her father. Without telling him where
they came from, or who got them for him, or asking him to put Max into protective custody. Another
girl from the church found out what Max had done, and...”

Victoria swallowed hard, as she looked away.

“What?” Kate prodded.

“The last footage anyone has of Max was from the night after her father came home, at the bus
station.” Victoria glanced back at Kate, her eyes wet. “Her face was covered in bruises, and she was
buying a ticket out of town.”

“Oh, God.” Kate had wide eyes.

“Yea.” Victoria sniffed and rubbed her nose. “It took us a few days to figure out what Rachel had
done.” She glanced back at her girlfriend. “I... might have punched her in the stomach, when I found
out.”

“You might have?”

“I did.” Victoria sighed. “I was so mad at her. I almost beat up Steph, too. I got as many students
together as I could, and we went to Portland. We spent two days running through that city looking
for her, but we never found a trace.”

Kate was silent, as Victoria sniffed.

“So. Yea.” Victoria met her eyes. “I hate Rachel and Steph, with every fiber of my being.”

“Have you been to the Facebook page they’re running?” Kate asked, picking her phone back up. “It
looks like they’re still looking for her.”

“I know.” Victoria nodded. “I still share their status updates, on the off-chance that someone might
actually find her. But like I said, nobody has seen her in years.” Victoria exhaled slowly. “I’m
hopeful, but... I’m realistic, too. I know that Max is probably dead by now.”

“Those girls must feel incredibly bad,” Kate mentioned.

“They had better.” Victoria’s face took on a mean look. “Those two got my friend killed. I hope they
never get another good night’s sleep for the rest of their lives. They should wake up every morning, look in the mirror, and remember what they did until the day they die.”

Kate was taken aback at Victoria’s vitriol, but she didn’t say anything about it. Her girlfriend could feel her discomfort, though, as she looked at her. Victoria’s face relaxed. “Sorry. I just... it still makes me mad, when I think about what they did.”

“I can see that.” Kate squeezed her hand. “I’m sorry.”

“Thanks.” Victoria looked at her lap. “I don’t like to talk about it. Max was a good person, who didn’t deserve what happened to her.”

Kate eyed Victoria carefully, as she fell silent.

“I’m ready to sleep.” Victoria placed her laptop on her nightstand. “You?”

Kate nodded as put her phone away, and the two girls turned off their lamps. She turned over, and Victoria immediately pulled herself in close, wrapping her arms around Kate’s shoulders, squeezing tighter than she normally did.

“I love you,” she murmured.

“I love you too, Vicky.”

Chapter End Notes

Two chapters, too short to stand on their own, rolled into one.

Y’all welcome :)
Rachel: Reconciliation

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2016, proceeding Ch. 17 of EtL

Rachel couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt as happy as she did.

She smiled while she tapped out texts on her phone from the bus seat, as she headed back to Arcadia Bay. Her, Max, and Steph had created a group chat, and they’d been talking almost non-stop since she’d left San Francisco.

Max: I am SO not a mage.

Steph: You kind of have to be. Rachel is the barbarian, and I’m a rogue. We need a mage to round out the group.

Max: So Rachel is beating the shit out of people left and right, you’re planting arrows into bad guys, and I’m... what? Waving my arms and shouting “Abracadabra”?

Rachel smirked as she typed out her response.

Rachel: Dude, you’re setting people on fire with those words.

Steph: Or freezing them. Your call.

Max: That still doesn’t appeal to me.

Rachel: But that’s so badass!

Max: Do YOU want to be the mage?

Rachel: No! I like beating the crap out of people!

Max: Well, I don’t! Can’t I be, like, a doctor or something?

Steph: You could be a cleric.

Max: What’s a cleric?

Steph: A mage who heals people.

Max: That, I am totally down for.

Steph: That would work. I did one campaign where the cleric hit the bad guy with such a powerful regeneration spell that the dude reverted all the way back to being a baby.

Max: Aww! That’s adorable!

Steph: And then the Orc in our party ate him.
Max: ... wow.

Rachel: That got so dark so fast.

Max: Hey, are you back home yet?

Rachel glanced at her watch, then looked outside. She recognized the part of the highway she was on, and could see the lights of Arcadia Bay approaching.

Rachel: Almost. Maybe five minutes or so until I get back to the bus station.

Steph: You catching a cab?

Rachel: My mom is going to get me.

Max: You don’t have to be up super-early, do you?

Rachel: No. My class doesn’t start until nine.

Rachel: Speaking of which, are you studying?

Max: Bleh. Yes. Science sucks.

Steph: When is your GED test?

Max: In three weeks.

Steph: We’ve got time to get you caught up. I can’t Skype tomorrow, though. I’ll probably be working late.

Rachel: Seriously? It’s your first day!

Steph: I’ve already got some assignments. We’re doing concept art for a first-person shooter game, and they want sketches done for Wednesday.

Max: Talk about hitting the ground running.

Rachel: Dude, sketch a guy out over your lunch break or something.

Steph: Nothing of quality gets done over lunch.

Rachel grinned as she typed out her next text.

Rachel: That explains why asking out Dana Ward went so well.

Steph: Oh, fuck you.

She snickered as the bus pulled to a stop.

Rachel: Shit, I’m back. Gotta go, TTYL.

Max: Have a good night!

God. Rachel stood, pulling her duffle bag down from the overhead shelf. I cannot believe how good it is to talk to her again. I can’t believe she’s actually WILLING to talk to me again. She shook her
head, as she walked off the bus. *I’m so happy she didn’t just punch me in the face.*

She walked out of the bus terminal and looked around, finally spotting her mother’s car. She walked over and opened the door to get inside... and paused. “Dad?”

Her father smiled from the driver’s seat. “Hey, sweetie.”

“I didn’t know you were coming to get me.” Rachel looked at him guardedly. While their relationship had improved somewhat, over the time that had passed since Max had ran away, she still felt as if they always stood on shaky ground. “Where’s Mom?”

“She’s at home.” He gestured to the passenger seat. “I figured we could talk on the way back.”

Rachel took her time, as she opened the back seat of the car and placed her duffle bag inside. She was still wary as she got in the car and buckled up.

“How’s Maxine?” her father asked, as he pulled away from the curb.

“She’s fine.” Rachel nodded. “She has an awesome roommate who charges her, like, no rent. He’s been helping her get back on her feet. And he hired her at a job where she makes enough money to start doing classes. She really is doing pretty good.”

“She-”

“I know.” Rachel turned to face the window. “You don’t have to remind me that she never should have been in that position to begin with.”

“Rachel...” he paused. “I was going to say that she sounds like she’s doing great. I’m glad to hear that she’s in a good place.”

“... yea.” Rachel sighed. “It is.”

“What did she say, when you first saw her?”

Rachel shook her head. “It was mostly me crying and saying how sorry I was, at first. And then she just...” she waved her arm. “Accepted my apology.”

Her dad blinked. “She did?”

“Yea. I have no idea why.” She shrugged. “We talked for a while. I offered to help her study for her GED, and we did that at Steph’s new apartment for a little while. That’s mostly what we’ve been doing for the past two days.”

“Did you let her know that I wanted to speak with her?”

“Yea.” Rachel nodded. “I gave her your number. She said she’d call you sometime soon.”

“I appreciate it.” He nodded. “I’d like to close her case.”

“I told her.” Rachel fell silent again, as she stared out the window.

Her dad took a turn, and she perked up with a frown. “What are you doing?” she asked, as she turned back to him and thumbed over her shoulder. “Home was that way.”

“I know.” He nodded. “We’re making a stop.”
“I don’t even remember when I was in here last.”

Her dad smiled. “It hasn’t changed much.”

“No, not really.” Rachel looked around the Two Whales, taking in the décor. “You think they’ve cleaned the grease trap lately?”

“You know, that’s not really a question I would ever want to ask them under oath.”

Rachel shook her head, smirking, as a waitress came up to their table and topped off their coffee. “Your usual, James?” she asked, looking at her dad.

“Yes, thank you, Eve.”

“And you, sweetheart?”

“Um...” Rachel glanced over the menu really quick, before closing it. “Two of the waffles, please.”

“You got it.” The woman made a note and departed, leaving the two of them with their coffee.

“I...” Rachel looked at her dad, as he hesitated. “I wanted to say something. I just wasn’t sure how to go about it.”

*There’s the other shoe.* Rachel winced internally, as she looked down into her coffee mug. *Let’s get this over with.*

“I’m sorry, Rachel.”

She blinked, looking back at her dad. “Huh?”

He inhaled slowly through his nose. “Your mother and I have had our fair share of arguments over the past couple of years,” he admitted. “Mostly about you. And that I haven’t been supportive, or encouraging, of everything you’ve done.”

“Yea.” Rachel fidgeted with her nails. “I get it.”

“Maybe, but... it still wasn’t right.” Her father shook his head. “I know you were the only one who never gave up hope that Maxine was still alive. And you’ve put everything into your education, to become a social worker.” He smiled softly. “If that’s not an effort to make amends, I don’t know what is.”

Rachel looked up at him, meeting his gaze. “I didn’t do it for redemption,” she said quietly. “I just don’t want anyone else to go through what Max did.”

“Which is commendable on its own.” Her dad leaned forward. “I talked to the CPS office you interned at, over the summer. The supervisor said you were incredibly helpful. He thinks you’ll make a great social worker.”

“... thanks.” Rachel tried to breath normally, and ignore the fact that her father was actually giving her praise. “I, uh, didn’t do that much.”

“Your supervisor said you were a rock to both of those children, after their father burned their house down.” Her father nodded. “That particular man doesn’t hand out praise often.”

“Yea.” Rachel shrugged, blinking rapidly as she looked out the window. “Well.”
“Anyway.” He shook his head. “You were hurting, after Maxine ran away. And... I let my anger with you blind me to the fact that you needed my help.” He sighed. “I should have been there for you, and I wasn’t. And... I’m sorry, Rachel.”

Rachel didn’t reply for a couple of minutes, and she tried to keep her tears from flowing down her face. She could feel the mucus loosening up behind her nose, too. She forced everything back as best she could, trying not to become emotional as she absorbed the first empathetic words she’d gotten from her dad in years.

“I...” Her voice cracked a little, as it came out, and she stopped and swallowed to get her emotions in check. “I screwed up,” she said, as she looked back at her father. “I deserved everything you told me. And more,” she added. “Even though I know Max is alive and doing well, I still hate myself for what I did.”

He stayed silent, letting her speak.

“And I know she’s never going to forgive me,” Rachel continued. “Even if she did accept my apology, and wants to be friends again. And even if she does one day, I still won’t ever forgive myself.” She paused. “So, I... don’t really blame you, for being too pissed at me to care.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Her dad shook his head. “You were the child, and I was the parent. I still should have been there.”

“Maybe.” Rachel shrugged, looking back into her coffee. “But... I’m not really angry that you weren’t.”

Her phone buzzed in her pocket. She retrieved it, glancing at the screen and chuckling.

Max: My roommate says I would make a good Dwarf. I can’t tell if he’s insulting me or not.

Steph: So you’re short, stout, and drink a lot?

Max: ... motherfucker.

“Is that Maxine?”

“Yea.” Rachel put her phone down on the table. “Steph somehow roped us into a debate about Dungeons and Dragons.”

“Well.” Her dad took a sip of his coffee. “How is Stephanie?”

“Ready to start her new job.” Rachel nodded. “Her and Max made a bunch of plans to hang out.”

“Sounds like you’ll have to go back,” her dad observed. “Maybe you can take a break when your classes finish, and you get your Master’s.”

Rachel smiled. “I’d like that.”

Chapter End Notes

In case you guys haven't noticed, the Kate/Victoria and Steph/Rachel storylines have caught up to each other. Brooke is still a couple of years ahead, for now.
“You don’t have to do this.”

“I know.”

“Seriously, Kate.”

“I know, Vicky.”

Victoria sat next to Kate, as they both looked at the computer in front of her. The Skype program was loaded, and her father’s information was already entered.

“I don’t think you should tell them,” Victoria said again. “It’s-”

“I’m not going to live the rest of my life in the closet,” Kate interrupted. “I’m tired of hiding who I am. And I’m tired of hiding you.” She reached over and took Victoria’s hand. “It’s going to be okay.”

Victoria looked extremely conflicted. “Kate, I love you, but I really don’t believe that,” she finally said. “I’ve heard you talk to your mother. And you’ve told me what she’s said about gay people. I don’t think she’s going to change her mind.”

Kate sighed. “Maybe not,” she agreed. “But either way, I want her to know the truth.”

She reached out and hit the Call button. Victoria stayed out of sight of the camera, keeping a firm grip on Kate’s hand where nobody on the other side could see her.

The call connected after a few minutes, and a middle-aged man appeared on the screen with a smile. “Hey, kiddo!” he exclaimed happily. “This is unexpected.”

“Hi, Dad,” Kate said quietly. “How are you?”

“Oh, I’m good.” He frowned. “Are you okay?”

“Yea, I’m fine.”

“You don’t sound fine.” He leaned in, towards the camera. “Are you sure?”

Kate sighed. “Please don’t ‘therapize’ me right now, Dad.”

Victoria contained a snort of amusement, as Kate’s father rolled his eyes. “I always hated it when you girls used that word.” He sighed as he leaned back. “Can I just be a caring father, who can pick up on his daughters being nervous?”

“Which one?” Victoria heard a girl call from the other side of the camera. A smaller version of Kate appeared behind her Dad, her eyes brightening. “Oh, hey, Kate. Well, should have figured. I’m certainly not nervous.”

Another, even younger girl appeared behind Lynn, waving over her shoulder. “Hi, Kate.”
Kate smiled. “Hey, Jessica. Hi, Lynn. Did you enter another science fair?”

“Willow said she was going to beat me this year. She’s working on something with plate tectonics.”

Lynn smirked. “Hope she enjoys that second-place medal. I did some really high-level math and found a more efficient way to travel from Earth to Mars. It beats NASA’s current projection by sixteen days.”

Kate raised her eyebrows. “Really?”


“That’s pretty neat.” Kate nodded. “What about you, Jessica? How’s school?”

The younger girl shrugged. “It’s okay,” she said quietly.

“Still practicing the violin?”

Jessica nodded. “I have a recital next month.”

“Oh, I missed going to those.” Kate smiled. “Dad, are you going to record it?”

“Of course. I’ll send you the video.” He nodded. “So, Kate. What did you want to talk about?”

“Um...” Kate bit her lip. “Uh, really quick, can I talk to Lynn?”

Her middle sister frowned, as she leaned over her father’s shoulder. “What’s up?”

“I, uh...” Kate hesitated, and sighed. “I’m sorry.”

Lynn’s brow furrowed. “Why?”

“I lied to you. Last Christmas,” Kate hesitated. “About those messages. And I felt really bad about it. But... I wasn’t ready to tell you the truth yet.”

Victoria squeezed Kate’s hand, as Lynn blinked in confusion. She didn’t get a chance to ask what Kate was talking about, though, because their mother picked that time to walk into the room. “Kate?” she said, surprised. “Wow. I didn’t think we’d be talking to you until next week. Have you figured out when you’re coming down for Christmas?”

“That... uh...” Kate licked her lips nervously. “That was one of the things I wanted to talk about.”

“Oh?” Her mother leaned forward. “What else?”

“Well...”

Kate had told Victoria almost two weeks prior, that she was ready to come out to her family.

Of course, saying so was the easy part. She had spent the last fourteen days agonizing about how to actually do it. She’d actually laid awake at night, for a couple of hours after Victoria fell asleep, trying to come up with the best way to tell her family.

She had done internet research. Watched YouTube videos. Discussed it with Victoria, Alyssa, and Stella. In her desperation, she had even written a “Dear Abby” column writer in the local paper, though the woman hadn’t replied before the Skype call.
There was never one concrete answer. Stella told her not to, that it was a bad idea. Alyssa suggested that she break it to them easily, maybe over a few weeks, feeling out their thoughts on gay people. Victoria, who Kate had hoped would be the most helpful (since she’d done it before), didn’t have much to offer; her parents had assured her that they loved her no matter what, when she’d told them at fifteen. All her girlfriend could offer was that she would support and love her, whatever she did.

The YouTube videos worried her as well. The ones she watched went both directions; some families supported their kids, others cast them out and disowned them. Victoria had found her crying a couple of times, as she watched a couple of the YouTube personalities talking about their struggles.

After a while, Kate had come to the conclusion that there was no gentle way to go about it. Especially with her ultra-religious mother. So she’d decided, that morning, the easiest way to tell them.

“Well... Mom, Dad, Lynn...” she took a deep breath. “I’m gay.”

Victoria squeezed her hand tightly as they watched her family’s reaction.

Lynn blinked, not saying anything as her eyes got wide in surprise. Her mouth opened slightly, and it seemed like she was about to speak, but words didn’t come. Jessica had a similar reaction, as she blinked stoically at the camera.

Her father also had a surprised look on his face. He opened his mouth after a couple of seconds, to say something, but whatever he had to offer was drowned out.

By her mother’s laughter.

“Kate, don’t be ridiculous,” her mother chided. “I thought you called us to say something serious.”

Victoria squeezed Kate’s hand even tighter, as she pressed her lips together tightly.

“I am serious,” Kate said, taken aback. “Mom, I’m gay.”

“No, you’re not.” Her mother shook her head. “I understand you might be having some confusing feelings, Kate, but you’re not gay.”

“Yes, Mother, I AM.” Kate’s eyes narrowed.

“Kate, that’s enough.” Her mother was no longer smiling. “I’m not going to tolerate whatever delusions you think you’re having.”

Kate was now squeezing Victoria’s hand back. Her girlfriend actually winced, as Kate leaned forward. “Mother, I can’t believe I’ve been stressing about this for the past two weeks,” she started. “This is not a delusion. This is not a confusing feeling. This is not a silly phase. This is me coming out to my family.”

“I will NOT hear any more of this,” her mother snapped. “I don’t know if this is a trick, or if you’re trying to get your way for something, but-”

“I have a girlfriend.”

That finally seemed to silence her mother, as she worked her mouth like a fish. Kate took advantage of her shock and forged ahead.

“Her name is Victoria,” she started. “She’s another student at UCLA. She’s in her first year of law
school. We met at a house party a little over eighteen months ago. I moved in with her over the summer break, and we’ve been living together for almost six months.” She took a deep breath. “I love her. And I wanted to talk to you guys about meeting her, over Christmas.”

Victoria pressed her lips together again. She’d already told Kate that she wasn’t very excited about meeting her mother in person. And she had no doubt that some choice words would be exchanged if she did go. But she had agreed to let Kate try and talk to her parents about it.

Her mother’s reaction was about what she expected.

“Kate,” she began frostily. “I don’t know what misconceptions you seem to be having, about yourself. But you need to get over them.” She folded her arms. “I knew that letting you go to Los Angeles was a mistake. You strayed too far from the light. I should have-”

“I knew I was gay when I was sixteen years old,” Kate replied back tersely. “Don’t blame a city you’ve never been to for something that it’s not responsible for.”

“Do NOT interrupt me, Kate!”

“I’m sorry, but I couldn’t tell if you were done.” Kate glared at the screen. “There was too much ignorance pouring from your mouth.”

“EXCUSE me!!” Her mother shot to her feet. “What did you say??”

“You heard DAMN well what I said,” Kate shot back, ice in her voice. “Vicky was right. Talking to you about this was a bad idea.”

“I don’t know WHAT is wrong with you!” her mother exclaimed. “You need to stop this, right now. You need to end this little charade, come back to the light, and learn to fall in love with boys. You are not-”

“I am SO gay,” Kate shot back. “Vicky and I kiss. Like, a lot. And we do other stuff with each other, like-”

“ENOUGH!!” her mother screamed. “I will not tolerate any more of this nonsense!!”

“Then I guess you’re not going to tolerate me for Christmas.” Kate let go of Victoria’s hand and folded her arms. “I’m not going to visit while-”

“Oh, YES you will!” Her mother stomped her foot, and Victoria tried her hardest not to snort in amusement. “You are going to come back to San Diego, and we are going to get you over whatever phase this is that you think you’re stuck on and back to the light.”

“No. I’m not.” Kate leaned forward, her eyes practically burning a hole through the laptop screen. “And unless you plan on coming up her to LA and kidnapping me, you can learn to live with it.”

Her mother fixed her with a glare through the camera. There was silence for several seconds, as mother and daughter stared at each other, not wavering. Her sisters and her father, essentially forgotten, both glanced back and forth between the two of them silently.

Her mother finally took a deep breath. “You WILL come back, Kate,” she finally said. “You have to.”

“And why is that?”
“Because Grandma Louis is getting sick.”

Kate flinched. “Excuse me?”

“Your grandmother Louis.” Her mother sat back down. “She’s taken a bad turn. I spoke to her doctor, last week. They don’t think she’ll make it through another holiday.”

Victoria watched Kate carefully, as the fire slowly left her girlfriend.

“Sick with what?” Kate finally managed to get out.

Her mother took another deep breath. “Her kidneys are starting to fail,” she said. “And the doctors won’t do a transplant, because of her age. They’ve given her six months or so.”

“But...” Kate worked her mouth. The anger was gone from her voice.

“This is her last Christmas, Kate.” Her mother fixed her with a look. “We ARE going to make it a nice one, without upsetting her. And that means you will come back, we will not hear this talk about your confusing feelings, and we will focus on her Christmas.”

A little bit of a glare entered Kate’s eyes, but Victoria could tell that the fire was mostly gone. “I’ll be calling back, then,” her girlfriend said tightly.

“Kate-”

She reached over to the laptop and tapped the button to end the call.

“Don’t go,” Victoria said immediately.

Kate blinked. “Huh?”

“Something was off.” Victoria glanced at the laptop. “I don’t like the way she said that, about your grandmother. Like it was back-burner.”

Her girlfriend bit her lip.

“What if she was telling the truth?” Kate asked quietly. “And...”

Victoria didn’t answer, as she took Kate’s hand back and squeezed.

“I’ll text my dad,” Kate said, after a few seconds, pulling her phone from her pocket. “I’ll ask him if my mom was right, that Grandma Louis is sick.”

Victoria watched her send a text, then put the phone in her lap. “Kate, this worries me,” she said. “And you’ve said that your dad does whatever your mom says. I don’t trust her, or him. And I don’t think she’s above lying to you to get what she wants.”

Kate bit her lip. “I know,” she said quietly.

“And...”

“I’m worried that...” Kate sighed. “If she’s not lying, and I do miss my Grandmother’s last Christmas... Vicky, I would be sick if I missed my grandma.”

Victoria frowned. “I thought you haven’t seen her for a couple of years?”
“I haven’t. She lives in Tucson, so she doesn’t come up very often.” Kate shrugged. “But when she does come up, I always loved to see her. And if she really is dying…”

Neither of them spoke for several seconds. Kate’s phone finally beeped, as her father responded to her text.

“Well?” Victoria asked, as Kate examined her phone.

“He says my mom is telling the truth.”

“He would either way, babe,” Victoria cautioned.

Kate bit her lip, glancing back at her girlfriend. “What do you think I should do?”

Victoria froze. “Huh?”

“I…” Kate put her phone back on the table. “Vicky, I want to spend Christmas with you. I hated that I didn’t last year. I don’t want to do it again. But if I miss my Grandmother, then... Vicky, I don’t think I’ll ever forgive myself.” She let both of her hands fall into her lap. “Please tell me what you want me to do.”

Victoria’s face twisted. Her feelings were extremely conflicted. Kate watched her wrestle with herself for a while, before she averted her gaze and sighed.

“If I don’t hear from you twice a day, I’m calling the police and having them do a wellness check.”

Kate gave Victoria a slight smile. “I don’t think my mother is going to force me into a conversion camp, Vicky.”

“I don’t care.” Victoria gripped Kate’s hand tightly. Just like the previous year, they were parked in front of the bus station, staring at the terminal, neither of them wanting to separate. “I’m not taking any chances.”

Her girlfriend sighed. “Trust me, I’ll be texting you a lot,” she assured her. “It’ll be the only respite I have from my mother.”

Victoria bit her lip. “When is your grandmother coming in from Tucson?”

“The 24th.” Kate checked her watch. “In two days.”

“So you have to deal with your mother for two days before you get to your grandmother.” Victoria shook her head. “I think you should have shortened your visit.”

“Stella’s family is doing a Christmas party tomorrow,” Kate explained. “I want to see her. And I want to try and spend some time with Lynn and Jessica.”

“Yea.” Victoria sighed. “I get it.”

Kate fell silent, as she held Victoria’s hand. “I’m sorry,” she finally said quietly.

Victoria looked at her, confused. “For what?”

“For running away again.” Kate sniffed. “I was really looking forward to actually having you with me for Christmas.”
“Really, Kate, don’t worry about it.” Victoria smiled sadly. “If your grandmother is on her last legs, then I don’t want to ruin it, either. I’ll see you on the 26th, anyway.”

“Yea.” Kate wiped her eyes. “I’m still sorry.”

“I know.”

Kate’s phone beeped again. “Dang it,” she muttered, silencing her alarm as she looked back at Victoria. “Time to go.”

Victoria leaned across the center console and kissed Kate deeply, pressing their lips together for several seconds. “I mean it,” she said, as they broke apart. “Every day. Or I’m calling the San Diego PD, and telling them that your mother is running a meth lab out of her garage.”

Kate smiled. “I love you too, Vicky.”
Kate: Holidays, Part Deux

“... huh.”

Kate looked at Chris apprehensively. “What does that mean?”

“Nothing. I’m just... surprised, is all.” Chris leaned back on the bench. “I wouldn’t have pegged you as gay. I always assumed you had a boyfriend back in L.A.”

Stella smirked from her seat next to Kate, as she glanced at her. “Look at you, being a little homosexual chameleon.”

Kate elbowed her friend in the ribs, though she couldn’t keep a smile from her face. Across from them, next to Chris, Jaime couldn’t help but snort in amusement before she composed herself. “Classy, Stella.”

“I try.” Stella winced, as she rubbed her side. “That was really hard.”

“Well, that wasn’t very funny.” Kate rolled her eyes before she turned back to Chris. “Anyway... I’m sorry I never told you, before. I didn’t want to put anyone in a position where they might have to lie to my mother.”

“No, hey, I totally get it,” Chris assured her. “I’m not mad or anything. And knowing your mom...” he hesitated. “Honestly, I’m kind of surprised you would come out of the closet at all.”

They all looked back through the glass doors, from their seats on the back patio of the Hills’ house. The four of them had left the get-together shortly after it started, to catch up. But their families and the other guests were still inside, socializing and snacking on hors d’oeuvres. Kate could see her parents as they flitted through the crowd.

“I didn’t want to keep it from them my whole life,” Kate said after a few seconds, turning back to Chris. “Hiding it from them is kind of exhausting. Especially with my mother desperately trying to convince me to make you cheat on Jaime.”

Jaime scoffed at that. “Yea, talk about a lost cause.”

Chris frowned, glancing at his girlfriend. “Wait, you don’t seem very surprised about this.”

“That’s because I’m not.” Jaime shrugged as she sipped from her glass of wine. “Kate told me at the Christmas party last year.”

“She did?” Chris raised his eyebrows, looking between the two of them.

“Oh, uh...” Jaime shifted uncomfortably. “Might not have been as nice to her as I should’ve, with the whole ‘they mean so much to each other’ thing I was hearing from her mother.” She winced. “Kate showed me a picture of her girlfriend, so I knew not to be concerned.”

“And I asked her not to tell anyone,” Kate added. “Sorry, Chris.”

He pursed his lips, then shrugged. “Eh. I guess it wasn’t really my business.”

“How has your mom been?” Stella asked, the worry evident in her voice. “Since you came back, I mean.”
“Oh, about what you’d expect.” Kate slouched in her chair. “She keeps dropping hints that I’m delusional, or confused. And she tried to invite the pastor from her church over for dinner, to talk to me about straying from the light.”

Stella snorted. “How’d that go?”

“He couldn’t make it. Turns out, pastors are actually really busy around Christmas, between preparing sermons, volunteer work, and having dinner with their own families.” Kate smirked. “Not that it would have done any good. Apparently my mother doesn’t know that the pastor donates some of his time to LGBT youth groups.”

The other three immediately started sniggering.

“What about your dad? And your sisters?” Chris asked, as they collected themselves.

Kate sighed. “I haven’t had a chance to talk to them alone yet,” she said with a grimace. “My mother won’t leave me alone, until I go to sleep. Every time I try to get one of them by ourselves, she pops out of nowhere with more nonsense.”

“I’m sure they don’t have a problem with it,” Jaime assured her. “I mean, I don’t know your sisters as well as you, but they definitely aren’t as crazy as your mother.”

“You’re probably right,” Kate allowed. “My dad, though...” she hesitated. “I have no idea what he actually thinks. My mom is the only one in the house talking to me about it.”

Nobody spoke for a few seconds.

“So, tell me about your girlfriend,” Chris finally said, breaking the silence as he leaned forward. “Who is she?”

Kate smiled. “You know, you’re the first person to ask about Vicky since I came back.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Seriously?”

“Well, my mother has no interest in learning about her, so...” Kate shrugged, as she pulled out her phone and brought up a photo. “Here, this is her.”

Chris took the phone, Jaime looking over his shoulder as they checked out the photo Kate had selected. It was a photo of the two of them in the Dolby theatre, the stage behind them as they posed together on the balcony. “When was this?” Jaime asked.

“Late summer.” Kate smiled. “Vicky was able to score us a couple of tickets to one of the live shows of America’s Got Talent.”

“Wow.” Chris grinned. “I’ll bet that was an amazing show.”

“Oh, yea, it was SO cool.” Kate nodded. “We saw all the acts, and-”

The sliding door opened behind them. “Chris! Jaime!”

Chris glanced over his shoulder. “What is it, Mom?”

“Your father wants your help with dinner.” Chris’s mother looked at all of them. “And we’re almost ready to eat. How about you kids come back inside?”

“Yea, okay.” Chris sighed as he handed Kate her phone back, the four of them standing up. “We’ll
“So, your grandmother is really sick?”

It was ten minutes later. Kate and Stella were back inside, in a far corner of the room as the other adults around them made small talk over the music.

“It sounds like it,” Kate replied morosely. Her and Stella had gotten themselves some wine, and she took a small sip before she continued. “My mom said her kidneys are starting to shut down. Apparently, she’s only looking at six months or so.”

“Damn.” Stella shook her head. “I’m really sorry, Kate.”

“Yea.” Kate sighed. “Honestly, seeing her is the only reason I’m here right now.”

Stella raised an eyebrow. “The only reason?”

“Oh, don’t do that.” Kate rolled her eyes, as Stella smirked. “I was looking forward to spending Christmas with my girlfriend. Instead I have to deal with two days of my mother needling me about ‘coming back to the light’.”

“Fair point.” Stella took her own sip from her wine glass. “At least your grandmother will be here tomorrow. How do you think she’ll be, with your ‘alternative lifestyle’?”

Kate hesitated. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “She’s pretty conservative too. But it doesn’t matter, really.”

“Why is that?”

“Simple.” She shrugged. “I’m not going to tell her.”

“Really?” Stella raised an eyebrow. “I thought you were coming out to everyone?”

“I am,” Kate assured her. “But... if this really is going to be my grandmother’s last Christmas, I don’t want to distract her from everything else.” She swirled her wine glass absently. “I’ll just focus on making her last holiday a good one.”

Stella bit her lip and nodded. “That’s fair,” she allowed. “Plus, I’m sure your mother will stop giving you shit while your grandmother is there, too.”

Kate’s phone buzzed in her pocket. “Yea, I might be looking forward to that more than anything else,” she agreed as she glanced at the screen. “Huh.”

“What?”

“It’s Chris.” Kate showed Stella her phone.

Chris: Hey, can you meet me in the billiard room? I need a hand with something.

Stella frowned. “What is Chris doing in the billiard room?”

“Guess I’ll go find out.” Kate shrugged as she put her phone away. “It’s in the new addition, right?”

“Yea, down the hall, on the left.” Stella pointed.
Kate put her wine glass down on an end table and walked towards the hallway, her lip curling up in a half-smirk as she glanced and saw the mistletoe over the arch. _I wanted to burn this place down so badly_, she remembered, thinking back to the last Christmas party, when she’d had Chris’s father give her a tour of the addition rather than let her mother push her into Chris’s lips. _God, I don’t think I can ever look at the lumber section of Home Depot again without getting triggered._

She snickered to herself, shaking her head as she pulled the door to the billiards room open and walked inside. Two very nice pool tables were sitting side by side, the balls all set up neatly in their triangles while the pool cues sat in racks on the wall. A dartboard was also set up on the far wall, the accompanying darts still stuck in the foam; whoever had been playing last was a good shot, Kate observed, since the darts all clustered in the bulls-eye.

And along the opposite wall was a bar, with several bottles of liquor displayed behind the counter. Chris was behind the bar with them, scanning the bottles as he ran his finger across them.

The door closed softly behind her as she walked across the room. “Chris?”

He turned, his eyebrows going up in surprise. “Hey Kate,” he said with a grin. “Trying to avoid your mother?”

“No...” Kate frowned as she walked around the pool tables, making her way towards him. “What are you doing?”

“Oh, my dad sent me to find another bottle of his favorite scotch.” Chris turned back to the liquor, still scanning the labels. “Him and my uncles are apparently going through it pretty quickly... ah, here it is.” He picked up a bottle at the end of the row. “Honestly, I think they’re just drinking so they can tolerate each other.”

Kate smirked, but it vanished quickly. “Did you need my help for that?”

Chris looked confused. “Um... no?”

“Then what did you need my help with?”

“I don’t need your help at all.” He shrugged. “Why would you think I did?”

“Because you asked me for it.” Kate pulled her phone from her pocket and brought up his text message to show him. “See?”

Chris blinked as he looked at her screen. “I didn’t send that.”

“You didn’t?”

“No.” He set the bottle down on the bar and patted his pockets, frowning. “I don’t even have my phone on me. Pretty sure I left it in the kitchen.”

“Mm.” Kate pursed her lips. “I think I know who has your phone.”

Chris looked at her blankly, then adopted an exasperated expression, as the gears turned in his head. “You have got to be kidding me.”

“Yea.” She sighed. “Come on, let’s go back and get it before she sends out anything else.”

They both walked back towards the door, Kate grabbing the handle to push it open... and nothing happened. The door refused to budge.
“What the...” Kate jiggled the handle, pushing on the door again, but the result was the same; while the handle turned freely, the door didn’t move a millimeter.

“Here, hold this.” Chris handed her the bottle of scotch, then took the knob in his hand and tried to move the door. He pushed forcefully, much harder than Kate could have, but the result was the same. After a few seconds, he lowered his shoulder, turning the knob and ramming into the door so hard that the wall rattled.

Nothing. The door didn’t budge.

“God...” Chris winced. “Ow.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yea.” He rubbed his shoulder. “That looks a lot easier on TV.”

Kate reached past him and jiggled the handle again; the door still didn’t move. She lifted her hand and pounded on the door instead. “HEY!” she yelled at the top of her lungs. “SOMEONE LET US OUT!!”

Chris joined her, beating on the door with his fists. “I think we’re too far away from the party,” he said after a minute. “Plus, they have music on.”

“I think you’re right.” Kate frowned, then blinked. “Oh. Duh. Let’s do this the easy way,” she said as she took her phone back out of her pocket.

“Yea.” Chris chuckled as Kate sent a text to Stella. “That’s much smarter.”

Kate: Hey, we need your help in the billiard room.

Nothing happened. Kate didn’t get a notification that Stella had gotten the text. “Why isn’t she answering?” she muttered, tapping out a second message.

Kate: Are you there?

“Oh, hell.” Chris grimaced. “I bet she left it at home. Her mom was giving her grief yesterday, that she was spending too much time on it.”

“Crap.” Kate looked back at Chris. “Do you know the number for the house phone?”

“Not from memory.”

“What about Jaime?”

“Ooh.” He nodded. “Yea, I know her number. She might have her phone on her.”

Kate took Jaime’s info, and sent another text.

Kate: Jaime, are you there?

“What if she doesn’t answer?” Kate asked.

“Then...” Chris looked around. “I think I can crawl out the window. The drop isn’t that far.”

“Yea, let’s not do that if we don’t have to,” Kate said as she shook her head. The Hill house was built into on top of a literal hill; while the front was level with the ground, the back was elevated
almost ten feet from the graded landscaping. “If you break a leg, I don’t think your family will invite us to any more parties.”

Chris snorted. “True.”

Kate’s phone buzzed.

**Jaime:** Who is this?

“Oh, good.” Kate sighed.

**Kate:** It’s Kate. Chris and I are locked in the billiard room, and we can’t get out.

**Jaime:** Wait, what? I thought that room didn’t lock.

**Kate:** It doesn’t. I think someone jammed it shut after they tricked me into coming in here.

**Kate:** On a related note, my mother might have Chris’s phone.

**Jaime:** ... that bitch.

Chris snorted, as he read over Kate’s shoulder. “I didn’t know she knew any curse words.”

**Kate:** Please come get us out.

**Jaime:** I’ll be right there.

“No jumping out the window for you today.” Kate pushed her phone back into her pocket, sighing. “She should be here in a few minutes.”

“Good.” Chris was still rubbing his shoulder. “I don’t know if your mom had anything to do with this door, but if she did, she’s getting really fucking annoying.”

“I’m not even gonna try to formulate an argument.” Kate sighed as she turned and leaned against the wall.

Neither of them spoke for a few minutes, while they waited for Jaime. Finally, Kate perked her head up. “I think I just heard my mom.”

“Huh?”

Kate turned and pressed her ear to the door, Chris following suit.

“... there’s nobody else down there.”

“Bless your heart for tryin’ to be helpful, Mrs. Marsh, but I do know that my beau is in the billiard room.”

Kate frowned; she’d never heard Jaime lay on that thick of a southern accent before. Next to her, Chris winced. “She’s pissed.”

“No, he isn’t. I saw him go back to the party.”

“Honey, I reckon you were mistaken, because I just came from there,” Jaime drawled. “And he did just send me a text, that he was stuck in the billiard room. I’m just sayin’, why don’t y’all let me in so I can make sure he’s okay without bein’ such a dog on the rug.”
“What does... look, I’m sure he’s fine. You should go back to helping with dinner or something. Someone in the kitchen might miss you.”

“Aren’t you just a peach, Mrs. Marsh. Let’s find out for sure.”

“What are you doing?”

A classic rock song permeated through the wood of the door. “That’s my ring tone,” Chris said sourly.

“Now Mrs. Marsh, why in tarnation do you have my beau’s cell phone in your pocket?”

“I... found it somewhere. I didn’t know it was his.”

“Well, bless your heart for keeping it safe. I’ll make sure I get it back to him. Now, I did hear that someone in the great room was looking for you. They mentioned what you were wearing when someone asked, and I do declare that you have a very creative choice in outfits.”

They heard some more grumbling, but eventually they caught footsteps making their way towards them. Kate immediately knocked her fist on the door. “Jaime?”

“Hang on, Kate.” They heard rustling. “Darn it... there’s a wedge jammed under the door.”

“Do I need to push?” Chris asked.

“No, just...” they heard Jaime grunting with effort, followed by a pop as something was freed from the bottom of the door. The knob turned, and the door opened easily. Jaime stood on the other side, holding a door stop in one hand and a cell phone in the other. “Try to keep this in your pocket, would you?”

“I will.” Chris took his phone back. “I was showing my mom a picture, and I put it down without thinking about it.”

“Where’s my mother?” Kate cut in.

“She went back to the party with her tail between her legs.” Jaime nodded down the hall. “Why?”

Kate didn’t answer, as she started to storm past them. Jaime grabbed her arm before she could get away. “Honey, take a breath,” she cautioned quickly.

“No, I want to know what the... FUCK she thought she was doing!” Kate snapped. “Like, what did she think was going to happen?! That I would sober up and realize I’m straight just because I’m locked in a room with a boy?!”

“Yes, your mother is delusional,” Jaime agreed. “But going out there and screaming at her in front of a party full of people is the nuclear option.”

Kate’s face flushed in anger. “I don’t care,” she retorted. “I’m going to-”

“You have to go home with her,” Jaime reminded her. “You’re still going to be here for a few days. Whatever you want to do, you REALLY don’t want to do it.”

“I really, really do.” Kate paused. “But... dang it.” She sighed. “Fine. We’ll just rug-sweep her behavior. Again.”

“Oh, no, honey.” Jaime smiled, and Kate mentally recoiled; her grin was absolutely predatory.
“You’re going home with her. I’m not.”

Victoria: Checking in. How are you doing?

Kate: I’m okay. It was actually a really good night.

Victoria: ... where did you take me on our first date?

Kate: Really? You know I’m the only one who can unlock my phone, right?

Victoria: I still want an answer to the question.

Kate: It was Red Robin. And you’re being a little paranoid.

Victoria: I’m worried about you. Especially being so close to your delusional mother.

Kate: She was actually very quiet tonight. Especially after the party.

Victoria: Why? What happened at the party?

Kate: Well, the first thing that happened was my mother locking me and Chris into the billiard room.

Victoria: ... do I need to come down to San Diego and handle her?

Kate: No. Jaime, Chris’s girlfriend, took care of that for me.

Victoria: How?

Kate: Well, we were sitting down for dinner, and a couple of people gave toasts, and Jaime asked if she could give one, too. And Chris’s whole family loves her, so of course they said yes.

Kate: She went for about five minutes about me, and how brave and courageous I was for coming out, in THE most Southern Belle accent I have ever heard. There was actually applause when she finished.

Victoria: Oh. My. God.

Victoria: How was your mother? TELL me she had an aneurysm.

Kate: She did not. But she didn’t speak for the rest of the night.

Victoria: Bet that was pretty nice.

Kate: It was definitely a refreshing change of pace.

Victoria: I’m sure watching the toast was pretty satisfying, too.

Kate: I’m trying not to be smug about it.

Kate: But I’d be lying if I said I didn’t enjoy it a little bit.
Victoria was miserable.

She’d woken an hour ago, and hadn’t even gotten up. Or looked at her phone. She lay on her side of the bed, staring at the empty pillow next to her while she tried to pretend that she wasn’t pining for her girlfriend.

_We’re supposed to be together_, she thought sadly, as she fought her emotions and tried to keep her eyes dry. _We agreed, after last year. We’re supposed to be exchanging presents right now._

“Fuck,” she muttered.

With a sigh, she finally got up, taking her phone from her nightstand. _I’ll send her a text in a little bit_, she thought morosely, as she walked into the kitchen with a yawn. _I’m hungry._

She opened the fridge, reaching for the eggs, but paused. Her eye caught the bottle of wine next to the fridge. And the pack of cigarettes next to it; she’d been smoking like a chimney since Kate had left.

_Fuck it._ She closed the fridge. _No better tradition for Christmas by yourself than to dive head-first into your vices._ Grabbing the cigarettes and taking the bottle by the neck, she started walking towards the balcony, but stopped halfway across the room.

_God damn it._ She turned around and went back to the kitchen, opening drawers. _Corkscrew, corkscrew... I know it’s around here somewhere... ah, there you are._

Her phone buzzed on the counter, distracting her as she retrieved the tool from the drawer. She looked over and saw her girlfriend’s face on the screen, and she couldn’t help but smile. _Guess she beat me to the punch_, she thought as she grabbed her phone.

“Merry Christmas, babe!” she answered cheerfully. “How are you doing? Get any good presents?”

Kate didn’t respond. Victoria was about to ask if she was there before she heard a sob.

“V-Vicky?”

“Kate?” Victoria dropped the corkscrew on the counter, the mirth gone from her voice. “Kate, what’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“You...” Kate sniffed. “You were right. My mom lied.”

“What?!”

“My grandmother’s not sick.” Kate sobbed again. “There’s nothing wrong with her. I’m sorry, Vicky, I’m so sorry I-”

“I’m on my way.” Victoria ran over to the counter, grabbing her car keys. “Kate, did you hear me? I’m leaving for San Diego right now. I’m coming to get you.”

Kate sniffed. “Vicky-”

“Pack your bag.” Victoria shoved her feet into her shoes and grabbed a jacket from a hook. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

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_Kate & Victoria: Pants on Fire_
It was normally a two-hour drive from Los Angeles to San Diego. Victoria made it in ninety minutes.

She finally took her foot off the accelerator as she turned into Kate’s neighborhood, as she examined the house numbers. Finally noticing the right house, she made a quick turn and backed into the driveway before she laid on her horn.

A couple of minutes passed before the front door to the house opened. Her girlfriend stormed out with her duffle bag over her shoulder, stomping down the stairs. A blonde woman in pajamas and a bathrobe exploded out the door right behind her.

“GET BACK HERE, YOUNG LADY!!” Kate’s mother screeched, though she stayed on the porch.

Kate ignored her as she walked around Victoria’s car, opening the passenger door.

“KATE!! You get back here, RIGHT NOW!!” her mother screamed, as she finally stepped off the porch. “Get BACK inside! You are going to spend this day with your FAMILY!!”

Victoria squeezed the steering wheel as hard as she could, resisting the urge to get out and start throwing punches while Kate got into her car.

“Please go,” she said softly, as she pushed her duffle bag into the back seat.

Victoria shifted the car into Drive, but paused. “In a second,” she said, as she hit the button to roll down her window.

Kate blinked, looking over at Victoria. “Huh?”

Shifting into a low gear, Victoria held the brake pedal down as she mashed her foot on the gas. Her tires immediately started screeching and smoking, as they spun on the driveway. She held one hand out and flipped Kate’s mother the middle finger before she released the brakes.

Her car left a pair of long, black strips as she performed a burnout, peeling out of the Marsh’s driveway and back onto the street. She imagined that she could still hear her girlfriend’s mother shrieking over the noise as she drove away. Kate looked at her with wide eyes.

“Yea, I know.” Victoria sighed, as she took a turn. “But that felt really, really good.”

Kate spent most of the drive sniffling and rubbing her eyes. Her and Victoria only exchanged a few words as they held hands across the center console tightly.

They finally stopped halfway between San Diego and Los Angeles; Kate had left the house so quickly, she’d missed breakfast. But the only place they could find that was open was a small diner just off the highway. Victoria supposed they made for an interesting couple, since she was still in her pajamas, but the waitress didn’t say anything as she seated them. She quickly took their breakfast orders and left them alone.

“So.” Victoria reached across the table and took Kate’s hand. “Are you doing okay?”

“I am now.” Kate gave her a small smile. “Thank you. For coming to get me.”

Kate sighed, glancing at the table. “She... like I said, she was fine. She wasn’t sick at all.”

“How did you find out?”

Kate scoffed. “I kind of got suspicious when she showed up yesterday,” she admitted quietly. “When she got out of the car, she was just her usual self. Nice, happy to see everyone... and she carried her own bags, like she always did.” She shook her head. “I was expecting a woman with a few months to live have us do that for her. I stayed next to her, throughout the day, and she seemed to be perfectly healthy for a seventy-two-year-old woman.”

Victoria frowned. “Yea, that’s weird.”

“I thought so.” Kate nodded. “When we went to bed last night, I looked up the symptoms of kidney failure on my phone. Swollen feet, loss of appetite, trouble concentrating... she didn’t have any of them.”

Kate bit her lip before she continued. “So this morning, I just straight-up asked her how her kidneys were doing. My mom tried to shout at me to be quiet, but I kept asking, and my grandmother was just...” she shook her head. “She had no idea what I was talking about. She said her kidneys were fine.”

“Wow.” Victoria tightened her grip on Kate’s hand. “Babe, I am so sorry.”


“No, your mom ruined their Christmas,” Victoria corrected. “She screwed everything up by failing to be a decent human being.”

The corner of Kate’s mouth twitched, though she stayed silent.

Victoria frowned. “Did you forget your phone?”

“No, it’s in my pocket. Why?”

“I expected your mother to start blowing it up five seconds after we left.”

“I’m sure she is, but I turned it off.” Kate shook her head. “I’ll turn it back on in a few days. I’m not expecting to talk to anyone else, anyway.” She glanced back at Victoria’s car. “Besides, I want to give her some time to cool off anyway, after the stunt you pulled with your car.”

“I was just leaving her a little something to remember me by.” Victoria smirked. “I’m not sorry.”

“I never thought you would be.”

“Well...” Victoria pursed her lips. “I guess there’s a bright side to all this.”

Kate met her eyes. “What’s that?”

“We finally get to spend Christmas together.” Victoria smirked as she looked around the half-empty diner, then down at the pajamas she was wearing. “Granted, this isn’t really what I had in mind.”

Kate smiled as she squeezed Victoria’s hand. “I don’t care about the circumstances,” she said softly. “I’m with you. That’s all I need.”
Taylor: WYD?

Victoria: Cooking dinner?

Taylor: LOL lame

Taylor: Com gt me so we cna hve sme fun ;)

Victoria: Do you know who you’re texting right now?

Taylor: ... oooops

Victoria: Are you drunk?

Taylor: Lil bit

Victoria: I think it’s time for you to call it a night.

Taylor: but butt but itss NYE!! i ned a bioy to kss!

Victoria: Where’s Liam? Is he with you?

Taylor: fk liam.

Victoria: Okay, I don’t know what’s going on, but I’m on my way. Where are you?

Taylor: No stp Kte’ll be relly mad

Victoria: I’m giving you a ride home, you moron. What bar are you at?

Taylor: NVM fund a boy

Victoria: Do NOT get in a car with him!!

Taylor: lol it wsnt a by

Taylor: lookd like 1 tho

Victoria: WHERE. ARE. YOU.

Taylor: lol

Victoria: TAYLOR

Victoria: ANSWER YOUR PHONE

Victoria: TAYLOR!!

Kate: Found her.

Victoria: Where?

Kate: Ladies room.
Victoria: On my way. She okay?

Kate: No. She’s puking.

Victoria: Great. Let her get it out of her system. Don’t need her making a mess in my car.

Kate: She’s going to anyway.

Victoria: Why?

Kate: It’s on her shirt.

Victoria: Wonderful. Be right there.

Kate: And shoes.

Taylor: ... thank you.

Victoria: Don’t thank me. Thank Kate. I wanted to leave you there.

Taylor: I’m sorry.

Victoria: We spent NYE running all over a noisy nightclub looking for you. We had actual plans, you know.

Taylor: I am seriously so sorry.

Taylor: How did you find me?

Victoria: You tagged yourself in the club on IG, idiot.

Victoria: BTW, you owe me $20 for the duffle bag we put your shoes and shirt in.

Taylor: Okay.

Victoria: What the hell were you thinking? I know you’re smarter than that.

Taylor: Liam broke up with me.

Victoria: ... oh.

Taylor: For a yoga instructor he was “just friends” with, at his gym. Perky little redhead with massive tits who can put her legs behind her head and has an IQ of fifty.

Taylor: I just... I don’t know. I felt like shit, and I wanted to forget about it.

Taylor: I really am sorry.

Victoria: Christ. I’m sorry, too. He seemed nice.

Taylor: I thought he was. And that it might’ve the real deal, like you and Kate, or Dana and Trevor.

Taylor: Guess not.
Victoria: Tay, you’re in your twenties. Me and Dana finding Kate and Trevor this early was just dumb luck.

Victoria: You will find someone like them for you. But getting blackout drunk isn’t going to solve anything.

Taylor: I know. I really cannot stress enough, how sorry I am. I’ll pay you back for the duffle bag when I see you next.

Victoria: I don’t care about the duffle bag. Just please don’t do that again. You seriously scared the hell out of me when we couldn’t find you.

Victoria: Who were you trying to text, anyway?

Taylor: I don’t remember. I think I just scrolled all the way to the bottom of my contacts and clicked on you by mistake.

Taylor: Thank you for bringing me and my car home. And setting out water and aspirin.

Victoria: Kate put a breakfast burrito in your fridge, too.

Taylor: Oh my God, I love her. You guys are seriously awesome friends.

Victoria: I’ll tell her you said so :)
Brooke: The Meeting

2019. Concurrent with chapters 49-51 of EtL.

Brooke still couldn’t believe it.

Her and Emily had been brought into the conference room with the other First Light teenagers earlier that morning. Brooke knew some of them already; Emily had made very brief introductions at Blackwell, but they all mostly did their own thing. Brooke hadn’t realized the small scope until they were all in the same room.

“I thought there were more than this,” she’d remarked quietly. “The way Miss Amber talked about us...”

“There are a couple of us missing.” Emily frowned, as she glanced around the room. “I don’t see Tyler, or Celia. And you gotta remember, a few teenagers have already aged out. Like Sadie.”

“Still.” Brooke sighed, as she slouched in her seat. “I figured there were...”

Her voice trailed off as she saw Miss Amber approach from outside the room. And her eyes had practically bugged out of her skull, when she saw the woman following her.

Doctor Greene was right. She is still alive.

Brooke had barely paid any attention to what Miss Amber said afterwards. Her eyes had been glued to Max, the brunette watching Miss Amber speak until she was asked to say something. It was painfully obvious that Max wasn’t used to speaking in front of crowds, the way she fumbled through what she said, but she seemed more than willing to answer questions. Even Emily’s attempt to be funny.

Finally, she raised her hand.

“Yes?”

“Do you remember me?” she asked quietly.

Max blinked, as she looked over Brooke. “Um... we’ve met before?”

I was a kid when she last saw me, Brooke remembered as she bit her lip. “I was at the summer camp. You were my tent counselor. I... used to have a way long ponytail-”

Max did a double-take. “Brooke Scott.”

Brooke sat up, grinning. “You remember me?”

Max started snapping her fingers. “Elder Scott’s granddaughter. Bobby Marshall was always getting in trouble for pulling your hair. You made me hold your hand the whole way back to the tent from the campfire that one night, because one of the older kids told you about Bigfoot, and you were worried that he was going to eat you. You were SO adorable!”

The other teenagers immediately started snickering. Emily, in particular, flashed Brooke a wicked grin as she blushed. “I was only eight.”
“Holy crap, I didn’t think any other Elder’s family members had run away.” Max was looking at her in astonishment. “Your grandfather must be FURIOUS.”

Brooke felt herself slide down in her chair. “Yea, he’s definitely not happy,” she sighed. “I called Miss Amber, after my grandfather told me I was going to be pulled from high school to be with my husband.”

“You’re already married?!”

“No,” Miss Amber cut in, as she looked at Brooke. “I know your grandfather and the church say you are, but the state doesn’t allow marriage between people under the age of 17, and most certainly not between people too young to consent. Brooke is definitely NOT married.”

“Too young to... wait, what?”

Does she not know about this stuff? Brooke had to wonder. Was a marriage never arranged for her? As an Elder’s daughter?

“Bobby Marshall and I had our wedding when we were kids. After we went to the camp together,” Brooke explained with an eye roll. “I signed the certificate, but... I mean, I thought it was pretend.”

“Jesus.” A shudder ran through Max’s body “I had no idea.”

“It’s becoming more common in the church.” Miss Amber turned to Max as she spoke. “Especially since you left. The pastors do the marriages when the children are barely old enough to go to school, and trick them into signing real marriage certificates. They’re not worth the paper they’re printed on, especially when you check the dates against their birthdays, but that doesn’t stop them from scaring kids who don’t know any better. Emily and Isabelle are in these sham marriages, too.”

Brooke glanced between Emily and a girl with red hair next to her, who shrugged indifferently.

“You guys know, every time I hear about First Light, they somehow get more and more twisted.” Max shook her head. “Have you guys ever seen their Wikipedia page?”

“The internet is full of evilness, falsehoods, lies, and deceit,” Emily commented. “The church is pretty clear that computer use should be limited and monitored for kids. They even try to tell us we can’t use them for school work.”

“Yea, I think that’s partially my fault, too,” Max sighed.

“You know what that means though, right?”

Brooke blinked in surprise, as a blue-haired woman interrupted before Max could explain what she’d meant. She’d totally missed that Max had come in with someone else. “Who are you?”

“Chloe. I’m Max’s girlfriend.”

Girlfriend? Brooke glanced back at Max. She’s gay, too?

“Your church is trying to keep you guys from using the internet, right?” Chloe continued, looking around the room at all of them. “That means you guys fucking terrify them.”

“That... doesn’t sound like something that’s true,” Emily said cautiously.

“Bullshit. Did you guys hear about the student walkouts, last spring?”
Brooke and the others shook their heads.

“After an older kid shot up his old high school, students around the country walked out of their classes in protest.” Chloe scoffed. “You should have seen the assholes on CNN, trying to downplay it. But those kids, rising up like that? They’re fucking with the status quo. And they all told the politicians the same message; we’re gonna be voters someday, so you’d better get with the fuckin’ program, or else.”

“Chloe’s right,” Miss Amber added. “The church might be powerful, but it has that power because of its size. You kids are detracting from that, bit by bit.”

We are? Brooke looked around at the others. There’s only nine of us here. Are... we really having that much of an impact?

“Guys, that church is built on a house of cards,” Max said. “They may have gotten away with their crap before, when nobody knew what was happening. But now you guys do. And you can tell others about it. And you know what happens when you pull too many cards out from the bottom?”

Brooke thought the answer, at the same time Max said it. It comes crashing down.

That had been a couple of hours ago. Max had stuck around, and was talking to everyone, as they lobbed her multiple questions.

“What do you think?” Brooke asked Emily quietly.

“I... I don’t know.” Emily fidgeted with her fingers, as she glanced imperceptibly at Max. “I still can’t believe that she’s actually alive. I always thought Elder Caulfield killed her.”

“Yea.” Brooke bit her lip. “It’s really weird, actually seeing her here. It’s like looking at a ghost or something.”

“Right?” Emily agreed. “Gotta be weird for you, too, since you knew her before.”

“I didn’t KNOW her,” Brooke emphasized. “She was my counselor at the summer camp. That was it.”

“Knew her better than most of us.” Emily shrugged. “What did you think, about what she said?”

“I don’t know.” Brooke glanced away in thought. “Sounds like a really nice motivational speech, but I don’t know how true it is. I mean... there aren’t even ten of us here.” Brooke shrugged. “Are we really supposed to believe that were such a thorn in First Light’s side?”

“You should be.”

Brooke and Emily glanced over, as Max sat across the table from them.

“Like my girlfriend said,” Max reminded them, “you guys are messing with the status quo. First Light doesn’t like it when you all don’t fall in line.”

“So I understand.” Brooke sighed as she planted her elbows on the table. “I just don’t see how we’re more than an annoyance.”

Max nodded. “I get that. Somebody pointed something out to me a few weeks ago, though.” She paused. “The weakest point of a cult is the base. Its followers.”

“Followers?” Emily frowned. “What, like us?”
“Exactly,” Max said. “Think about it. All the girls who stay with that church. How many kids do they have?”

Brooke and Emily exchanged glances. “I mean, I only have one sibling,” Brooke answered.

“I have three.” Emily looked back at Max. “So what?”

“Think about it. If you guys had two-point-five kids, they would have been raised in the church, too.” Max looked up in thought. “The church is about fifty years old. That’s two generations. So if you had three kids each, and THEY had three kids each, that’s twelve people right there that they just lost.”

Brooke glanced around the room. “So... twelve times nine is...”

“One hundred and eight,” Emily answered. “Wow. That’s a lot of lost parishioners. And not all the runaways are here.”

“Exactly.” Max smiled smugly. “You guys are making a difference. Even if you can’t see it yet.”

I... never thought about it like that. Brooke couldn’t help but smirk. “I doubt that I’m the last one to leave, either,” she said. “I’m sure another girl will figure out that they’re not worth it.”

“Probably,” Max agreed. “I... am really glad to see you, Brooke.”

“You are?” Brooke raised her eyebrows in surprise.

“Yea, of course.” Max nodded. “I mean, I’m happy that other teenagers are leaving the church at all. But you were pretty miserable, at that summer camp.”

Brooke scoffed. “If Bobby Marshall hadn’t kept pulling my ponytail, I probably would have had fun.”


“I haven’t seen him in years,” Brooke said with a shrug. “I hadn’t thought about him in as long. You know, he’s three or four years older than me. But he’s 19 now, and you know how people in the church marry young anyway...”

“So it was time that his bride joined him?” Max held up her hands, using two fingers to make air quotes around the word ‘bride’.

“I mean, I guess?” Brooke sighed, averting her gaze. “I don’t know. I was fucking terrified when my grandpa told me what was gonna happen. Like... am I supposed to have sex with him now? Start having kids? I’m not ready for that. I don’t want to be a teen mom.” She glanced back at Max. “Is that even legal?”

“I want to say no... but Age of Consent laws are weird.” Max pursed her lips, before she pulled out her cell phone. “One second.”

Brooke heard the phone vibrate a couple of times, as Max sent a few texts. “Who is that?”

“My friend,” Max answered. “The one who’s in school to become a lawyer. She’s smart as hell.”

“I don’t know why it matters,” Brooke sighed. “I don’t wanna go back. I’m pretty sure my parents will kill me for embarrassing them, never mind what my grandpa will do.” She paused. “Did you
ever see your folks again, after you left?"

Max shook her head. “This is the first time I’ve been back in Arcadia Bay since I ran away.”

Brooke raised her eyebrows. “And they never found you?”

“Nobody did.” Max shrugged. “Like I said, I was homeless for a long time. A friend pointed out that it was probably easier on the church, with me being ‘dead’ as the rumor, so that other teenagers would think twice before they challenged the church.”

“Your friend wasn’t wrong.” Emily spoke up while she fidgeted with a bracelet. “Your name is pretty much a precautionary tale in the church rumor mill. Like, ‘Elder Caulfield’s daughter was bad, and now she’s dead’, kind of thing.”

“Yea, but I don’t think anyone really took it seriously until your mom got off on her trial,” Brooke pointed out. “Like, we really thought everyone involved with those deaths was going to prison. That whole thing kinds of makes your dad the church bogeyman.”

“Ryan Caulfield is not the bogeyman.” Brooke blinked, and Miss Amber materialized behind Max. “The state’s stance is very clear; if you don’t want to go back, then you won’t. First Light of Christ has shown a pattern of abuse towards teenagers who rebel against them, and we will not send kids back into that.”

Max frowned. “Am I missing something?”

“Her grandfather is using your dad to try and get Brooke back,” Miss Amber explained. “He’s been a thorn in our side for a while, because he can’t find Brooke. So he’s been dumping legal paperwork on our office, trying to force us to give up her location. Which we won’t.”

*He is?* Brooke looked at Miss Amber with wide eyes.

“Oh. Hey, listen.”

Brooke tore her eyes from the social worker, to look back at Max.

“My dad’s a pussy.”

Brooke immediately snorted in amusement. Emily cackled with her, as well as a couple of the other teenagers. Miss Amber, of course, didn’t think it was funny. “I get the point you’re trying to make, Max, but we try not to use bad language around this office.”

“Sorry.” Max shrugged. “He is, though. He’s a little, little man, who only beats up girls that he thinks won’t fight back. And last time he tried to do that, I broke his jaw with the pan my mom cooked breakfast in that morning.”

*Okay, that’s funny.*

“My father is only scary if you let him be,” Max added, while her phone vibrated on the table. She picked it up and started scanning her incoming texts, a widening smile coming over her face. “So, there it is.” She said, showing Brooke her phone.

*Romeo and Juliet... must be within three years...*

“When does this guy turn twenty?” Max asked.

“May.” Brooke smiled. “I don’t turn seventeen until November.”
“Which means that even if Miss Amber DOES have to give you back, which she won’t, the second
this dude lays a finger on you, he’s toast.” Max smiled, as she put her phone away.

_Holy shit._ Brooke breathed a sigh of relief. _That’s... more of a load off than I thought it would be._

“Thanks,” she said gratefully. “And, you know, your friend, too.”

“Don’t worry about my dad.” Max smiled back at the social worker behind her. “I know Miss
Amber won’t let him take you anywhere. Like I said, I wish there’d been someone like her around
when I ran away.”

Chloe walked up behind her, bending over and whispering something in her ear. Max nodded,
turning back to the teenagers. “I’m really sorry, guys, but we have to go,” she said as she stood up.

Brooke stood up with her. “Thanks, Max... for, you know, coming back to talk to us.” She hesitated.
“It feels a lot better, now that we know you got out okay.”

“Listen, guys, everything is gonna be alright.” Max smiled. “Trust Miss Amber. She won’t let
anything bad happen to you.”

“Okay, as much as I enjoy my praises being sung, we need to get you two back home.” Miss Amber
smirked as she opened the door. “Thank you guys, for coming in.”

_This is so cool._ Brooke was actually smiling, as she followed Max out the door. _Max actually got
away. If Bobby lays a finger on me, I can have his ass in a sling._

_But my grandfather..._

... _Ignore it._ Brooke shook her head clear. _If Miss Amber isn’t worried enough to tell you about it, then
don’t let it bother you._

Everyone in front of her suddenly stopped walking. “What’s going on?” Chloe asked ahead of her.

Brooke frowned and tried to look ahead of the others, but all she could hear was the older social
worker arguing with someone before...

“I have an obligation on behalf of my client to personally ensure that Miss Scott receives these
papers.”

... _no._

_No._

_No, no, no, no, no, no, not him, not HIM..._

Brooke reflexively flattened herself into the wall as her breath caught in her chest.

_Stay quiet. He can’t see you. He CAN’T see you._ Brooke started trembling, as she tried to slow her
heartbeat and failed. Her blood was pounding in her ears, and making it hard to hear anything.

“...I insist on seeing Miss Scott in person. Her family is worried about her...”

Jane was next to her before Brooke even realized it. Her foster mother immediately wrapped an arm
around her shoulders and pulled her close.
“He’s not going to take you,” Jane whispered quietly. “Listen to me, Brooke. Mister Caulfield isn’t going to take you away.”

Brooke grabbed her arm, squeezing tightly as she tried very hard not to start hyperventilating.

“Stay calm,” Jane assured her. “You’re not going anywhere, Brooke. It’s okay.”

*I can’t go. I won’t go. I won’t go with him.* Brooke blinked, and she felt moisture on her eyelashes as she held her breath. *I can’t... I can’t...*

“He’s leaving.” Brooke blinked, as Jane continued. “They’re getting rid of him, Brooke. You’ll be okay. Everything is.”

They were both distracted as Max pushed herself off the wall. Brooke and Jane both watched as Max, before Miss Amber could stop her, walked out where she could be seen from the entrance to the office.

Where she HAD to have been seen.

Max glared in the direction of the door, as she slowly raised one hand and extended her middle finger.

Brooke could have sworn her heart stopped, as she stared at Max.

...

...

*Did she... just...*

...

*Holy shit.*

“I told you guys.” Max glanced back at them with a straight face. “My dad is only scary if you let him be.”

Brooke and Emily didn’t leave the CPS office for almost half an hour afterwards.

Miss Amber took Max and Chloe out right away. Miss Hemingway then asked the state police to sweep the area around the building, to ensure that nobody was lying in wait to follow the teenagers. They were all released slowly, one foster family at a time.

Jane had driven them all to the office, but Pete drove back. The trip took half an hour longer than usual, because he made several U-turns before he got back to the house.

“Are you two okay?” he finally asked, as they walked through the door.

“I’m fine.” Emily shrugged.

“... yea.” Brooke sat on the couch heavily, her eyes on the floor. “Just... tired.”

“Right.” Pete nodded. “Take a few minutes, while Jane starts dinner. I’m going out to the garage for a bit.”
Emily sat down next to Brooke as Pete walked out. She placed a hand comfortingly on Brooke’s back. “You sure you’re okay?”

“I’ll be fine.” Brooke rubbed her eyes. “That just... took more out of me than I thought.”

“I bet.” Emily paused. “How badass was that, though?”

Brooke glanced at her. “What? Max?”

“She totally flipped Elder Caulfield the middle finger.” Emily grinned. “I wish I had balls in her size. I watched a kid forget to refer to Elder Xavier by his title once, and he almost caught an ass-beating from his parents. If someone had actually flipped him the bird...”

One corner of Brooke’s mouth twitched, in an attempt at a smirk. “That was pretty hardcore,” she agreed.

“Yea.” Emily leaned back. “... you ever wonder why we still call them ‘Elder’?”

Brooke blinked. “Huh?”

“I mean... what’s the point?” Emily looked at her. “It’s a meaningless title outside of the church. So why do we still call them Elders?”

“I...” Brooke hesitated. “I guess because it just feels weird not to.”

“Well, fuck that.” Emily blew air out through her nose. “I’m never going to use that word again.” She smirked. “Ryan Caulfield is a prick.”

Brooke bit her lip.

“What?”

“Nothing. Just... you’re right.” She grinned. “El- I mean, Ryan Caulfield can go fuck himself.”

“Language!!”

“Sorry, Jane!!”

Unknown: Hey, Brooke. You there?

Brooke: Who is this?

Unknown: It’s Megan.

<CONTACT INFO UPDATED>

Brooke: I didn’t know you had this app on your phone, too.

Megan: Miss Amber and I use it to discuss you kids, just to be safe.

Megan: But my schedule is hectic for the next few days, so I won’t be able to see you. I just want to make sure you’re up-to-date with the case.

Brooke: Is this because of Ryan Caulfield’s visit to CPS?
Megan: It is. He’s made a motion with the judge to have you evaluated by a psychologist.

Brooke: Why?!

Megan: Because he’s trying to prove their point, that you’re a disturbed youth who’s also a liar.

Brooke: ... he’s a fucking cocksucker.

Megan: I won’t tell Miss Amber you said so.

Brooke: So what do I do?

Megan: I’m going to work on squashing the motion. Do I have your permission to speak to Miss Amber about this?

Brooke: I didn’t realize you needed it.

Megan: I’m YOUR lawyer, Brooke. I need your permission to discuss facets of the case with anyone else.

Brooke: Oh. Okay, sure.

Megan: Thank you. I’ll let you know what comes of it.

Amy: Checking in. Still single?

Brooke: Depends on who you ask, I guess.

Amy: You’re still not married, right?

Brooke: Dude, I’m not old enough to get married NOW.

Amy: Right, I forgot.

Amy: So you haven’t found a boyfriend at your new school yet?

Brooke: No. Have you?

Amy: ... maybe?

Brooke: WHAT??

Amy: Bryan Harlow asked me to the spring formal.

Brooke: I thought he was dating Kylie?

Amy: Dude, you’ve missed a lot. Kylie transferred out.

Brooke: Why? Where?

Amy: Her mom got promoted, and she took a job out east somewhere.

Brooke: Wow. How did he come to ask a nerd like you to the dance?
Amy: Ouch!

Brooke: Asked with nothing but love.

Amy: Yea, yea. And it turns out, he watches anime too.

Brooke: Wait, for real?

Amy: I know, surprised the shit out of me. He saw the Spike sticker on my laptop and asked where I got it, and we started chatting.

Brooke: Wow. Never would have figured the varsity pitcher for a geek.

Emily: I need you to cover for me in Trig.

Brooke: What do you mean, cover for you?

Emily: Just convince the teacher not to mark me absent.

Brooke: No way! I am not getting involved in you skipping class!

Emily: I’m not skipping class!

Brooke: Then where are you? Break ends in three minutes!

Emily: I’m just gonna be a little late.

Brooke: Why?

Emily: I can’t say.

Brooke: The fuck you can’t. I’m not risking my ass to let you skip. I’ll never hear the end of it from Miss Amber.

Emily: I am NOT trying to cut Trig! I swear!

Brooke: Then tell me where you are!

Emily: ... I’m in the bathroom.

Brooke: Seriously? Why didn’t you just fucking say so? Why are you being all cagey about it?

Emily: Because I might be here for a few minutes.

Brooke: What for?

Emily: You remember how you said that those leftovers I ate for breakfast looked off?

Brooke: ... oh.

Emily: Please just tell Mrs. McMichael that I’ll be a little late. Quietly, and for a reason that’s not suicidally embarrassing.
**Brooke:** Fine. Are you okay?

**Emily:** I will be, once it all leaves.

**Brooke:** Okay, I love you, but TMI. Way, WAY TMI.

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**Joey:** I have some info for you.

**Brooke:** About Abel Industries?

**Joey:** How big of a surprise would it be, if you found out that your grandfather is listed as an officer in that corporation?

**Brooke:** Considering I found the bank statements in his office, not very. Is he the owner?

**Joey:** No. Like I said, he’s an officer. The majority owner is someone named Preston Xavier.

**Brooke:** Shit, he’s another Elder.

**Joey:** Well, that makes sense. There are two other officers named Ryan Caulfield and James Thompson.

**Brooke:** A third Elder and one of the Pastors. So it’s a church businesses, just like we figured.

**Joey:** See, that’s where it gets interesting.

**Brooke:** Well, what do you want, a fucking drum roll?

**Joey:** Be nice, considering the work I put into this.

**Brooke:** I swear to God...

**Joey:** The mission statement I found for Abel Industries is short. It states that they strive to bring executive synergy and fiscal efficiency to global integrated operations.

**Brooke:** My head hurt just reading that.

**Joey:** Yea, it’s a bunch of corporate buzzwords thrown together. The thing is, as far as I can tell, Abel Industries does little to no business anywhere.

**Joey:** They have zero presence on websites like LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, or any social media platform. They don’t own property, though their business address is your old church. From what I can see, they have no means of generating income.

**Brooke:** So... how are they making all this money every month?

**Joey:** That is an excellent question.

**Joey:** Did you look into their transactions?

**Brooke:** Yes. I did find a few interesting patterns. There are nine payments that recur every month with the same dollar amounts, on the third of each month, like clockwork.
Joey: Are we talking a nice, even number?

Brooke: No. One is $1,335.65, one is $1,204.92, stuff like that.

Joey: Hmm. Those sound like loan payments.

Brooke: There are notes to the accounts they’re going into. The letters MLS, followed by a series of numbers. I don’t know what it means, though.

Joey: Multiple Listing Services. So they’re mortgage payments for real estate.

Brooke: Are you sure?

Joey: My mom’s a realtor, remember?

Brooke: Oh, right. Is there any way to see what properties they are?

Joey: Maybe. Send me the numbers, and I’ll see what I can find out.
Kate & Victoria: Facebook Call

2017. Concurrent with ch 18 of EtL

Kate was humming, as she watched the numbers on the elevator go higher. It had been almost a year since she moved in with her girlfriend, and she still enjoyed coming home from school to see her.

She practically skipped down the hall, using her key to unlock the door. “I’m home!” she called, as she closed the door behind her.

Victoria was sitting at the table, leaning forward as she looked at Kate and smiled. The intensity of her expression made Kate freeze as she put her purse down. “How was class?” her girlfriend asked sweetly.

“It was... nice?” Kate turned her head to look at Victoria, as she spoke very cautiously. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Oh, you know.” Victoria leaned back in her seat, her manicured fingernails dancing over a white envelope on the table. “I got a very interesting piece of mail today.”

Kate blinked, her eyes flickering between Victoria and the envelope. “Is... that what you’re playing with? What is it?”

“You know, I’m a really, really good driver,” Victoria stated. “Never been in an accident. Never gotten a ticket. Never even been pulled over.”

She held up the envelope. “So you can imagine my surprise, when I got a certified letter today from the California Highway Patrol. And you can imagine my surprise even FURTHER,” she continued as she retrieved the paper from inside, “when it’s a speeding ticket.”

Kate’s brow furrowed. “A... wait. Since when do speeding tickets come through the mail?”

“Since the CHP installed electronic speed traps along the four-oh-five.” Victoria started unfolding the paper. “I was curious, too, so I looked it up. They’re the fancy ones, that measure your speed, and snap a picture of the driver and the license place if you’re more than eleven miles an hour over the speed limit.”

“Okay...” Kate shifted, still looking at Victoria apprehensively. “So... you got a speeding ticket?”

“Oh, no, babe.” Victoria held up the paper. A picture of Kate’s face stared back at her. “YOU did.”

“I... wait. I what?!?” Kate gaped as she looked at the paper. It was a very clear picture of her behind the wheel of Victoria’s car. “But- how-”

“By an impressive margin, too.” Victoria looked back at the sheet of paper. “Ninety-one, in a sixty-five. Twenty-six miles over the limit.” She glanced back up at Kate. “You know, a little higher and you’d’ve hit felony speeding.”

Kate blinked as she stared at the paper in Victoria’s hands. “Oh my God, I...”

“Also, Jeff Gordon called, he wants to know if you’re up for a little bit of a drive later.” Victoria’s
smirk returned. “Elon Musk, too. He was curious if you’d be up for a discussion on escape velocity-”

“Okay!” Kate interrupted. She sighed, as she glanced at her feet. “I’m sorry, Vicky. I didn’t realize I was going so fast.”

Victoria snorted in amusement. “It’s fine, babe. I’ve honestly been more excited to give you grief for it.”

“Yea, I could tell.” Kate sat down at the table. “How bad is the ticket?”

“About three hundred bucks.”

“Three hun-” Kate’s voice caught, as she stared at the ticket. “Oh... wow.”

“Relax.” Victoria picked up the paper, balling it up and tossing it towards the garbage can. “I already paid it.”

“You- Vicky!” Kate exclaimed. “I don’t want you to just buy me out of stuff like this!”

Victoria shifted in her chair. “If it helps, you can think of it as a trade-off.”

“A trade-off?”

“Well...” Victoria scratched behind her neck. “I smoked a cigarette, while you were gone.”

Kate narrowed her eyes. “... I thought you were chewing the gum again.”

“It’s this paper.” Victoria sighed. “I’ve been working on it for three days. I just... I don’t know. I know what it’s about, I have all the info, but I just... CAN’T get the words on paper.” She glanced at her fingers. “It’s frustrating.”

“That doesn’t mean contributing to a future case of lung cancer is that way to go,” Kate countered. “Vicky...”

“Hey, we agreed that me paying your speeding ticket was worth a cigarette,” Victoria pointed out.

“WE did not agree on that. YOU suggested it.” Kate folded her arms. “I love you. I want to keep you around. If paying three hundred bucks is worth you not having a cigarette, then I’ll break out my checkbook.”

Victoria smirked. “You don’t actually have a checkbook.”

“Don’t get cute.”

“SO too late for that.” Victoria got up and walked over to the fridge, removing a bottle of water. “Hey, change of subject, did you think on what we were talking about last night?”

Kate furrowed her brow. “Um...”

“Our two-year anniversary weekend?” Victoria raised an eyebrow. “Don’t tell me you forgot.”

“No,” Kate said quickly. “I just didn’t really get a chance. I do like your idea of getting away from Los Angeles, though.”

“Well, yea, totally.” Victoria sat back down, pulling her laptop closer. “Where, though? I want to stay in California, for sure.”
“Me, too.” Kate nodded. “Would you want to go to San Di-”

“No.” Victoria’s response was immediate.

Kate sighed. “San Diego is pretty big, Vicky. There’s a lot to do, and we can visit without being anywhere near my mother.”

“I don’t want to take the chance.” Victoria looked up in thought. “We could go north, hit up one of the other tourist cities. Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz, San Francisco, Sacramento...”

“I’ve never been to any of those places.” Kate leaned forward. “What about you?”

“Only Sacramento.” Victoria raised an eyebrow. “Do you want to go someplace neither of us have been? Or do you want me to be a sort-of tour guide?”

“I like the idea of us both trying something new.” Kate smiled. “Between those... honestly, I would rather hit up San Francisco. I’d love to see the Golden Gate Bridge.”

Victoria hummed. “That would be pretty cool,” she admitted. “Plus, I think it’s a requirement, that all gay people have to visit that city at some point in their lives.”

Kate snorted in amusement. “True enough. So... is that what we’re doing?”

“Maybe.” Victoria shrugged, as she opened her laptop. “We’ve got some time. Let’s keep thinking about it.”

Kate felt bad for Victoria, as the evening went on. Her assignments were mostly done by dinner. Victoria was still typing away on her laptop as Kate cooked; it seemed like every other key she hit was Delete. Her groans and grunts of frustration only got louder as the night went on, even through dinner.

“I think you need to get some sleep,” Kate finally said as nine o’clock rolled around. “You still have class tomorrow, remember?”

“Urgh.” Victoria dropped her forehead onto the table as she ran her hands over the back of her head. “I am... SO close.”

“I know.” Kate rubbed her shoulder. “Don’t you still have a couple of days?”

“I need to finish this before then.” Victoria sighed. “I have a test I need to study for, too, in a different class. I need to wrap this up so I can work on that.”

“I’m sorry, babe.”

Victoria shrugged. “It’s my fault. I decided that I wanted to be a hot-shot lawyer who was near the top of her class. Are you going to bed?”

“Yea. I’m tired.” Kate rubbed her eyes. “You’re not gonna be long, are you?”

“No.” Victoria quickly pounded out another few words on her keyboard. “Like I said, I’m almost done. I’ll be there soon.”

Kate couldn’t help but roll her eyes as she turned towards their bedroom. Be there soon, my foot, she thought with a smirk. More like a couple of hours. She’ll be drinking Red Bull for her class
tomorrow for sure.

She changed and got in bed, turning out the light, but sleep didn’t really come; she had long since found it difficult to drift off without Victoria next to her. But her girlfriend was still hammering away on her keyboard in the kitchen. And she didn’t show any signs of slowing down.

At least she’s typing more, Kate thought, amused, as she tried to relax. Sounds like she’s not hitting Backspace as much. I hope she’ll be done soon.

San Francisco. She sighed as she rolled onto her back, looking at the ceiling. Two years. I can’t believe it’s been two years. It feels like a lifetime ago. And San Francisco... I have always wanted to go visit. Maybe we-

The tablet on Victoria’s nightstand chimed, rousing Kate from her thoughts. She opened her eyes and glanced over; her girlfriend had gotten a Facebook notification. Must be someone from her study group, Kate figured as she turned back and closed her eyes. Nobody else would be up this late.

The typing in the kitchen stopped.

“Oh my God,” Victoria gasped, loud enough for Kate to hear through the door.

She opened her eyes again, frowning as she listened.

“Oh my God.” Victoria started typing again, at a much more furious pace. “Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God...”

Kate sat up in bed as her girlfriend’s computer started beeping. What in the world is she doing?

“Answer, answer, answer, answer, answer...”

The beeping stopped after a few seconds.

“Holy shit.”

Kate slowly got out of bed as whoever Victoria was talking to replied in a voice she had trouble hearing. Her girlfriend’s own voice had grown quiet, as she talked in a surprised tone.

Who in the world is she talking to? Kate frowned as she slowly opened the door. Is she on a video call? It’s almost ten o’clock at night!

“Well, they fucking should.” Kate did a double-take at her girlfriend’s language, blinking in surprise as she quietly entered the main room. Victoria was concentrating on her laptop, and didn’t notice her as she glared at the screen with folded arms. “I can’t fucking believe those two would have the balls to-”

“Vicky?” Kate asked carefully. “Who are you talking to?”

Her girlfriend glanced up, and the anger quickly faded from her face as she smiled. “Oh, hell. I’m sorry, babe. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

Kate ran her fingers through her hair as she walked around the table. The screen showed a girl with brown hair down to her shoulders and freckles... who looked incredibly familiar. “Who is that?”

Victoria slowly turned in her chair to face her, as she bit her lip. “Um... do you remember, I told you about the girl who ran away from her parents when I was in high school? The one we tore up Portland looking for?” she waved her hand at the laptop. “She just friended me on Facebook.”
Kate’s eyes grew wide as she remembered all the status updates she’d seen her girlfriend post over the past two years. That’s...

“Oh my God,” Kate gasped, as she looked at Maxine Caulfield. “Wait. You’re Max?!”

The girl smiled nervously. “So I’ve heard.”

“Max, this is my girlfriend, Kate,” Victoria introduced her. “Kate, this is Max Caulfield.”

“Oh... wow.” Kate quickly got behind Victoria to get a better look. She perched her head right over her girlfriend’s shoulder. “I guess that explains the noise. I can’t believe it. Vicky has talked so much about you!”

“She has?” Max raised her eyebrows in surprise, as her gaze flickered back to Victoria.

“Not THAT much,” Victoria objected.

“Yes, that much.” Kate edged closer. “Seriously. She wrote a paper about you for one of her law classes.”

“It was NOT about her.” Victoria spoke quickly, as she shot Kate a look. “It was about evidence gathering for criminal trials. And I only mentioned you in a few paragraphs.”

Really? Huh. Kate mentally shrugged. Maybe I should have read it closer.

“Yea, I heard you were in law school,” Max said with a smile. “How is that?”

“Incredibly boring and extremely difficult,” Victoria replied with a sigh.

Kate poked Victoria in the ribs. “Says the girl near the top of her class.”

Victoria smirked in response. “I never said I wasn’t good at it.”

Kate poked her again before she turned back to the laptop. “So where are you now?” she asked. “Are you back in Oregon? And what are you doing?”

“No,” Max said, as she shook her head. “I live in San Francisco now. I work as an office assistant.”

Kate inhaled in surprise. “San Francisco?! No way!” she exclaimed, looking at Victoria. “We were literally just planning a trip there in a couple of months for our anniversary! We totally need to go see you! How amazing is that?”

Max’s face immediately lit up. “Seriously? Wow. I’d love to see you, Victoria. It’s been ages.”

“Yea, it has. We’ll definitely meet up while we’re there.” Kate felt Victoria adjust herself in the chair. “We haven’t finalized anything yet, though.”

“Dude, that would be awesome. How long have you guys been together?”

Kate smiled again, as she thought about it. “Almost two years,” she replied dreamily, as she rested her head on Victoria’s shoulder. “We met on campus at a party.”

Victoria looked back at her and smirked. “I was at the party. You were desperately trying to melt into the wallpaper. Your friends had to drag you kicking and screaming.”

“They did not!” Kate picked her head back up and gave Victoria’s shoulder a light backhand.
The smugness in Victoria’s eyes was painful. “That’s not what Alyssa said.”

“Alyssa’s full of it.”

“I doubt it, but whatever.” Victoria looked back at the laptop. “Anyway, now that I know you’re in San Francisco, we’re definitely going to come see you. Think you can make time for us?”

Max scoffed. “Wow, let me check my busy schedule. Since, you know, I barely hang out with anyone besides my roommate and Steph—” she blinked and stopped talking.

*Steph? Wait. Isn’t she the one...*

“Steph is there?” Victoria asked, ice in her voice.

Max shifted uncomfortably, clearly not used to being on the receiving end of Victoria’s glare. “Um... yea. She got a job up here at a video game company as a designer.”

“And you’re hanging out with her.”

Max’s hand found the back of her neck as she scratched at it. “We’ve spent some time together. I’m trying to reconnect with people. Including her. And Rachel.”

_Rachel? Kate’s insides tightened. That was the other girl Vicky said she hated._

“You’re a lot nicer of a person than you ought to be,” Victoria commented, her voice still frosty. _Okay, let’s see if we can reel it back._ Kate laid her hand on Victoria’s arm, squeezing gently. “Vicky, it’s been five years,” she reminded her quietly.

“I know how long it’s been. It’s not the kind of memory you forget about.” Victoria’s voice thawed slightly, though not much. “I can’t believe you’re actually speaking to them.”

Max squirmed. “I’m... trying to move past it. It’s not easy, but... we’re making progress.”

Victoria didn’t reply for a minute, and Kate almost started to worry before she heard her sigh, the tension leaving her arm. “Well... it’s your call, I guess.”

Kate’s eye caught the clock in the corner of the screen. _Okay, we need to wrap this up_, she thought as she leaned forward to get Max’s attention. _Vicky has class tomorrow._

“Max, I’m sure you guys want to keep talking, but Vicky was supposed to come to bed an hour ago,” she informed her. “She has classes early tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll send you my number,” Victoria added with a nod “We’ll text this week and figure out where to meet up when we get there.”

“That sounds awesome.” Max smiled. “It’s gonna be great to see you.”

“You too.” Victoria waved at her. “Talk to you later, Max.”

“Bye Max!” Kate exclaimed.

Victoria reached out and ended the call, tapping the red button. “Wow,” Kate remarked quietly. “I can’t believe it. How incredible is...”

She paused as Victoria slowly turned on her chair. Her girlfriend surprised her by throwing her arms
around her in a bone crushing hug, burying her face in Kate’s chest.

“Vicky?” Kate asked carefully, as she laid her hand on her back. “Vicky, are you okay?”

She didn’t reply. Kate was about to ask again before Victoria’s breath caught, and she took a deep inhale.

“She’s alive,” Victoria whimpered.

“I know.” Kate gripped her tightly. “She’s okay, Vicky. She looked really good.”

“I thought she was...” Victoria sniffed deeply, as her voice cracked. “Oh my God, Kate, I thought she was dead...”

“She’s okay,” Kate repeated, kissing the top of Victoria’s head as she rubbed her girlfriend’s back. “She’s okay.”

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**Victoria:** Max? It’s Victoria.

**Max:** Hey!! I didn’t expect you to text back so quick.

**Victoria:** I haven’t spoken to you in five years!

**Victoria:** I want to talk to my friend!

**Max:** ... I’m sorry I didn’t get in touch sooner.

**Victoria:** It doesn’t matter. You’re here now.

**Victoria:** How are you doing? For real?

**Max:** I’m fine. I’m in a way better place than I was when I left.

**Victoria:** It seemed like it. You have your own apartment and job?

**Max:** Sort of. It’s my roommate’s apartment. I rent one of the bedrooms.

**Victoria:** Well... with rent prices in San Francisco, I guess you could do worse.

**Max:** LOL, no joke.

**Victoria:** Are you sure you don’t need ANYTHING?

**Max:** Positive. I really am okay, Victoria.

**Max:** Pretty excited that you’re gonna come up for a visit, actually.

**Victoria:** Well, Kate and I are still figuring out the dates we’re coming. But we are definitely going to be in San Francisco sometime in April.

**Max:** Let me know when. I’ll make sure I get time off to see you.

**Victoria:** You had better. I’m sure your boss can do without an office assistant for a day or two.
Max: You would think. Apparently, my filing system is too much for him to navigate on his own.

Victoria: Seriously? What, do you use Dewey Decimal or something?

Max: No. I put everything into its proper, neatly labeled folder.

Max: That’s apparently too complicated for him.

Victoria: Seems to be pretty common among business owners. My dad’s filing system equates to ‘give it to the receptionist, and trust that she knows where to put it’.

Max: Must be something they teach at business school.

Victoria: Did your boss go to Harvard, too?

Max: ... maybe they’re both just lazy.

Victoria: Seems more likely.
“I doubt it.”

“I’m telling you, it’s gonna happen.”

Officer Harriet Gonzales rolled her eyes, as she drove the squad car. “Against the Titans? It’s a fifty-fifty shot at BEST, Marty. You need to stop getting your hopes up.”

“You are such a goddamn pessimist.” Her partner sighed as he played with the computer in their car. “Hear me out, okay? First, we’ll win in Tennessee. Then we’ll probably lose to the Bears, but we’ll beat Green Bay, Jacksonville, Seattle, Ariz-”

“I’m sorry, did you just say we’re going to beat the Seahawks?” Harriet gave him an incredulous look. “Are you high or something? There’s no way we’re beating the Seahawks this year.”

“I’m telling you, that’s gonna be our upset.” Marty nodded. “Then Arizona, MAYBE we lose to Philly, then Detroit and St. Louis. Boom, playoffs.”

Harriet shook her head, bringing her eyes back to the road as she took a turn. “You’re off your rocker. This is not our year, I’m telling you that right now.”

“You are the worst goddamn fan ever, swear to Christ.”

“I prefer to be a realist.”

Their radio burped, before Marty could make a comeback. “Adam Six-Three, 911 caller is reporting theft at 12560 Baker Street, EZ Pawn Emporium.”

“That’s a pawn shop. Great.” Marty sighed, as he picked up the microphone. “Adam Six-Three responding.”

“Did he say EZ Pawn Emporium?” Harriet asked, as she turned the car around.

“Yea. You know it?”

She scoffed. “Surprised you don’t. We’ve cited them eight times in the past two years for taking in stolen merchandise.”

Marty raised his eyebrows. “It’s a fence?”

“Yes. Small-time, not really worth it to bust.” Harriet smirked. “This might be one of the most ironic calls I’ve ever gotten.”

“I’m tellin’ you, Gonzales, it wasn’t stolen merch.”
“Uh huh.” Harriet was very unconvinced as she looked around the store, which mostly consisted of power tools, TVs, older computers, and a few shelves of movies. “So you’re gonna tell me everything here is legit?”

“Course it is.” The three-hundred pound man behind the counter, who couldn’t seem to stop sweating, nodded profusely. “That’s all behind me. I’ve turned a new leaf, swear on my mother.”

“Your mother’s dead, Kenny.”

He shrugged. “I got nothin’ more important to swear on.”

“Fine.” She flipped open her notepad. “What was taken?”

“A camcorder. And an old Palm Pilot.” Kenny pointed to a shelf near the door. “That scrawny little bitch swiped ‘em and bolted. I tried to chase her down, but she was too goddamn fast.”

Harriet tried not to laugh at the mental image of Kenny running after anybody, as she jotted notes. “You got serial numbers?”

“They didn’t have any.”

She looked at him and narrowed her eyes. “Kenny, do you think I’m stupid?”

“Hey, it’s not a crime to sell stuff with missing serial numbers.”

“It is if they’re stolen,” Marty cut in. “You got pawn receipts for those items?”

Kenny shifted uncomfortably. “Somewhere around here.”

“Yea, I bet.”

“I think we’re forgetting that some bitch stole from my store.” He turned around and hit the power button on a small TV. “I got proof, see?”

“Fine.” Harriet closed her notebook. “Show us.”

He hit the play button on an old VCR, and the tape started. After several seconds of an empty store, the camera caught a girl in a black hoodie walking inside. She stopped in front of the shelf, looking around, then grabbed the stolen items and sprinted back out the entrance. Kenny waddled past the camera a few minutes later as he made a feeble attempt to catch up to the thief.

“There. I told you-”

“Shut up.” Harriet walked around the counter, pushing Kenny out of the way. “Let me see this thing.”

She rewound the tape, starting and stopping several times. Finally, she paused it right as the girl’s face was caught on camera.

“God damn it,” she muttered.

“What?” Marty looked confused. “Something wrong?”

“Come on.” Harriet put her notepad away. “We gotta go.”

“Hey!” Kenny complained, as the two officers started leaving. “What about my stuff?”
Harriet glanced over her shoulder. “Call me when you find those receipts, Kenny. And if they don’t have serial numbers, then that’s tough shit.”

“How do you know she’ll be here?”

“Because she’s always here.” Harriet parked the squad car in front of the Walgreens and turned off the engine. “The cashier who works this shift has shit for vision, so this is where she takes her fake ID to get cigarettes and booze.”

“You still haven’t told me who this is,” Marty reminded her as he got out.

“It’s complicated. I’ll explain later.” Harriet pointed to the far side of the store. “Go that way, around back. Yell once you see her, and I’ll catch her on the other side.”

He frowned. “You think she’ll run?”

“She just robbed a pawn shop, so she probably will. Especially if she’s still got that stuff on her. And be ready, she’s fast.”

With that, she split away from her partner, walking around the other side of the store. She paused just before the alley entrance and waited.

It didn’t take long. She heard Marty yell faintly, followed a few seconds later by stampeding footsteps. Just as the black hoodie flashed around the corner, she reached out and snagged it, using the girl’s own momentum to swing her around and shove her into the wall.

“OW!!” she yelped. “Fuck! Let go of me, you jack-booted mother f-”

“Shut the hell up,” Harriet snapped as she twisted the girl’s arm. “Gimme your other hand.”

“Fine, I said FINE! Cut that out!”

Harriet took hold of both wrists and slapped the handcuffs on, locking them just as Marty ran out of the alley. “Christ,” he breathed. “You weren’t kidding. She’s like a jackrabbit.”

“I know. So much potential.” The cuffs secured, she spun the girl around and yanked the hood off her head.

A brunette teenager looked back at her. Her face fell into a grimace as she finally laid eyes on Harriet. “Shit,” she muttered. “Don’t you have anything better to fuckin’ do, Gonzales?”

“I really do, Chloe.” She folded her arms. “Where is it?”

“Where’s what?”

“The stuff you stole from EZ Pawn.”

Chloe gave her a blank look. “What’s EZ Pawn?”

“The shop over on Baker you robbed an hour ago.”

“No idea what you’re talking about.”

Marty held up a black backpack, shaking it. “This yours? Because I’m pretty sure I saw you drop it, before you started running.”
The teenager looked it up and down. “Nope. Never seen it before.”

“Well, if it’s not yours, then it’s okay if I take a look inside.” He unzipped the bag, peering into the main compartment. “Huh.”

“What is it?” Harriet asked.

Marty reached inside and pulled out a Palm Pilot. “Smaller than it looked on the security footage.”

“That’s not mine,” Chloe said immediately. “I saw that backpack on the ground. Never touched it.”

Marty pulled out a bottle of whiskey next. “So when I go inside the Walgreens and check their tapes, you won’t be wearing it?” he asked. “Or have purchased this bottle?”

Chloe sighed and closed her eyes, as she leaned into the wall. “Man... fuck you.”

“HEY!!” Harriet jerked Chloe’s shoulder, the girl’s eyes popping back open. “We have actual crimes we need to stop! Victims that need our help! Do you really think I have nothing better to do than chase down my Lieutenant’s kid?!”

The teenager’s eyes flashed angrily. “I’m NOT his fucking kid.” Chloe snarled.

“That much has never been more obvious.” Harriet grabbed her arm and yanked her forward, walking her towards the squad car. “Get in,” she ordered, as Marty opened the back door. “And you better be quiet the whole ride, or I swear to God we’ll go over every speed bump we can find.”

So goddamn close.

Chloe sighed, as she kept her eyes closed and leaned against the window in the back of the squad car. *Knew I should’ve got booze later,* she thought to herself miserably. *Or found someplace else to smoke. Shit, I didn’t even see a fuckin’ camera at that pawn shop.*

She smirked. *I must be losing my touch.*

*Ah, hell. The smirk vanished. I promised Izzy a bottle of Jack Daniels for her old laptop. Now how the fuck am I going to pay her?*

The car finally stopped, and she heard Harriet hit the parking brake. She opened her eyes, looking around, and noticing that they were not in the station’s parking lot.

“Oh, come on!!” she exclaimed, as her heart dropped into her stomach. “You had to take me home?! My mom’s not gonna be back for hours! Why can’t we just go to the fuckin’ station or something?!”

Harriet got out of the car and opened up the back door, glaring at Chloe. “Because like your dad, believe it or not, I actually care about your future.”

“He’s NOT my fucking father.” Chloe glared back. “So go fuck yourself.”

“Get out of the car.”

“Make me, bitch.”

Harriet reached inside, grabbing Chloe’s jacket and dragging her out. The teenager immediately tried to go limp, but Harriet seemed to be ready for that; she snaked her hand under Chloe’s elbow, grabbing the back of her hoodie and forcing her arms over her head.
“OW!!” Chloe yelped, as pain radiated through her shoulder. “FUCK!!”


Chloe grit her teeth and tried to resist, but Harriet had the advantage over her; the officer simply exerted more pressure, and the pain in her shoulder almost doubled. She managed to march forward with her head down, Harriet forcing her towards the front door. She finally stopped, her head almost facing the welcome mat as Harriet rung the bell.

The door opened a few seconds later, and Chloe saw a pair of black shoes appear. A sigh heaved a few seconds later. “Now what?”

She glanced up at the man who lived in her house, her most mortal enemy, and glared at him with hostile eyes. “You have too many Stormtroopers, Mein Fuhrer,” she growled.

Harriet tweaked her arm again, and she yelped in pain. “What did I say about shutting the hell up?” the officer snapped.

“Let go of me!” Chloe yelled. “This is police brutality!”

“Not yet, it’s not.”

David rubbed his face. “What did she do?” he asked, his voice tired.

“The owner of EZ Pawn got her on camera stealing his merchandise.” Harriet lifted the backpack in her other hand, shaking it; they listened to the contents rattle around inside. “And she bought a bottle of whiskey from that Walgreens on Fourth.”

Chloe’s stepfather shot her a look. “I thought we told you to stop going there.”

“I make it a point not to listen to fascist dickbags,” she retorted, bracing herself for the pain; as predicted, Harriet flexed her arm again, and she grit her teeth.

David sighed again, looking at Harriet. “You’re not going to take her to the station?”

“It was EZ Pawn,” Harriet reminded him, though Chloe didn’t get the reference. “Unless you say otherwise, Lieutenant, she’s your problem.”

“I appreciate that.” He nodded. “I’ll take her.”

Harriet handed him the backpack, then used a key to undo the handcuffs. Chloe pushed herself upright, rubbing her shoulder and glaring at the officer. “I’m filing a complaint with Internal Affairs.”

“Go for it. Badge number one-three-eight-eight-nine.” Harriet put her cuffs back in the holster. “See you tomorrow, Lieutenant.”

Chloe watched her head back to her car, finally turning back to David. “Cool. I’m leaving now.”


“Fuck you.”

“I have Harriet’s number in my cell phone.” He patted his pocket. “I can have her re-arrest you in a few minutes.”

She fumed, as she stood on the porch, glancing back at the squad car; Harriet was back in the
driver’s seat, but hadn’t left, seemingly content to sit there and watch. “Fine,” she seethed, stalking back inside. “Then I’m going to my room.”

“Sit down, Chloe.”

“Fuck off.”

“SIT DOWN!!”

His barking order actually made her flinch, and she hated him all the more for it. She managed to maintain a steely glare, though, as she parked herself on the couch.

David unzipped the backpack and started pulling stuff out of it. First was the bottle of whiskey, followed by the Palm Pilot. Then was the camcorder, two empty packs of cigarettes, a folding knife, a Zippo, a black marker, and a can of red spray paint.

He set everything down and looked over it quickly. Then he picked up the can of spray paint. “You know, Chloe, you’re probably one of the smartest teenagers in your school,” he started.

“Good for me. You should throw a party.”

“Maybe if you could manage to keep your grades up, we would.” He shook his head. “Which actually disappoints me a little, that this is the best you could come up with.”

With that, he grabbed the bottom of the can and twisted. The end popped off, and a Ziploc baggie fell out of the concealed hiding space inside.

“Dude!” Chloe yelled. “What the fuck?!”

He ignored her, as he picked up the baggie of marijuana. He opened it and gave it a quick sniff. “Christ,” he muttered, looking back at her. “This isn’t even good stuff. I don’t know what you paid, but it was too much.”

“I’ll remember that for next time,” Chloe snapped. “Are you done? Can I fucking go now?”

David dropped the baggie down on the table. “Why did you steal from a pawn shop?”

“’Cause it was there.”

“I’m serious.” He folded his arms. “Do you even know what you’re risking? You could have gone to jail, Chloe! If it was another officer that caught you-”

“Then they would have brought me straight here just like Gonzales did, so they could kiss your ass.” Chloe folded her arms as she leaned back into the couch. “That girl either wants a promotion or your dick.”

“This isn’t funny, Chloe.”

“No. It’s not. Which is why I am SO over this conversation.”

“Is that what you want, then?” David asked. “For me to let the next officer who puts cuffs on you bring you to lockup, so you can be sent in front of a judge?”

She shrugged. “I don’t give a fuck.”

“You and I both know that’s not true.” He sighed. “I want to help, Chloe. Please tell me how I-”
“I don’t WANT your fucking help!” she yelled. “I don’t need some pretend-daddy dickweasel teaching me life lessons! Can I fucking go now or what?!”

He looked at her, blinking silently. He sighed after a few seconds. “Fine. Go to your room,” he said, waving his hand weakly. “You can deal with your mother when she gets home.”

“Finally,” she growled, getting up. She reached forward and snatched the Zippo from the table.

“Chloe, put that-”

“Fuck yourself.” She spun on her heel and walked away, stomping up to her room and slamming the door.

_Christ._ Chloe sighed, running her hand through her hair. _Okay. Give it a few minutes, so he’ll go do whatever. Then I can go get my truck._ She made her way to her window, stepping around her mattress and flipping the latch before she pulled it open.

Or tried to, anyway.

“What the...” She tugged again, but the window was stuck. She leaned in closer, peering at the bottom of the frame. And finally seeing four screws, perfectly spaced, that had been drilled into the wood from the other side.

Chloe could feel the heat rising in her face as she spun back to her door. “FUCK YOU!!” she screamed.

Silence answered her. In her anger, she could almost feel her step-asshole smirk.

Chapter End Notes

Another quick little break from the others. I’ve been posting the daily chapters so I could hurry up and get to this part :)
“Miss, put it away.”

“No.”

“This isn’t a game. Cut it out.”

“Eat me.”

Harriet stood up. “I got this,” she told the officer working the camera, as she walked up to Chloe, who continued to hold up her middle finger. “We’ve got two ways of doing this,” she said in a menacing voice. “Easy or hard. And the hard way involves full-body restraints.”

“Bring it on, bitch.” Chloe turned her glare to her. “I can take you.”

“Not after I use a taser, you won’t.” Harriet didn’t budge. “Put the finger away. Now.”

Chloe kept it up for a few more seconds, before she put it down and held up her placard. Harriet stepped away so the officer could snap the picture.

“Good.” Harriet took her by the arm and put the handcuffs back on, pulling her out the door. “Keep walking.”

“I am.”

“Faster.”

She grumbled but complied, as Harriet escorted her down the hallway. “Where are we going?” she finally bit out.

“Here.” Harriet turned her and pushed her into an interrogation room, then forced her unto a chair. She undid the cuffs on one hand, so Chloe could sit correctly, and closed them around a bar that ran the length of the table.

That was when Chloe noticed the other occupant of the room. Her mother, sitting across the table from her with arms folded. “I’ll give you two a few minutes,” Harriet said, closing the door behind her as she left.

Neither of them spoke. Joyce kept eye contact, as she stared across the table. Chloe did, too, as she waited.

“What are you doing?” Joyce finally asked.

“Waiting for you to say something.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it.” Joyce sighed, uncrossing her arms and leaning on the table. “I mean, driving without a license? Really?!”

Chloe shrugged. “You won’t take me to get one.”
“Do you even KNOW how much trouble you’re in?!”

“No, Joyce. Between the handcuffs, mugshot, and fingerprinting, I really have no idea.”

“This isn’t funny, Chloe!” her mother exclaimed. “You’re going to have to go see a judge tomorrow! This is going on your permanent record!”

Chloe scoffed. “Whatever.”

“Are you really so casual about this?” Joyce asked. “Why? Why are you doing this, Chloe? Why don’t you CARE?”

“Oh, please.” Chloe tried to cross her arms. but failed, due to her cuffed wrist. She settled for resting her hand on her opposite arm. “Don’t fucking sit there and pretend like you do.”

“What?” Joyce whispered incredulously. “Why in the world do you think that I don’t? Of course I do!”

“Yea, I can tell, when you forget about Dad so quick and drop his memory for step-douche.”

Joyce blinked. “You’re ruining your life because you’re upset that I got over your father?”

“After less than one year, Joyce? Really?” Chloe shot back. “How fucking depressing WAS your marriage?”

Her mother sighed. “So. That’s really it? You went and got yourself arrested because you’re mad that I found love again?”

“I wasn’t trying to get arrested. I just wanted to go get cigarettes.”

“Chloe, you NEED to stop smoking those-”

“No, I don’t,” Chloe retorted. “And I’m certainly not going to take the hypocritical advice from a woman who keeps a secret pack in her car.”

“It’s illegal, Chloe!” Joyce exclaimed. “Do you know how much trouble the people who sell those to you can get in?”

Chloe shrugged. “Not my fault they can’t check an ID properly. Besides, what do you care? Shit like that keeps Dickhead in business anyway.”

Joyce sighed, as she rubbed her nose. “Chloe, he’s your stepfather. Please try to-”

“I’m not going to try to do shit,” Chloe snapped. “He’s not my dad, and him pretending to be is getting really fucking aggravating.”

“He doesn’t WANT to be your father, Chloe!” Joyce begged. “He just wants to help! He cares about you, and wants to-”

“Well, I don’t!” Chloe yelled back. “I don’t give a shit what he wants. I just want him to leave. Or leave me alone!”

Joyce blinked several times, before she deflated into her chair. “… I don’t know what to do, Chloe,” she whispered.

Chloe didn’t answer. She sat across from her mother and fumed silently.
“I don’t know what you want. I don’t know how to help you.” Joyce took a second to wipe her eyes. “I’ve read books, I talked to professionals, and I still don’t know what to do to. And I don’t know if I can even keep you out of trouble. Driving without a license? Chloe, where did you even GET that truck you were driving?!”

“From the junkyard.”

Joyce furrowed her brow. “What junk- wait. That one you ran away to last year?!?”

“Yea.”

Her mother blinked, as she slowly dropped her head into her arms. Chloe furrowed her brow as she watched Joyce sit motionless for several seconds. “What are you doing?” she finally asked.

No answer.

“Seriously, what the hell are-”

Joyce’s breath finally caught, and Chloe figured out what was going on. For the first time in weeks, a wave of guilt watched over her.

_Shit. I didn’t mean to make her cry._

“Fuck,” she muttered, looking down at her lap. “Joyce...” she paused and heaved a sigh. “Mom. Please stop.”

“You’ve had a truck for months.” Joyce picked her head back up, and Chloe could see the trail her tears left down her face. “My daughter has had her own car for almost a year. She’s been driving a truck with no airbags around this city, with no license or insurance. And I had absolutely no idea.” She sniffled, as she wiped her face. “Your father would be so upset with me if he could see this.”

“I’m pretty sure he’d be mad at me, not you,” Chloe mumbled.

“You’re the child, Chloe. I’m the parent.” She wiped her eyes again. “What do you want, Chloe? What am I supposed to do to help you?”

Chloe bit her lip, before shrugging silently.

The door opened after a few seconds, and Harriet strolled back in. “Time’s up,” she announced. “I’ve got to get her to lockup for the night.”

Joyce stood as the officer undid Chloe’s handcuffs, re-doing them behind her back. She managed to get her arms around Chloe’s shoulders as she came around the table. “David said you’ll be here overnight,” she said quietly. “We’ll get you after you see the judge tomorrow morning.”

“Fine,” Chloe replied, as her mother let go. “See you tomorrow.”

Harriet brought her down a new hallway she’d never been down before, despite her frequent appearances in the station. It was starkly lit, the halogen lights bouncing harshly over the white cinderblock walls.

“Move,” the officer ordered, as she pushed Chloe by her shoulder. “Come on. Faster.”

“Fuck you,” Chloe muttered.
She found herself whipped around and shoved into the wall, gasping in pain as Harriet twisted her cuffed wrist. “OW!” she yelped. “What the fuck are you doing?!”

“Listen very carefully, you little shit, and yell all you want because there’s no cameras in this hallway and we’re the only ones here.” Harriet tweaked her wrist again, as Chloe yelped. “Your mother has the patience of a saint. Your stepfather wants nothing more than to have a relationship with you. And you pissing all over them is upsetting two very good people.”

“Nobody fuckin’ asked you,” Chloe snapped, struggling against Harriet. “Let go of me, bitch, so I can-”

The officer twisted Chloe’s entire arm, bending the elbow to almost a ninety-degree angle as she cried out in pain. “I didn’t say you could talk,” she replied coldly. “As far as I’m concerned, the best thing that could happen to your family is for the judge to send you to juvie, so they get a break from your behavior for a few months.”

She alleviated some of the pressure from Chloe’s arm, allowing her to breath for a second. “But that’s not going to happen. Your stepfather, for some fucking reason known only to him, has already spoken to the judge. He called in a favor that any other cop would have saved for the rainiest of days. Instead of forcing you to pay a fine in the thousands and giving you suspended sentence, the judge is going to slap you for a hundred hours of community service.”

Chloe grit her teeth. “I didn’t ask for-”

“No. You fucking didn’t.” Harriet spun her around, pinning her to the wall by her collar as she glared into Chloe’s eyes. “You’ve done absolutely nothing to fucking deserve it. And every cop in this building, save for your step-father, thinks you’re a spoiled little brat.”

Chloe narrowed her eyes. “You don’t know shit about me.”

“Oh, I know all about you,” Harriet mocked. “The poor little white girl who can’t get over her dead daddy.”

“Fuck you,” Chloe snapped, as her nostrils flared. “Don’t talk about my dad.”

“God, you really are so fucking selfish. You ever think that maybe you’re not the only one who lost him?”

Chloe blinked. “Fuck does THAT mean?”

“You ever stop and wonder how your saint of a mother feels about losing her husband?” Harriet asked. “Ever wonder what she felt, when he died?”

“She was clearly fine, given that she hopped right on the next dick that stood at attention for-”

Harriet’s fists pushed into Chloe’s neck, choking the teenager. “Don’t ever disrespect your mother,” she said flatly. “Understood?”

“Fuck you,” Chloe croaked out.

The officer pushed harder. “Do you understand?” she repeated.

“Yes! Fine!” Chloe gasped.

Harriet relaxed, letting Chloe cough out a breath. “Christ,” the officer muttered. “You really don’t
even think Joyce was upset about losing her husband. And on top of everything, she had to deal with a spoiled little snob who decided that she was more interested in acting out than helping her mother.” She shook her head. “No wonder your mom fell in love with the first man willing to build a relationship with the two of you.”

“He didn’t-”

“I wasn’t asking a question, you immature little shit.” Harriet jerked her away from the wall and pushed her down the hallway. “Walk. We’re late enough as it is.”

Chloe didn’t speak, as Harriet dragged her through the door into the holding cells. She took her to the first one that had several women inside. “Open on five!” she shouted, and an officer opened the door for them. She shoved Chloe inside, and had the door closed.

“Stick your hands back through the hole,” Harriet ordered. “Or have the cuffs on all night. Your call.”

Chloe shot her another glare, as she backed up and stuck her hands through the hole in the bars. Harriet took the cuffs off, placing them back into her belt.

“See you tomorrow, brat.” She smirked. “Try to get some sleep, so you don’t look like shit in front of the judge.”

“Couldn’t look worse than you.”

Harriet shook her head as she walked away. *That was weak,* Chloe thought miserably, as she turned to survey the cell. Several other women sat on the benches that lined the wall, occupying them completely. There was no place left to sit, and as they looked over her lazily, none of them showed any signs of moving. *Well, fuck you all, too.*

She sighed, sliding to the floor in the corner of the cell and leaning her head against the bars.

... *I know mom was upset when Dad died.*

*Bitch.*

She couldn’t help being nervous, as she looked at the bars. *Jesus, this fucking sucks,* she thought morosely. *Can’t believe that cop actually arrested me. And now I have to go see a judge? They really don’t have anything better to do, huh?*

A slow breath escaped her nostrils. *... I can’t believe David actually talked to the judge already. Wonder what kind of shit you have to do for a judge to owe you a favor.*

*Hell, he probably only did it because Mom asked him to.*

Chloe still felt a twinge of guilt, as she remembered her mother crying in the interrogation room. *Fuck. I... guess I could have done a little better.*

*Dammit.*
Mr. & Mrs. Madsen:

The purpose of this letter is to serve as an official notice that your child, Chloe Elizabeth Price, is hereby expelled from Bay Central High School. Additionally, your child is barred from attending any primary schools in the district. This expulsion is in effect as of January 21st, 2012.

The exact charges are as follows:

- Excessive absences, numbering nineteen through this school year to date
- Seventeen instances of skipping classes
- Malicious activation of the fire alarm
- Disrespecting faculty members
- Vandalism of students' private property
- Vandalism of school property
- Smoking tobacco on school grounds
- Possession of alcohol on school grounds
- Possession of a controlled substance (marijuana) on school grounds

Unfortunately, due to the nature and frequency of your child’s offenses, this expulsion cannot be appealed.

Your child’s current academic credits and GPA information are detailed on page 2 of this letter. Note that they will transfer to any high school in California, or to any GED facility. On page 3 of this letter you will find a list of alternative schools for troubled youths; bear in mind that per relevant statutes, minors in the state of California must remain in school or be involved in home-schooling until they turn seventeen years old.

Regrettably,

Joseph Kearney, Principal

“I’m not sure about this, David.”

“I know.” He sighed, as he reached across the table and held his wife’s hand. “I know it’s a strong step, sweetie. But... I don’t know how else we can motivate her.”

Joyce scratched as her thumb, as she looked upstairs. “What if she calls our bluff?” she asked quietly. “I know she’s frustrating. I know we don’t have any other options. But... I can’t. I can’t kick my daughter out of our house.” She bit her lip. “And she knows that, I think, deep down.”

He nodded. “It’s just in our back pocket,” he assured her. “If she resists, we can break it out. But I really think, when she hears her choices, she’ll go for it.”

“You really think so?” Joyce still looked troubled. “She’s never had a job, David. And if she hated
school, I don’t see why she’d bother trying to get a GED.”

“I... really hope so,” he admitted. “She has no reason not to, especially when we tell her that we’ll pay for it.”

“Me too.” Joyce sighed, as she ran her hands through her hair. “But kicking her out... oh, David, I’m not sure I can say that to her. I really don’t know if I have it in me.”

He took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. “I will,” he finally said. “I’ll do it. I’m already her personal villain anyway. Just let me go up, and try to talk some sense into her.”

Joyce finally cracked a smirk. “You think she’ll listen?”

“She has gotten a little better, you have to admit that.”

“I thought so.” Joyce looked at the letter between them again, the official notice from their daughter’s high school that finalized her expulsion. “I thought we were making progress.”

David sighed. “Not everyone cares for school,” he reminded her. “And Principal Kearney was not exactly an understanding administrator. I didn’t like dealing with him very much.”

“I know.” Joyce looked back at him. “It was a miracle you kept her there as long as she was, really.”

“I tried my best.” David nodded. “Alright, I’ll go talk to her. I’ll call if I need you.”

With that, he stood, pushing his chair in before he started up the stairs. He gave some thought to what he would say, as he made his way to Chloe’s room and knocked.

“Who is it?”

He rolled his eyes. “Does it matter?”

“... fuck do you want?”

“To talk.”

“Go ahead. I’m listening.”

_She must think I’m stupid._ David smirked as he twisted the knob, pushing the door open.

Chloe’s room had devolved rapidly, from the first time he’d seen it. It had used to be neat, if a little cluttered, with only a few posters on the walls. It had since turned into an array of randomness and confusion that could only be interpreted by its occupant. Hundreds of pictures were hung on the walls, overlapping so much that the original paint color was almost completely hidden. The bookcase was crammed with computer parts that he couldn’t identify, and didn’t want to know the origins of. Her desk had a laptop in addition to a PC that had belonged to her father, and there was a second laptop in Chloe’s lap.

And his stepdaughter was reclined on the mattress that lay on the floor, headphones halfway around her ears.

“Dammit,” she muttered.

“Yea, nice try.” He folded his arms. “You’ve played that trick before, remember?”

“I do now.” She dropped the headphones and brushed her blue hair from her eyes; Joyce had almost
had a stroke when she’d seen the new hairstyle. David wouldn’t admit it out loud, but he actually thought the color looked good on her, as Chloe crossed her arms. “What do you want?”

“Like I said.” He reached over and dragged the computer chair towards him, sitting down. “To talk.”

“What about?”

He shifted, getting comfortable. “Have you decided what you’re going to do for a job?”

Chloe sighed, as she looked down. “No,” she admitted. “I haven’t.”

“Have you looked?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“The paper.”

David shook his head. “The paper doesn’t have job listings anymore, Chloe. Try again.”

“... fine. I didn’t.” Chloe looked back up. “So. When are you two kicking me out?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Dude, I’m not fucking stupid.” She slouched into her pillows. “If you’re going to do it, just get it over with. Although I’d appreciate a head start on looking for a place to crash.”

“Chloe, I-”

Her laptop beeped, drawing her attention. “Hang on,” she said, sitting up. “Fucking finally.”

David frowned. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to backdoor my way into this website.” She started typing rapidly, her eyes not leaving the screen. “They tried to tell me I had to pay ten bucks to get a full-resolution photo. Fuck that.”

He frowned. “Ten bucks? What kind of photo is it?”

“Oh, you know. More of that lesbian porn I love so much.”

He shook his head. Chloe had been dropping the ‘lesbian’ bit in conversations for months, since she’d come out, in an attempt to make him uncomfortable. He knew what she was trying to do, though, and simply refused to rise to the bait; he truly couldn’t have cared less about her sexuality.

And I think she’s trying to distract me from the fact that she’s hacking into someone else’s website. ... please, God, do not have the FBI knock on our door tomorrow morning.

“Seriously, Chloe, what is it?”

“Fine. It’s a desktop background I want, but they only have it available for free with a big-ass watermark.” She shrugged. “Not anymore, though. Finally got it. Suckers are using a server that’s got a security hole the size of a cable car.”

He watched her type, and a new line of thinking occurred to him. After a few quick seconds of thought, he decided to shift strategies. “I always forget how much you know computers,” he
“Everyone underestimates the dropouts,” Chloe countered lazily.

“You aren’t a dropout. You were expelled for vandalizing three cars.”

“Yea, well, if you heard what some of those fuckers were saying about Joyce, you would have vandalized them too.”

He sighed. “I don’t want to argue anymore, Chloe. Quite simply, you got lucky enough.”

She frowned. “How do you figure?”

“You finished the first half of your senior year.” David nodded. “All your credits will transfer for a GED.”

“A GED? Why am I-”

“Because it’s going to be a lot harder to find a job without one.” He paused, taking a deep breath as he gathered his thoughts. “Chloe, we’re not going to kick you out. But your mother and I think that if you’re just going to be lounging around the house, it might be appropriate to charge you rent.”


“Wait until I finish, before you start to yell. Please.”

She looked indignant, at being asked to wait, but Chloe pressed her lips together and stayed silent. “As I said, rent to live here is not out of line,” he continued. “But. We’re willing to make a deal.”

Chloe folded her arms. “What kind of deal?”

“Your month-to-month lease will start now. And it will be for one dollar a month.” He nodded. “But only so long as you’re doing one of two things; furthering your education, or working. If you’re not doing either, it’s going to go up.”

“Dude, how am I supposed to pay for-”

“Your mother and I will pay for your GED,” he explained. “And... if it’s something you’re interested in... we’ll talk about paying for a trade school.”

She blinked. “A trade school? For what?”

He gestured to the laptop in her hands. “You clearly know what you’re doing with those. Why not start there?”

“With... what? Computers?”

David nodded. “I certainly don’t know how to hack into a website.”

Chloe looked at the laptop in her hands. “I... didn’t know there were trade schools for that.”

He took a deep breath and stood. “I’ll tell you what, Chloe, since I know you don’t like any of my suggestions out of hand. Research it, and figure out what you want. If it’s something that’s not too expensive... then your mother and I will talk about paying for it.”

“... really?”
The glimmer in her eyes actually made his heart race, for a second. He managed to keep the excitement from his face. “Yes. Like I said, figure it out and make a decision.” He smirked. “And try not to reject it just because I came up with it.”

Chloe didn’t reply, as he walked out and closed the door behind him.

The teenager didn’t usually make it down for breakfast. Even when she had been going to school; the best they got was her rushing through the kitchen, occasionally grabbing a bagel or muffin on her way out the door. And on the weekends, she never got out of bed before noon.

As David and Joyce ate, though, they were both surprised to hear footsteps coming down the stairs just after eight in the morning. They had just enough time to exchange glances of surprise before Chloe walked into the kitchen with her laptop, wearing sweatpants and a white tank top.

She sat down in front of the, biting her lip before she looked at David. “Were you serious?” she asked quietly. “About helping with classes, I mean.”

He put his fork down and interlaced his fingers. “What did you find?”

“There’s... a couple of certifications I can get,” she said. “They could get me a decent job working with computers. And the website I looked at said there are a bunch of companies hiring around here.”

“What kind of certifications? And how much?”

Chloe opened her laptop and showed him the website. “These guys certify people to work on all different servers; Linux, Dell, whatever. But they recommend a bunch of training first, before I take the tests.” She squirmed, as she took the laptop back. “It’s... a couple of thousand bucks, though. And another few hundred for the exams.”

David looked at Joyce again, who nodded. “I think we can do that,” he agreed. “But you’re going to need your GED first.”

“Yea, I know.” Chloe sighed. “Um... what do I do, for that?”

“There are some tests you need to take,” Joyce said. “We’ll find you the study materials.”

“Is this what you want to do?” David asked. “You’ve thought about it?”

“I was looking at it most of last night.” Chloe paused, then reached for the pocket of her sweatpants. She came back up with a crumpled bill. “Here.”

“What’s that?”

“First month’s rent.”

With that, she closed her laptop and stood, heading back for the stairs. David and Joyce listened to her return to her room and close the door.

Joyce immediately pinched her forearm. “What are you doing?” David asked.

“Making sure I’m not dreaming.”

Joyce: Your GED results came in!
Chloe: Cool. I’ll be back in an hour or so.

Joyce: Don’t you want to come back and see them?

Chloe: Just tell me what they are. I know you already opened the envelope.

Joyce: Yea, I did. Congratulations! You passed!

Chloe: Woo hoo. Another checkmark.

Joyce: Where are you? Please tell me you’re not at that Walgreens again.

Chloe: No, I’m not at the Walgreens.

Joyce: So where are you?

Chloe: You don’t trust that I’m staying out of trouble?

Joyce: Kiddo, I just want to know that you’re being smart.

Joyce: You’ve made such amazing progress. I don’t want you to fall back now.

Chloe: ... I’m at the library.

Joyce: YOU ARE???

Chloe: Try not to act so shocked.

Joyce: I’m sorry. What are you doing there?

Chloe: Checking out a book on SQL certifications.

Chloe: This is a lot more complicated than I thought.

Joyce: Sweetie, please tell me you’re not having second thoughts.

Chloe: No. This is just a lot more technical that I figured. There’s a lot to study in here.

Joyce: Is it interesting to you?

Chloe: I don’t know, a little?

Joyce: Then it won’t be nearly as bad as your GED materials.

Joyce: Which, judging from your scores, you looked at a lot harder than you were letting on.

Chloe: Well, I just wanted to get it over with.

Joyce: I’m still proud of you, kiddo.

Chloe: ... thanks, Mom.
“You want another?”

Chloe nodded at the bartender as she spun her Zippo mindlessly, watching it twirl as she sat on the stool. “Yes. And for future reference, you can bring me a new one whenever I start running low.”

“Sure.” The woman frowned, tilting her head. “You okay?”

“I’m fine.” Chloe picked up the glass, swallowing the last of her beer. “Been a long day.”

“... alright then.” The bartender took her empty glass, bringing a full one back after a couple of minutes. “You’re not driving, are you?”

She shook her head. “I’m gonna Uber home.”

“Okay. Let me know if you want anything else.”

Chloe nodded, peeping at the bartender’s backside as she walked away. Nice, she thought idly as she sipped her new beer.

Her phone lit up, and she opened the new text.

Joyce: You sure you’re okay, sweetie?

Chloe: I’m fine, Mom. It’s not my first breakup.

Joyce: I know you liked her.

Chloe: Yea, I thought I did.

Joyce: What are you doing now?

Chloe: Relaxing at home, watching TV.

Joyce: Can I call you?

Chloe: Let’s do it tomorrow instead.

She shook her head as she put her phone in her pocket, then took a sip of her beer. “Christ,” she muttered, sighing heavily. “Can a girl not just drink in peace anymore?”

Nobody answered her, of course. She was by herself, at one end of the bar; the few other patrons were at the opposite end, watching something on the wall-mounted TV. And given the mood she was in, that suited her just fine.

Chloe finished her second beer a few minutes later and waved for the bartender, who immediately brought over a third. Before she could pick it up, though, a hand came out of nowhere and smacked the glass over. A river of beer flowed into her lap before she could stop it.
“What the FUCK?!” she snapped, jumping up and turning to see bright red hair, buzzed short on one side and flowing past the girl’s shoulder on the other. “Oh, Christ, not you.”

“What the fuck is right!” Fiona glared at her, while Chloe looked at her ex-girlfriend indifferently. “Where the hell have you been? I’ve been trying to call you for two days!”

“I get that it’s a foreign concept for you, but I was working.” Chloe turned, nudging her Zippo out of the spilled beer before grabbing a handful of napkins and trying to wipe her jeans. “I had to turn in nine hours of overtime because some dickhead blew up six servers in one building.”

“And what?! You’ve just been ignoring me?!”

“That’s generally what you do with ex’s, yea.”

“We are NOT broken up,” Fiona fumed. “I want to talk about this.”

“I’m not interested in whatever you have to say.” Chloe dropped the napkins in the puddle on top of the bar, before turning back to Fiona and folding her arms. “I thought I made that very clear.”

“Over a fucking text?!” Fiona waved her phone angrily in front of Chloe’s face. “Who the fuck breaks up with a text?! What are you, twelve?!”

Chloe shrugged. “ Didn’t feel like seeing you. Still don’t actually.” She glanced over her shoulder at the bartender, who was watching the two of them closely. “Can I get another beer please?”

“Are you kidding me?! I’m standing here trying to talk to you about this!”

She glared back at Fiona. “You stole two hundred bucks from my nightstand,” she said frostily. “There’s nothing to talk about.”

“I did not!”

“My webcam turns on when there’s movement in my apartment while I’m at work,” Chloe informed her. “I saw you do it, you fucking moron. Also, I don’t remember giving you a key to my place; want to tell me how you got it?”

Fiona flinched, her face flushing. “I needed the cash! Really bad!”

“No, you didn’t.” Chloe sat back down on her bar stool. “I went by your condo after, to try and get my money back, and saw your little purchase.” She tilted her head. “What were those lines of white powder, coke or speed? I can’t tell the difference.”

Fiona ignored the question, as she crossed her arms. “I’ll repay you!”

“With what? The job you don’t have?” Chloe scoffed. “Besides, it’s only partially about the money and drugs. The rest is about the girls you were fucking on the side.”

“I was not!”

“Then why does Heather think you eat pussy like it’s your last meal?”

Fiona blinked, clearly taken aback. “Did... you fucking bitch! Did you hack my Facebook?!”

“It wasn’t hard.” Chloe turned back to the bar, moving her Zippo back into place. “I mean, password-one-two-three? Put some fuckin’ effort into it, at least. Now go away, I was drinking.”
“HEY!” Fiona slammed her hand down on top of the lighter, snatching it. “Don’t you fucking ignore-”

Chloe grabbed the other girl’s hand, squeezing her knuckles as hard as she could. Fiona yelped as she reflexively dropped the Zippo, and Chloe threw her hand away. “You touch that again and I’ll break you like a twig,” she snapped, glaring so intently that Fiona recoiled. “We’re done. Get lost.”

“We’re not done! You don’t get to break up with me!” Fiona exclaimed, her voice reaching an extremely high pitch. “Nobody breaks up with me!!’

“I just did.” Chloe shrugged, picking up the lighter and sticking it in her pocket. “But you can say it was your idea, if it’ll make you feel better on Facebook. So fuck off, before I file a police report for petty theft.”

Fiona’s face turned a deep shade of red, and Chloe could practically feel her vibrating. “FUCK YOU!!” she screeched, finally turning and stalking away. She slammed the door of the bar so hard that pictures on the wall rattled.

The bartender came back after a few seconds. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Chloe sighed. “Can I have that beer replaced, please?”

“Yea.” The woman bit her lip. “It’s... I’m sorry, it’s not my place. But do you think you should get your key back from her? I’m only asking because my sister does drugs, and I don’t let her in my apartment because she likes to steal stuff.”

“Already changed the locks.” Chloe nodded. “And sent an anonymous tip to the cops, about her drug habit.”

A smirk broke out over the bartender’s face. “Nice touch.”

“I thought so. Where are we on that beer?”

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**David:** If she doesn’t have a job, it was probably meth. Cocaine is expensive.

**Chloe:** Even with an extra $200?

**David:** That wouldn’t get her very much. How long were the lines?

**Chloe:** I didn’t go inside and measure. Couple of inches, maybe?

**David:** I’d still give it 90/10 odds that it was meth.

**David:** You made an anonymous tip?

**Chloe:** Yea.

**David:** Well, I’m sorry to say it probably won’t amount to much; the SFPD is swamped as it is. They’ll probably just file it away.

**Chloe:** Figured.

**David:** What about the money?
Chloe: It’s worth $200 to never see or deal with her again.

Chloe: I’m just glad I didn’t let her move in with me.

David: She was trying to?

Chloe: She wanted to. Pretty badly. Was always complaining that she couldn’t find work, and was having trouble paying her rent.

Chloe: Guess I know why now.

Chloe: She actually asked me if I could store some things for her, and showed up with a fucking U-haul.

David: ... wow.

Chloe: Yea, talk about a dodged bullet.

David: Are you sure you don’t want me to make a call? I can have the Anti-Drug unit knock on her door.

Chloe: No. I just want to do my best to forget that she exists.

Chloe: By the way, if case it wasn’t clear before; not a WORD of this to Mom.

David: Neither of us wants to make her worry, Chloe. My lips are sealed.

Chloe had an exasperated look on her face a week later, as she held a clipboard out to a client. “I installed a software patch. And did a routine inspection.”

“A patch for what?”

“It fixed a couple of bugs, and closed a security flaw in your firewall.”

The middle manager looked at her disdainfully, glancing between her and the clipboard. “Those sound like minor issues.”

“They are. Please sign this.”

“I didn’t agree to pay to fix minor issues that don’t affect our operations.”

Chloe sighed heavily. “You did, actually. Part of the retainer your head office pays for includes regular maintenance and software upgrades.”

“Then why am I signing an invoice?”

“It’s not an invoice. It’s verification that I was there, and performed the services listed.”

“How do I know you actually did?”

With her free hand, Chloe opened her laptop bag and removed a tablet, bringing up an application. She turned it around a few seconds later. “See that number, right there?”
The manager blinked, looking over her tablet. “Yes.”

“That’s the current patch your server is on. It corresponds with the number here.” Chloe slid it under the clipboard and tapped the paper with her other finger. “It only took about half an hour to install the patch and reboot your server. Did you notice your network was down for five minutes?”

“No.”

“Well, it was. Which is why your tellers couldn’t process any transactions.” Chloe held the clipboard out to him. “Now, please sign this. My next stop is your district office, and I don’t want to have to explain why I’m late.”

That did it. She saw a brief flash of apprehension, as the manager realized that the server girl might name him as the reason she was late to his boss’s office. He quickly grabbed the clipboard, scribbling a signature.

“Thank you.” Chloe stuck her tablet back into her bag. “Have a good day.”

He didn’t reply as she left, a smug smile coming over her face as she pulled the beanie from her pocket and jammed it back over her head. Asshole. Like he would know shit about what I was doing. Or that I did his district office on Friday.

She hopped back into her van just as her phone rang. Her supervisor’s name came up, and she answered the call. ‘Mick, what’s the worst that could happen if I beat the shit out of a mid-level manager that questions me?”

“I really need you to tell me that’s a hypothetical, Chloe.”

“For now.” She sighed. “The credit union upgrade on Westley is done.”

“Perfect timing. We need you back at that office building on Fifth.”

“The one on- ah, shit.” Chloe slumped into her seat, closing her eyes as she exhaled heavily. “Dynamic Technology again?”

She could practically hear her boss smirk. “You know it.”

“Dude, if I find that asshole, I’m going to string him up by his balls. Did you tell them that their server is probably fucked?”

“I explained that to the woman who called. Just get down there and take a look. Maybe we can salvage something from this one.”

Chloe rolled her eyes. “Not if he’s using those boards, we can’t.”

“Do your best.”

“I will. Where am I going?”

“Company’s called Franklin-Seymour, LLC. Let me know what happens either way.”
2017. Concurrent with ch 19-20 of EtL.

*I am so fucking tired of this building.*

She adjusted her laptop bag around her shoulder as she walked into the lobby, waving to the security guard. “Hello again,” he greeted her. “Another server fail?”

“Nah, I just like to stop by and rack up overtime.” Chloe leaned on his desk. “How do I get to Franklin-Seymour?”

“Fourth floor.” The guard nodded towards the elevator. “Take a right once you get out.”

“Thanks.”

The elevator ride went quickly, and she walked out, noting the company sign and hanging a right. She pulled her beanie off and shook out her hair as she made a beeline towards the door.

A brunette receptionist stood to greet her. “Are you guys the ones who called for a server tech?” Chloe asked, as she got closer.

“Yes, we did.” The girl smiled. “I’m Max.”

“Chloe.” She gave her best customer service smile as she shook Max’s hand. “Nice to meet you. What’s the problem?”

“I think our server was about to blow up when we came in this morning,” Max said with a wince. “Our network is down, we can’t get email, and the whole closet was hot when we opened it up.”

“Ooh, that’s not good.” she frowned, already knowing what had happened. “Where is it?”

“That way,” Max pointed towards an open door at the back of their office. Chloe walked towards it, listening to the brunette follow her as she walked.

She could feel the warmth on her face as she got closer. “Jeez, you weren’t kidding. It’s like a sauna in there. How long ago did you pull the plug?”

“Thirty minutes or so,” Max replied, sounding worried.

Chloe stepped into the closet and opened the server case, confirming her worst fears.*Those fucking boards. Again. Christ, that asshole must have bought a pallet of them.*

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” she muttered. “Another wonderful job by Dynamic Technology.”

“I take it you’re familiar with their work?” Max asked.

“Intimately,” she said dryly, as she reached into the case and moved some wires, confirming the part numbers on the control boards. “I’ve been fixing their screw-ups since the owner shut the company down and fled to Mexico last month. They wired half the offices in this building, and they half-assed all of them.”
Crap. Not supposed to curse in front of customers. She looked back at Max. “Pardon my French.”

“If you can fix it, I’ll forgive you.”

Chloe sighed as she stepped back. “Don’t bother. Your server is fucked.”

A blonde woman in a business suit and a ponytail appeared behind Max. “I really hope I heard that wrong,” she said sourly.

“Penny, Chloe. Chloe, Penny. She’s the boss,” Max said, as Chloe nodded towards the blonde. “What exactly is wrong?”

“You paid them for a brand-new server installation, right? Wiring, setup, maintenance, all of it?”

“We did.” Penny nodded back.

“Yea, well, they screwed you.” She waved her hand towards the server. “These boards are years old. And they’re under recall. Have been ever since six months after they were released. For overheating, as you might have guessed.” A thought occurred to her, and she reached back into the case. “Was there an audible alarm going off when you opened the door?”

Max shook her head. “No.”

Ah ha. There you are. “There would have been, if those assholes had plugged in the speaker,” she said as she retrieved the black box that had been sitting on the bottom of the case, dangling it by the wires before she dropped it. She reached back inside, intending to grab the hard drive, but she recoiled as soon as her fingers touched it. “Ow!”

“Are you okay?” Max asked her.

“Yea.” She shook her fingers. “Still hot. Hang on.” Pulling a glove from her cargo pocket, she slipped it onto her hand, reached back in, and pulled out the hard drive. She could smell the burnt metal and plastic before she even got it to her nose. “Yep. Your drive is fried.”

Penny’s face fell. “Can you get back what was on it?”

Chloe put the drive on top of the cabinet and reached back inside, tracing a wire with her finger. “Maybe. But...” she trailed off as she found the second hard drive, pulling it out and smelling it as well. “Ah ha. You’re in luck. They must have had a spare hard drive when they set it up, because you guys actually have a working backup. Two of the offices I’ve been to, those guys didn’t bother with their backup drives. They lost everything.”

The blonde breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank God.”

“I’ll be honest, Miss...” she hesitated, looking at her and waiting for a last name.

“Penny is fine.”

“Penny, that’s gonna be the only bit of good news I have for you.” Chloe waved her hand around the room, as she took everything in. “This setup is toast. Totally unfixable, and even if it was, this is a shitty setup overall. I wouldn’t sell this to my worst enemy. You need a brand new rig in here. There’s no environmental monitoring system, you should have one of those too... God, those dickheads couldn’t even get the wiring right, it looks like a blind man did it while he was on crack.”

She looked back at Penny. “Pardon my French.”
“Well, fuck those assholes,” Penny growled menacingly. “I’m going to sue them into the grave.”

“You and plenty of others,” Chloe snorted. “That’s probably why the owner fled to Mexico last month. Something like two dozen people want his head on a stick because of his shoddy work. I was at a marketing firm last week, they lost a BUNCH of work when his servers blew up. They want to sue him for millions.”

Penny shook her head. “Okay, I’ll look for a hitman later. Can you get a server back up and running?”

Chloe looked around the closet again. “Yes. Not before dinnertime, though. And not with what I have on me. I don’t have any other service calls today, so I can go back to the warehouse and get what I need. But it’s gonna be expensive.” She glanced back at Penny. “I’ll talk to my boss, he’ll probably cut you guys a discount. But you’re still looking at a lot of money.”

“Well, we can’t work without email, never mind what was on those servers.” Penny shrugged. “Do what you have to do, we’ll pay for it.”

“Mm.” Chloe scratched the back of her neck, looking at the server one more time. “Okay. I’ll head back now, then. I’ll get you an invoice before I get started.”

They thanked her, as she headed back for the elevator, leaning against the wall as she rode the car down. Least I’ll get some more overtime, she thought. Make up for that money Fiona stole.

“Shit.”

“Yea.” Chloe winced, as she watched Penny’s face fall at her invoice. “I’m sorry. My boss did write in a fifteen-percent discount, but we really can’t do better than that.”

“I appreciate it nonetheless.” Penny sighed, as she scribbled a signature at the bottom. “Jake’s going to love this.”

Chloe furrowed her brow. “Who’s Jake?”

“The Franklin half of Franklin-Seymour. This server will work for a while, right? We won’t have to replace it in eight months?”

“All the parts I’ve got are warrantied for three years,” Chloe assured her. “And you can talk with my boss about an extended service contract, where we provide at-cost upgrades and regular maintenance. Some of the servers we’ve sold are going on a decade or more.”

Penny nodded. “You’ll be able to get back everything that was on our old server?”

“I should be.” Chloe shrugged. “It’s a simple process to move everything over.”

“Good.” Penny handed her the paper back. “We’ll stay out of your way.”

Chloe took the invoice, sticking it in her bag as she headed for the elevator. Max smiled at her as she left, heading back for her van.

Mm. Cute.

She opened the biggest box with the new server case first, sticking some of the other components inside. Then it was a struggle, getting everything back to the elevator; she braced the box against the side of the cab, trying to catch her breath as she rode back up to the fourth floor.
Max sprang from her seat as Chloe walked into the hallway. “Do you need help with that?”

“I think I’m supposed to refuse, in the name of good customer service,” she replied. “But yes, please, I didn’t think it would get so heavy.”

The brunette grabbed the other side of the box, helping her carry it towards the server room. “What’s in here?”

“A new server case,” Chloe gasped, as they set the box down. “And some of the hardware. I’ve got to make another trip, though. There’s more stuff in the van.”

Max nodded. “You want a hand?”

“Please and thank you.”

Max followed her into the elevator. They leaned against opposite walls, and Chloe gave her a once-over; the small girl was definitely attractive.

*Let it go, man. You’re not jumping towards another girlfriend a week after Fiona dumped a beer all over you. Besides, she’s probably straight anyways.*

“Why is it going to take so long to fix the server?” Max asked. “Don’t you just plug everything together?”

Chloe chuckled. “If it was that easy, Max, I would be out of a job. Putting everything together and running wires will only take two or three hours. Everything else will be configuring it. It takes a while to set up a new server.”

Max frowned as the elevator opened up at the ground floor. “It only took the last guys a couple of hours.”

“Which is why the owner fled to Mexico to avoid the lawsuits,” Chloe said as they walked outside. “When it’s done right, it takes a little longer.”

They quickly unloaded a few more boxes, bringing everything back to the elevator. “I appreciate the help,” Chloe said on the way back up.

“No problem.” Max smiled as the elevator got back to their floor. “You need anything else?”

“Nah.” Chloe shook her head. “Like I said, though, it’ll take a while. My boss pulled me off the on-call rotation for this gig.”

“I hope we don’t keep you too late.”

“Hey, I never turn down overtime.” She smirked. “Nobody’s twisting my arm.”

With that, Chloe started ripping open boxes. Max left as she retrieved a drill from her bag and got to work.

*Almost done. Finally.*

Setting up the server had been easy, but retrieving all the company data had been a nightmare. Chloe had plugged in the hard drive and discovered that the past few updates had been corrupted; Dynamic Technology had fucked up once again, by not coding a proper backup procedure.
Fixing it had taken about an hour, and fully restoring the data had taken another thirty minutes. By the time she got to the last configuration, she’d been working for almost seven hours straight.

*I am drinking SO many beers when I get home,* she thought to herself. *And maybe seeing if anyone online knows of a good contract killer. This asshole needs to be punted out of an airlock or something.*

The laptop beeped again, and she resumed typing, setting the last few pieces of info she needed before restarting the server. *Just a few more minutes.*

“Hello,” a cheerful voice said from the doorway.

She glanced up and saw a man with brown hair in a smart suit looking at her. “Oh, hey!” she said with a smile, as she racked her brain for the name Penny had mentioned. “You’re Jake, I’m guessing?”

“That’s me.” Jake smiled back. “How is everything?”

“So far, so good. I’ll be done in a few minutes, then the server will restart, and you guys should be up and running like before in no time.” She glanced back at the screen typed a few more commands before she hit the Enter key. “Just loading the last configuration now.”

“Super.” Jake nodded. “We appreciate your quick response on this.”

“Sorry the last guy fucked it up,” Chloe apologized with a shrug. “We try to do top-quality work in this business, but assholes like that give IT guys a bad name.”

“Well, you get assholes in every line of work.” Jake paused. “So... kind of out of left field, but do you mind if I ask a personal question?”

She furrowed her brow. “Uh, sure.”

“Are you gay?”

Chloe blinked, as she quickly tried to get a read on him; Jake would not have been the first guy to notice the tattoo on her arm and have issue.

Then again, he doesn't look like someone who voted for Trump.

“Um... yea,” she replied carefully. “Is... that a problem?”

“No, no, absolutely not,” Jake laughed. “I have my own Pride shirt at home. My last boyfriend made me wear it to a parade.”

“Oh.” Chloe looked him up and down, then shrugged, relaxing. “I take it you noticed my tattoo, then?”

“Well, I didn’t, but they did.” Jake nodded towards their offices. “Penny is trying to convince Max to ask you out.”

Chloe raised her eyebrows at the revelation. “Wait... your receptionist? Really?”

“Max prefers ‘administrative assistant’. But yea. She’s also shy. Like, incredibly, depressingly shy,” Jake added. “She’s not really experienced with the whole ‘asking people out’ thing, and Penny is trying to help her work up the stones to do it.”

Chloe leaned over and poked her head out of the server room, watching Max and Penny talk in the
office. She gave her another, more thorough once over. “Mm. She is pretty cute.”

“So... you don’t have a girlfriend?”

The memory of Fiona flashed through her mind. And what she had said to herself in the elevator. For a brief second, she considered telling him that she did.

... fuck it. She’s cute, and looks like she more or less has her life together.

And she couldn’t possibly be worse than the last one.

“Not at the moment, no,” Chloe finally answered.

Jake smiled. “Well, I’m trying to get some work done, and quite frankly, they’re getting really fucking annoying. I can promise that she’s not a serial killer or anything. You think you’d be up for a date with her?”

Chloe glanced back at the office. “Hm. Yea. I would definitely get drinks with her, at least.” She looked back at Jake. “You’re sure she’s not a serial killer?”

“She captures spiders alive and releases them outside.”

Okay, that’s funny.

“Then I’m down.” Chloe said with a grin as her laptop beeped. She hit a couple of buttons, and the lights on the connected server blinked several times, as she initiated the restart. “Good timing, too, because I’ll be finished in a few minutes.”

“Perfect. Just a sec.”

Jake walked out of the closet, over to a row of nearby filing cabinets. He pulled out a folder before turning back to the office. “MAX!!”

Chloe heard the door open. “Jake? What is it?”

“Will you come take a look at this? I don’t think this is right.”

Footsteps approached quickly. “What are you even looking at?”

Jake shrugged. “Don’t know. Didn’t read it,” he said as he set it down, then reached out and grabbed Max. Chloe blinked and the brunette flew into view.

“Whoa!” she yelped, as she grabbed the door frame. Chloe couldn’t help but be amused, as Max looked up at her and froze. “Um...”

“Chloe, Max has something she’d like to ask you.” Jake leaned in behind her. “Spoiler alert; she already told me she’d be down,” he stage-whispered, before patting her shoulder. “Go get ‘em, tiger.”

She watched, amused, as Max’s face turned scarlet red when her boss walked away. “Wow, he was right,” she remarked. ”You really are shy.”

“... I’m going to kill him,” the brunette muttered.

Chloe raised her eyebrows. “You shouldn’t.”
“Why?”

“Well, it’s gonna be kind of hard to ask me out if you’re in prison. I’m not waiting on a jailbird.”

She watched Max’s face got even redder. “Do... uh... are you...” The brunette paused. “Are you doing anything later tonight?” she finally blurted.

“Nope.” Chloe smiled.

“Do you, uh, want to go get coffee?” Max asked, the nervousness obvious in her voice. “Or maybe a... drink?”

The laptop beside her finally beeped. Chloe turned and watched the server lights flicker, then start glowing a bright, consistent green. “Your server is up and running,” she said as she disconnected her laptop, shutting the door of the server case. She put away her laptop before she turned back to Max. “You know what? It’s been a long day. Coffee sounds good, but grabbing a beer sounds better.”

The brunette blinked, clearly not sure what to do next. “Um...”

Okay, let’s take the reins before she has a heart attack. “How about Zulu’s?” Chloe asked. “It’s at the corner of Mark and Fifth. You know it?”

“Yea.” Max nodded. “I’ve been there.”

“How about we meet there in...” Chloe glanced at her watch. “An hour? You can tell me all about how you want to kill your boss.”

“That sounds great,” Max said in a tight voice.

“Cool.” Chloe re-slung her laptop bag, grabbing the last cardboard box. “See you there, Max.”

She walked out with a smile, trying to keep herself from bouncing as she walked. I’ve got a date, she thought happily. With a girl who doesn’t look crazy. And I just made three hours of overtime.

Not bad for a day’s work.

Her elated mood didn’t go away after drinks. The bar, Zulu’s, was close enough to her house that she could walk home, and she spent most of the way humming.

It wasn’t until she got to her apartment complex and climbed the stairs, that she stopped. She saw that the window on her door was broken, the shattered glass glinting on the ground.

Oh, fuck. Chloe pulled out her cell phone as she crept closer.

The lights in her apartment were off. She jiggled the knob; the door was still locked. And she turned on her phone’s flashlight, shining it through the broken window to confirm that nothing was missing.

A closer look at the glass revealed red stains. Blood. She stood up straight, shining the light towards her feet. Several more large drops were on the ground. Someone tried to break in and cut themselves. Badly.

Chloe nudged the blood with her shoe, and it smeared. Still fresh.

She followed the drops back down the stairs and around the corner of the lot, down the sidewalk. Worry started to creep in as she walked. This is a lot of blood. Way too much. Whoever did this
fucked themselves up good.

Shit. I hope they’re not dead.

The drops led out of the parking lot, towards a bus stop. She lowered the phone as she saw the lone occupant of the bench, shaking like a leaf as she sat hunched over her arm.

What the...

She stepped closer, finally getting a good look.

“Are you FUCKING kidding me?!”

Fiona glanced up. The girl’s skin was deathly pale, and her shirt and jeans were covered in blood. She trembled, breathing heavily as she focused on Chloe’s face, one hand clamped around her wrist. “Your lock is broken,” she whispered.

“God damn it.” Chloe brought her phone back up and dialed, holding it to her ear.

“911, what is your emergency?”

“Yea, we need help on Ninth and Village,” Chloe reported. “A girl tried to break into my apartment, and now she’s bleeding out at the bus stop. You need to send an ambulance, quickly.”

“I’m sorry, you’re-”

“Ninth and Village! Ambulance!”

“Fuck you,” Fiona breathed, as she stood. She only managed to take two steps before she collapsed into a heap on the sidewalk.

“Ah, shit!” Chloe raced over, kneeling beside her. “Dammit, she just fainted! You need to send someone out here pronto!”

“Understood, ma’am. Help is on the way.”

“How long ago did you break up with her?”

“About a week ago,” Chloe answered. “She didn’t take it well.”

The officer nodded as he scribbled in his notepad, the two of them standing in front of her apartment. “Any idea why she was here tonight?”

“I don’t have a clue.” Chloe looked back at her door. “She stole a couple hundred bucks from me to buy drugs. That was why I ended it, and had my landlord change the locks.”

“You think she might’ve came back to rob you?”

“... maybe,” Chloe sighed. “She said, before she passed out, that my lock was broken; I don’t think she knew I changed it.”

The cop looked back at the bloody window. “We see this a lot, with addicts. When they need a fix and they’re out of money, they’ll go wherever they know they can find stuff to pawn and start stealing.” He nodded inside her apartment. “My guess is she came for the electronics. Your PlayStation, and the computer parts you’ve got on your shelf.”
Chloe shook her head. “Those aren’t even worth anything,” she muttered. “They’re all old. I only have them to tinker with.”

“Well, in any event, you won’t have to worry about her for a while.” The cop closed his notebook. “The EMTs found drug paraphernalia in her coat. We’ll be arresting her when she’s released from the hospital. She’ll be behind bars for at least a year, which will give her plenty of time to sober up.”

“Okay.” Chloe glanced back at her broken window. “So... now what? Do I have to testify or something?”

The cop shook his head. “We’ve got photos, and what happened is pretty clear. If your ex has an ounce of common sense, she’ll plead out.”

“I don’t have to do anything else?”

“Here.” The officer produced a card and handed it to her. “Call this number tomorrow morning. We’ll get you a copy of the police report for your landlord and insurance. But yea, this matter is pretty much settled as far as you’re concerned.”

“... okay then.” She nodded. “Have a good night.”
David: Are you okay?

Chloe: Jesus, how many watchdogs do you still have back here?

David: At the very least, one who recognized your name when it came up on the police blotter.

Chloe: Is it a sign of maturity, that I wish that narrowed it down?

David: Let’s agree that it is. So, are you okay?

Chloe: Yes. I’m fine, other than having to pay for my landlord to replace my window.

David: You’re paying? You should be able to make that girl pay for it.

Chloe: Big shocker, but that little druggie didn’t actually have a job. Can’t get blood from a stone, man.

Chloe: Plus, she’s going to prison. I think she’s paid enough.

David: ... okay then.

Chloe: How long will she be put away for, do you think?

David: For attempted burglary and possession of paraphernalia? Probably about a year, if she pleads out. When it comes to tweakers, judges like to give out prison sentences that let them sober up.

Chloe: Good. I really don’t need her popping up again right now.

David: Why not?

Chloe: ... look, don’t tell Mom, because I know she’ll make it a thing. But I went out on another date last night.

David: Ah. Well, I hope she’s better than the last one.

Chloe: Ditto.

David: Where did you guys meet? Another bar?

Chloe: No. At work. She’s a receptionist at a company that had a server take a shit, and I was there all afternoon installing their new one. She asked me out right as I was about to leave.

David: She asked you? Sounds like she’s pretty confident.

David: Chloe?

Chloe: Sorry. I was too busy laughing.

David: Why was that funny?
Chloe: I’ll tell you the story someday, if this starts to work out.

Chloe: I’m SOOOOOOOOOO BORED.

Max: I thought you had, like, a super-long job this morning?

Chloe: I did. It got cancelled.

Max: Why?

Chloe: Exigent circumstances.

Max: What does that mean?

Chloe: It means a guy driving while drunk jumped the curb and crashed through the wall. The fire dept isn’t letting anybody inside.

Max: Oh. Is he okay?

Chloe: They didn’t say. Probably.

Max: So what are you going to do?

Chloe: Well, I figured I could do one of two things. I could sit in my truck and play on my phone for the next two hours...

Chloe: Or I can swing by your office and take you on an early lunch?

Max: To the taco truck again???

Chloe: ... I don’t think you’re excited to see me.

Chloe: I think you just like me for the taco truck.

Max: NONONO

Max: I want to see you! I swear!

Chloe: So does it matter where we go?

Max: No!

Max: But... I mean, if you knew where the taco truck was...

Max: Or not! We can go someplace else! I don’t mind!

Chloe: LOL. I was kidding, Max.

Max: :( 

Max: You’re mean.

Chloe: Aw. How about I make it up to you?
Max: How?

Chloe: I buy you tacos, and we make out in the parking lot?

Max: ... I’ll be downstairs waiting for you in fifteen minutes.

Joyce: Sooooooooooo...

Chloe: So... what?

Joyce: How’s San Francisco?

Chloe: Good?

Joyce: Anything interesting going on in your life?

Chloe: ... David, you fucking narc.

Joyce: Who are you seeing???????

Chloe: I’m not getting into this, Mom.

Joyce: Why not?! I want to know who my baby is dating!

Chloe: For three weeks! I’ve been dating a girl for three weeks! That is not enough time for you to go all parental on me!

Joyce: I’m just curious! Will you tell me anything? Her name, what she does?

Chloe: Fine. Her name is Max, and she’s an administrative assistant.

Joyce: What’s that?

Chloe: The title she prefers to “receptionist”.

Joyce: Where does she work?

Chloe: At a company that owns a bunch of other businesses.

Joyce: Like what?

Chloe: I don’t know, restaurants and stuff?

Joyce: What’s it called?

Chloe: STOP TRYING TO GOOGLE MY GIRLFRIEND

Joyce: SHE’S ALREADY YOUR GIRLFRIEND?!

Chloe: ASDFGHJKL NO!!

Chloe: It’s been three weeks! We haven’t had that talk yet! Forget I said that!
Joyce: Too late :)

Chloe: Holy SHIT, do I have an awesome date for you.

Max: It must be, to start that strong :)

Chloe: Do you like the zoo?

Max: I’ve never been to one.

Chloe: WHAT

Max: I don’t really think there were any, back in Oregon.

Chloe: OMG

Max: I’m... sorry?

Chloe: Okay, we’re going to fix this tomorrow.

Max: We’re going to the zoo tomorrow?

Chloe: We are going to OWN that zoo tomorrow. They’re throwing an Adult Night.

Max: What’s that?

Chloe: Picture this; animals from all over the world, no screaming little children to distract us, and vendors selling alcohol.

Max: They’re not letting kids in?

Chloe: They can’t, if they’re selling booze.

Max: Huh. That sounds pretty cool.

Max: What kind of animals do they have?

Chloe: Lions.

Chloe: Tigers.

Chloe: And Bears.

Max: ... is that it?

Chloe: You were supposed to say “Oh, my!”

Max: I was? Why?

Chloe: Because Judy Garland said so.

David: Fiona pled out. 11 months in minimum security, court-ordered rehab, and two years parole.
Chloe: Cool. Do you want some Lidocaine?

David: For... what?

Chloe: The stitches you’re going to get, on account of being a snitch.

David: Okay, I really did think you’d already told your mother about Max.

Chloe: Just tell me you didn’t run her name or anything.

David: No, of course not.

Chloe: Good.

David: ... would you like me to?

Chloe: No!!

David: It wouldn’t be hard, I can make a phone call back to SF.

David: And given your previous partner, it might not be uncalled for.

Chloe: ... okay, that’s fair. But I’m really not worried about Max having a criminal record.

David: Why not?

Chloe: Because when she sees spiders in her apartment, she catches them alive and releases them outside.

David: Yea, okay. You’re fine.

Chloe: I might be a little late.

Max: Everything okay?

Chloe: Truck problems.

Max: What’s wrong with your truck?

Max: Or is what’s NOT wrong a shorter list?

Chloe: Okay, 99% of the time, my truck runs perfectly fine TYVM.

Max: And the 1% that you’re dealing with now?

Chloe: A hose cracked. It won’t take long to fix.

Max: That sounds like something that should be replaced, not fixed.

Chloe: I totally would, if they sold these hoses at Autozone. They stopped production years ago; I have to find new ones at scrounge yards.

Max: Then how do you “fix” it?
Chloe: Duct tape, mostly.

Max: Yea, I’m not getting in your truck tonight.

Chloe: Relax, the engine’s not going to explode or anything. It’ll just get a little hot, until I can find a new one.

Max: Are you sure?

Chloe: Trust me? Please?

Max: ... if your engine starts smoking, I am SO doing a tuck-and-roll.

Skip: Shaka Brah!!

Chloe: Dickface!!

Skip: Aw, I miss you too, you pain in my ass.

Chloe: What’s up man? How’s life on the rock-and-roll circuit?

Skip: We’re opening for Fall Out Boy next month in San Bernardino.

Chloe: BRO

Skip: I know, right?

Chloe: Dude, what are the chances you can score me some tickets?

Skip: The negative side of zero. They’re sold out so hard it’s not even funny.

Chloe: Fuck. That blows.

Chloe: Oh well.

Skip: Sorry, kid.

Chloe: Eh, it’s fine. I’ll just think less of you in the interim.

Skip: That’s because you’re a basic bitch.

Chloe: Do I need to whoop your ass at beer pong AGAIN?

Skip: No, you do not. But listen, there was actually a different reason I texted you.

Skip: I can’t get you FOB tickets. BUT, I have two tickets to a different show this next weekend in San Fran, and now I can’t make it. If you want them, they’re yours.

Chloe: What show?

Skip: Tiny little band called Firewalk. You probably haven’t heard of them.

Chloe: DON’T YOU FUCKING MESS WITH ME
Skip: You want them or not?

Chloe: FUCK YES, I want them! How much?

Skip: Meh. Call it a wash, for being an okay wingman.

Chloe: I was a fucking AWESOME wingman, you unappreciative little asshole.

Skip: Can’t argue with that. I’ll drop them in the mail this afternoon.

Chloe: Hey, wanna hang out?

Max: Of course :) but I’m still at the office.

Chloe: Until?

Max: Five or so? What time do you get off?

Chloe: About half an hour after I pick you up, hopefully.

Max: Huh?

Max: OH

Max: Dude! I’m at work!

Chloe: What? I can’t text you naughty stuff when you’re working?

Max: Someone could see!

Chloe: Who else uses your phone?

Max: Nobody. But they could still see the texts on my screen! I leave it on my desk!

Chloe: HEY, REMEMBER THOSE INCREDBLY HOT NOISES YOU MADE WHEN WE WERE FUCKING??

Max: ... is it going to be like this from now on?

Chloe: Maybe. Can I pick you up at five?

Max: Yes :)

Max: What are we going to do?

Chloe: Each other.

Max: CHLOE!!

Chloe: Keep practicing. You’re gonna be moaning that a lot :)

Joyce: How are things with Max?
Chloe: Really, really good.

Joyce: Does this mean I get to meet her?

Chloe: Let’s go with ‘eventually’.

Joyce: Hopefully soon. And you must like her, if you’ve been with her for this long.

Chloe: ... yea.

Joyce: Is everything okay?

Chloe: It’s stupid.

Joyce: What is?

Chloe: I don’t know. Everything is great. She’s awesome, I really like spending time with her, and... everything just feels nicer, when I’m with her. She makes me want to be a better person.

Joyce: But...

Chloe: I keep getting the sense that she’s holding stuff back.

Joyce: Like what?

Chloe: She won’t say. And I haven’t really pushed.

Chloe: But some of what she says and does... I’m not sure how to describe it. It’s almost like she’s deliberately hiding things from me, and not telling me why?

Chloe: I’m not sure how much sense that makes.

Joyce: Have you asked her about it?

Chloe: No. Like I said, I haven’t pushed.

Chloe: I mostly just feel like I’m only getting half the story.

Joyce: Chloe, you can’t just breeze through the book of someone’s life in a few months. It takes time, to really learn all about someone.

Joyce: And some parts of the book, you might never see. There were things that your father never spoke of. And David doesn’t share everything, either.

Joyce: Do you think Max is keeping something hidden to hurt you?

Chloe: No.

Joyce: Then she’ll tell you when she’s ready. In the meantime, there’s no use thinking on it.

Chloe: I guess you’re right.

Chloe: So... new topic. What are the odds I can get Great-Grandma’s pasta recipe from you?
Joyce: I'll have to dig it up. What do you need it for?

Chloe: I want to cook it for Max on our six-month anniversary.

Joyce: Hmm. I think we can work out some sort of deal.
Rachel frowned, as she signaled to change lanes. “Secure foster house? Someone must have used it before.”

Stacy shrugged. “Other social agencies have something similar, but it’s not standardized. Are you keeping your eyes on the rearview mirror?”

“Yes.” Rachel looked behind them. “That white Honda’s been following us for a while.”

“That’s fine, we’re on the freeway.” Stacy checked her side mirror discreetly. “If he follows us off the exit, I want you to turn left, instead of right. Then do a U-turn at the first light.”

“Got it.” Rachel nodded, moving into the next lane. The Honda didn’t follow them. “And if he does one too?”

“There are a few other tricks to shake a tail. I’ll show you later, when we don’t have someplace to be.”

Rachel gave her new boss a quick look. “You take this pretty seriously. Have you ever actually been followed?”

“That I’m certain of? No.” Stacy kept her eyes on the mirror. “I’m PRETTY sure I was, in at least two instances, but I can’t positively say that they were tails. Could’ve just been paranoia. Anyway, I put the criteria for the secure foster houses together after that boy tried to break in. The man in charge of our office at the time signed off on it. We just finished setting up our fourth one, and two others are undergoing the vetting process.”

“Is all it is just extra background checks?” Rachel asked. “That doesn’t seem hard.”

“No, there’s more to it.” Stacy started ticking off on her fingers. “There are five criteria to meet. First is the background check, yes; the foster family has to pass them, and not have any kind of criminal records aside from minor citations. The second is the financial inquiry; the family cannot have any serious or unmanageable debt.”

“That’s so they can’t be bribed?” Rachel deduced.

“Exactly.” Stacy tapped the third finger. “Third, location. We prefer secured foster houses to have a semblance of privacy. Not remote cabins, but not cookie-cutter houses on quarter-acre lots, either.”

Rachel frowned. “How do you judge that?”

“You go with your gut, mostly.” Stacy moved on. “Fourth, being able to provide a secure home. Alarm systems are nice, though not required, and we like it if the family has some prior experience with security. The couple we’re going to visit right now, for instance, are both retired police
officers."

“Finally, there’s the more in-depth training,” she concluded. “Foster parents get training to help kids anyway, but we want to make sure secure homes can handle children with more problems than normal; the kids that we wind up sending to them tend to have heavier baggage than usual.”

“Especially if they’re from First Light?”

“Oh yes,” Stacy nodded. “The Anderson family has one teenager from First Light, a boy named Steven.”

Rachel flipped her turn signal, as she started to take the off-ramp. She kept her eye on the white Honda, as it drove past them and continued down the highway. “Why did we take custody?”

“Because he’s gay,” Stacy explained. “He ran away from home. The cops found him on the streets, going through dumpsters for food. When we tried to speak to the father, he told us that he ‘didn’t have any faggots in his family’.”

“Christ,” Rachel muttered. “How is Steven?”

“Doing better than you’d think.” Stacy turned to check behind them. “Looks like we’re clear.”

Rachel looked in her mirrors and saw that the road behind them was empty, as they took the exit.

“How often do you check on these kids?” She asked. “Like, once a week, or what?”

“Not as often as I should, since I became a supervisor.” Stacy looked back at her. “That’s why I want you to become familiar with them.”

“You...” Rachel frowned. “What? Want me to take over for you?”

“I have to assign someone to them,” Stacy explained. “I don’t have the time to see them anymore. And I think you’re the best person to start learning the job.”

“Why me?” Rachel asked, confused. “It’s literally my second week.”

Stacy smirked. “It’s not your second week dealing with First Light, though, is it?”

Rachel looked at her, unsure of how to answer.

“I know who you are, Rachel.” Stacy settled back in her seat. “Your father and I actually know each other quite well. I know you have your own reasons to hate First Light.” She paused. “And I know you still feel terrible about what happened to Maxine Caulfield.”

*She doesn’t know that we found her.*

*Should I... say something?*

...

*No. If Dad didn’t, I’m not going to, either.*

“Yea,” Rachel replied softly, keeping her eyes forward.

“You know better than anyone else in the office what could happen to these kids if they go back.” Stacy looked at her again. “That’s why I know you’ll be the right person for the job.”
“She’s not wrong.”

Rachel picked at her dinner, later that night. “I hope not,” she agreed quietly.

“Sweetie, your boss is an extremely competent woman, who has a knack for empathizing with others,” James told her. “She knows what she’s doing. If she feels that you’re the best person to look after those kids, then so be it.”

“I know. I want to do it.” Rachel looked at him. “I just don’t want to fuck it up.”

“How was the meeting with the teenager today?” Rose asked, leaning forward. “Did it go well?”

Rachel nodded. “It wasn’t too bad. We connected, a little bit, on the whole ‘being gay’ thing.” She smirked. “Though our coming out stories were wildly different.”

“Yes, I imagine so.” Her father took another bite of food. “I’m sure you’ll do well.”

“I couldn’t possibly do worse,” she muttered.

James pressed his lips together. “Sweetie, you didn’t-”

Rachel’s phone rang in her pocket, interrupting them. She pulled it out, frowning as she looked at the caller ID. “That’s weird.”

“What?”

“It’s Stacy.” Rachel showed her father the screen. “I don’t know what she wants at this hour, I’m not on call.”

He opened his mouth to respond, but his phone rang on the counter. Rose frowned as he stood to retrieve it. “This feels like a dramatic moment in a movie,” she mentioned.

Rachel answered her phone. “Hello?”

“Good, you answered. Are you busy?”

“Just eating dinner with my parents.” Rachel looked over, as her father spoke quietly but intently into his phone. “Is it a coincidence that my dad’s phone rang just now?”

“No, it’s not. And you being next to him is handy. Are you able to ride with him to the police station.”

“The police station? Why?”

“I’m not at liberty to give you the important details, but your father is.” Rachel heard more talking on the other end of the line. “Yes, honey, I am. Look, Rachel, here’s what’s happening; we just got a call that the police have picked up a teenaged girl from First Light, who may have information they want.”

“And we have to be there for her interview because she’s a minor,” Rachel finished.

“Exactly. And look, I know you’re not on-call, and I could do this myself. But I want you to start getting a handle on how to deal with these kinds of situations. Since James is going to want to speak to her anyway, I’d like you to go with him and meet me there, if it’s not inconvenient.”

“Absolutely.” Rachel nodded. “What about her parents?”
“My guess is that we’ll most likely be bringing the teenager from the station directly to a foster home. But we’ll- I’m afraid so, honey. We’ll deal with that when we get there.”

“Where are you?”

“I was enjoying a nice dinner with my husband,” her boss said sourly. “Some days, I really hate this job. I’ll see you at the station, Rachel.”

She hung up and turned to her dad, catching the tail end of his conversation. “Good. I understand, Lieutenant. Keep her in the interview room, and do NOT let any of your officers try to speak to her. I’ll be there as soon as I can.” He ended his call, turning to her. “Let me guess; you’re supposed to meet Stacy at the police station?”

“She told me I should ride with you,” Rachel affirmed.

“Then let’s go.”

“Stacy also said you would fill me in on what’s going on.”

Her father sighed, as he drove the car. “She did, did she?”

“Yes.”

“Your boss like to bump into other people’s lanes.” He paused. “Though she’s not wrong. You probably should know the background, if nothing else.” Hitting the turn signal, he changed lanes as they prepared to merge onto the highway. “Are you aware, Rachel, that two teenage girls from First Light died last month?”

She looked at her father with wide eyes. “No! How?!”

“We were told that it was a double suicide, initially. That was the story given to us by Doctor Silvers.”

“First Light’s doctor?”

“That’s right.” Her father nodded. “We received an anonymous tip from someone who worked in his office; one of the nurses, we think, but it doesn’t matter. The police showed up as he was sealing the body bags of two dead teenage girls, a pair named Jennifer Hansen and Sara Wood.” He shook his head. “When Silvers was confronted, he tried to claim that the two had committed suicide, and he was about to do up the death certificates.”

“And they decided not to tell anyone?” Rachel asked incredulously.

“They wanted it kept in-house, because the girls’ families were ashamed. Or so Silvers said.” Her father looked at her. “Obviously that didn’t fly. The police took the bodies for proper autopsies.”

“Right, I’ve seen this on TV.” Rachel frowned. “Don’t all suicides get investigated as potential murders? I think I saw that on NCIS or something.”

Her father gave her a bemused look. “No. But police can make the determination on the spot, if they want to. Given what the cops walked in on, they elected to do so.”

“Makes sense. What did the medical examiner find?”

“That the two girls were beaten to death,” her father said simply. “The ME found hundreds of
The girl was definitely nervous. Her eyes shifted around the room continuously, moving from the glass to the door to all the corners. The dress she wore was dirty and stained; the cops told them that they’d found her hiding in the bushes near the phone she’d called from. Her long brown hair was also mussed, and Rachel could swear that there was a leaf buried in it.

“She’s barely said a dozen words since we brought her here.”

Rachel turned to face the police officer. “What HAS she said?”

“She asked where the bathroom was.” He shrugged. “And for a glass of water.”

“Did you question her at all?” Stacy asked from her spot next to Rachel.

“Aside from her name and if she needed medical attention, no.” The officer shook his head. “We know the rules. We didn’t put anything out over the radio, either. Unless those First Light assholes are psychic, they have no way of knowing she’s here.”

“Sounds good.” James nodded. “Do me a favor, Lieutenant, and put an officer outside the main entrance with a radio.”
The officer looked at him, confused. “Why?”

“Because it would not be the first time that First Light had a psychic premonition.” James gave him a look. “Trust me, it’ll save us a lot of problems later.”

The cop pursed his lips, then shrugged. “Sure thing.”

“Okay, Rachel.” Stacy looked at her. “What do you think we should do?”

Rachel took a deep breath. “I should talk to her first, alone,” she started. “Let her know who I am, get the ground rules established, all that. Then I’ll signal for you.” She nodded at her dad. “You can ask her questions. GENTLE questions,” she added. “She’s only a teenager. She doesn’t need the third degree.”

“I understand, sweetie, but we have to move fast,” her father reminded her. “We’re likely on borrowed time with this girl.”

“Nevertheless.” Rachel looked back at Stacy. “Did I miss anything?”

“Just remember that you’re not Rachel in there,” Stacy reminded her. “You’re her social worker, not her friend; you don’t want her to become too familiar. Introduce yourself as Miss Amber.”

“Okay.” Rachel turned towards the door, but paused. “Oh, damn it.”

“What?”

She looked at the officer. “What’s her name?”

“Yea, that’d be helpful, huh.” He smirked. “Her name’s Sarah Parsons. But she asked us to call her Sadie.”
Rachel: Sadie

The girl looked up as Rachel walked into the room, closing the door behind her.

“Hello, Sadie,” she started with a smile.

“Hi.” Her voice was low, and guarded, as her hands clutched at her elbows. She looked back at the one-way mirror nervously.

Defensive body language. She’s nervous. Rachel could appreciate that. Hell, I would be, too.

She reached over and pulled one of the chairs around the table slowly, until she could sit across the corner from the teenager. She made sure to keep her smile on her face as she sat down. “How are you doing?”

“Okay.” Sadie squirmed nervously.

“Good. My name is Miss Amber. I’m a social worker with Child Protective Services.” She looked her over. “Do you need anything? Water? Something from the vending mach-”

“Who else is watching?” Sadie asked suddenly.

“I’m sorry?”

The teenager looked back at the glass. “I know that’s a one-way mirror. Who else is back there?”

“A police officer, another social worker, and the district attorney.” Rachel tilted her head. “Are you nervous?”

Sadie scratched at her arm. “I just don’t like feeling like I’m under a microscope.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about that.” Rachel nodded. “I turned off the microphone before I came in. They can’t hear us. I figured we would speak privately, first.”

“Oh.” Sadie looked back at the glass again, falling silent.

Rachel tucked her hair behind her ear, wrist brushing her blue feather earring as she scooted a little closer. “Do you know what a social worker does, Sadie?”

“Um...” She looked at Rachel warily. “Not really, no.”

“We help people that need assistance,” Rachel told her. “My job is to make sure that you’re okay, and to do what it takes to keep you safe.” She made eye contact with the teenager. “I’m here as your guardian ad litem. Do you know what that means?”

Sadie shook her head again.

“It means that in the absence of your parents, I’m going to function as your guardian.”

“So... like another parent?”

“Exactly. Now, you told the officers who got you that you had information about what happened to Jennifer Hansen and Sara Wood. Is that true?”
Sadie looked at her, seeming to appraise her carefully, before she nodded.

“Okay. Then I want you to listen to me very carefully.” Rachel leaned forward. “I know you have no reason to trust me. But I’m on your team, Sadie. All I want is what’s best for you. I can’t promise that it’ll be what YOU want,” she quickly clarified. “But you will be safe, I can promise you that.”

“Will you send me back home?” Sadie asked quietly.

Rachel pursed her lips. “Do you fear for your life, Sadie?” she asked carefully. “Are you scared to go back?”

The teenager nodded vigorously.

“Would you tell me why?”

“Because...” Sadie paused, as she looked down at her hands and exhaled heavily. “I’m gay, too.”

It wasn’t the answer Rachel was expecting. She did her best to suppress a double-take, as she kept a neutral expression. “Do your parents know?”

“No.” Sadie shook her head. “I, uh... there’s a boy. My parents and his are really, really good friends, and...”

Rachel made the connection quickly. “You’re supposed to marry him.”

“Next year.” Sadie looked up at her. “I thought... maybe I can talk my parents out of it. I figured, eventually I’d tell them, and they wouldn’t make me marry him.”

“... you said ‘too’.”

Sadie looked back at her lap silently.

The pieces slowly started to come together in Rachel’s head. “Wait... were Jennifer and Sara...”

“They were girlfriends.” Sadie sniffed, as she rubbed her nose. “And they were my friends. We talked about everything. They’re the reason everyone calls me Sadie.” She smiled fondly. “Sara said she was born first, so I got the nickname.”

_These fucking motherfuckers._

“I didn’t even know they were dead until a couple of days ago. I heard my parents talking about them when they thought I wasn’t listening.” She glanced back up at Rachel. “My mom said the cops were bugging Doctor Silvers about them, trying to find out what had happened. And my dad... he said that...”

“It’s okay,” Rachel assured her. “You don’t have to talk about it.”

“... he said that they died to easily,” Sadie finished quietly, looking at her hands. “He called them dykes. And said they were burning in hell.”

“Sadie.” Rachel sat upright. “Sadie, please look at me.”

The teenager met her gaze. “Are you gonna send me back?”

“Sadie, if you’re worried about your parents hurting you, then I will not send you back,” Rachel assured her. “But... there are other people that are going to want to know what happened.”
She nodded. “Okay.”

“A man is going to come in here,” Rachel said. “He’s a prosecutor. And he really wants to know everything you do about those poor girls. But,” she added, “if I tell you not to speak, I need you to do it, Sadie. Do you understand?”

“... yea.”

Rachel waved to the glass. “Don’t worry,” she assured her. “You’re going to be okay.”

The door opened on the tail end of her sentence, and they both looked up at her father walked in. He carried his leather briefcase, looking very professional as he smiled. “Are we ready?”

“We are.” Rachel nodded at him. “Sadie, this is James,” she said, feeling very weird for using her dad’s first name.

“It’s nice to meet you, Sadie.” He took the seat across from her, setting his briefcase on the floor. “Has Miss Amber told you who I am?”

“You’re a prosecutor.”

“That’s right.” He leaned forward, clasping his hands together as he rested his elbows on the table. “Now, Sadie, I want to make sure you to know that you’re not in any trouble. I don’t care what you did to get here, or how you came to know what you know. And I will help you however I can. Do you understand?”

She nodded.

“Good.” James reached down and produced a recorder from his briefcase, as well as a notepad and a pen. “I’d like to ask you some questions, Sadie. And I want to record this conversation. Is that okay?”

“Hang on,” Rachel interrupted. “She just told me that she’s scared for her life. A recorded conversation is admissible evidence under a subpoena.”

He pursed his lips. “Rachel, I NEED admissible evidence,” he told her. “This investigation won’t go anywhere without it. If she has information about Jennifer Hansen and Sara Wood’s deaths, then it’s going to have to be on the record.”

“You can’t take it like an anonymous tip?”

“That runs the risk of getting evidence thrown out,” James countered. “There’s no easy way to do this, Rachel. You know we can protect her.”

“I’m not-”

“Jen and Sara's parents beat them to death because they were lesbians.”

Rachel and James both stared at Sadie as she spoke. The teenager’s eyes didn’t leave the table in front of her.

“Sadie, I told you not to speak until I said it was okay,” Rachel reminded her.

“Sorry.” Sadie looked at them. “You guys can protect me, right? If my parents find me, or find out that I’m...” she hesitated. “They’ll kill me. I know they will.”
James leaned forward. “Child Protective Services will put you in a secure foster home away from the church,” he informed her. “Another social worker is outside, calling them right now to make sure they’re ready for you.”

“And my parents won’t find me?”

Rachel took a breath. “Your parents won’t be able to find out where you are,” she assured her. “The secure foster homes are kept very secret. Only a few people know about them, and even less know where they are.”

James nodded sympathetically. “Sadie, I want to punish the people who killed Jennifer and Sara. I want to put them all in prison. But so far, nobody else has come forward with any information.” He paused. “Anything you can tell us would be very helpful. And we will do everything we can to keep you safe, I promise.”

The teenager took a deep breath. “I know their parents were the ones that did the exorcism.”

Rachel and her father both frowned. “Exorcism?” James asked.

“That’s what I heard my parents call it.” Sadie cleared her throat, as she met his eyes. “A Sinner’s Exorcism.”

Stacy watched silently from behind the mirror.

As soon as James had gone inside, she’d turned the microphone back on. She stood next to the Lieutenant as Sadie told James everything they’d wanted to know.

“My parents were talking about it the night before last,” Sadie was telling him. “They said that Jennifer’s parents were freaking out. And that if anyone talked, everything was going to come crashing down.”

“Do you know why your parents might have known that?” James asked.

Sadie nodded. “Our families are friends. My parents were the ones who told me that Jennifer and Sara were going to Washington with their parents for something, and they might be gone for a while.”

James tilted his head. “Why Washington?”

“I don’t know.” Sadie shrugged. “But they said they were definitely heading there.”

“Jesus Christ.” Stacy glanced at the Lieutenant, as he dragged a hand over his face. “Their own parents did that to them.”

“Sadie, this is incredibly helpful,” James assured her. “But I have a very important question, and I need you to give me an honest answer. It’s okay if you don’t know, but if you do, I need you to be sure.”

“Uh... okay.”

“If either of Sara’s parents wear a large ring?” He leaned forward intently. “Or Jennifer’s parents? Possibly one that has a gemstone on it?”

Sadie frowned. “Why?”
“Please answer the question, if you can.”

“Um...” Sadie closed her eyes, thinking. She opened them a few seconds later. “Yes. Sara’s dad.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive. He has a really big ring, like a class ring, that he wears all the time.”

Stacy looked at the officer. “What’s the significance of the ring?”

“The ME found a bruise on the Wood girl’s face that left an impression in her skin,” he explained, his eyes not leaving the mirror. “He said it most likely came from a large ring with a gemstone. And he got a good mold of it, enough that he can probably match it if we get ahold of this psychopath’s ring.”

“And most class rings have gemstones on them.” Stacy looked back at the mirror. “I’m not a lawyer, but that sounds good enough for a warrant to me.”

Her phone buzzed, and she checked it quickly. “The foster family is ready to take her.” She looked back up. “We should move her soon. I don’t like that she’s been here as long as she has.”

The officer shook his head. “Miss Hemingway, I mean no disrespect, but I think you and Mister Amber are a little paranoid. I used my phone to call the patrol that got her, so nothing went over the radios. And we brought her in through the back of the building, where nobody could have seen her. There’s no way First Light would know that she’s-”

The radio on his shoulder burped. “Lieutenant?”

He reached over and keyed the microphone. “Go.”

“Sir, a black BMW just pulled into the parking lot. I think it’s Elder Caulfield.”

“It’s not paranoia if they’re really out to get you.” Stacy walked past him and quickly turned the knob on the door, shoving it open. “It’s time to go,” she announced.

James looked at her. “He’s here, isn’t he?”

“Just pulled into the parking lot.” Stacy nodded. “Do you intend to treat her parents as potential suspects?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Then we have every right to take her with us.” Stacy looked at Rachel. “The foster home is ready. We need to go, right now.”

“But- wait,” Sadie protested, as Rachel put a hand on her arm and pulled her upright. “Who’s here?”

“Ryan Caulfield.” James stood, snatching his voice recorder and notepad. “You two head out the back. I’ll deal with him.”
Rachel: Getaway

The two social workers escorted Sadie down the hall as quickly as they could. “Your choice of parking spot makes a lot more sense,” Rachel mentioned off-handedly.

“Not my first rodeo. Take this left,” Stacy pointed, and Rachel lead the way down the hall, gripping Sadie tightly around her shoulder. “James is good at keeping him occupied.”

Rachel reached her hand out, shoving open the double doors ahead of them. “How long do you think he’ll be able to stall him?”

“Long enough for us to get out of here,” Stacy answered. “That door, right there, leads to the holding area. We can get out into the parking lot through there.”

Rachel grabbed and twisted the knob as they approached, pushing the door open. They entered what looked like a loading bay with a large set of double doors on the far side. Rachel had been there before, on a tour of the station; it was the area where prisoners were held while they awaited transport, to bring them to the courthouse. “Almost there,” she assured Sadie. “We’ll be.”

The doors in front of them opened quietly, and Ryan Caulfield walked inside.

The three of them froze in their tracks, as the doors closed behind him. “Good evening, Miss Hemingway,” Ryan greeted them.

Stacy glanced behind them and sighed; the doors they’d just walked through didn’t have handles on their side. They were stuck. “I didn’t know you were in the habit of taking the back entrances of buildings, Mister Caulfield,” she said as she pulled out her phone and started typing.

“I am when I notice your car parked in the side lot.” He looked over Rachel’s shoulder. “And where do you think you’re taking Miss Parsons?”

Rachel immediately stepped in front of the teenager and folded her arms. “Into protective custody.”

“Miss Amber. Congratulations on your new job.” Ryan took a step towards her. “Are you aware that interrogating a minor without their parents is illegal in the state of Oregon?”

“You and I both know that statute includes a guardian ad litem clause,” Rachel shot back. “Are YOU aware that breaking into the back of a police station is illegal in the state of Oregon?”

Ryan’s eyebrows elevated, just slightly. Rachel almost didn’t notice at first. That’s right, motherfucker, she thought spitefully. I’m not a pushover. Bring it.

“The door was unlocked. And this is a public building. But that’s a moot point.” He craned his neck to look at Sadie again. “Miss Parsons, you need to come with me, right now.”

Rachel felt Sadie grab the back of her arm. The teenager practically melted into her back, as she hid from Ryan. “Maybe you didn’t hear me,” Rachel said evenly. “We have a legitimate concern for her safety if she’s returned to her home. She’s being placed with a foster family while we investigate.”

Ryan took another step towards her. “And why is that?”

Shit. I might have said too much.

“Last I checked, we justify our actions to the state of Oregon, not you.” Stacy appeared next to
Rachel, shoving her phone back into her pocket. “You’re in our way.”

“Miss Parsons,” Ryan began, ignoring Stacy. “Your parents are very worried about you. You need to come home with me, or I can’t help you.”

“She doesn’t need your help,” Rachel snapped.

“She does if she’s being kidnapped by a state agency.”

“Maybe you didn’t hear me when I said the phrase ‘protective custody,’ ” Rachel shot back. “We’ve received information that puts her life in danger. She is not going back with you.”

Ryan turned her focus back to the two of them. “I don’t know what she told you, and quite frankly, it doesn’t matter. Without her parents’ presence and consent to the interrogation, none of it will stand up in court. Hand her over to me, or you will-”

The doors behind them were shoved open. James and three other officers walked out into the holding area. “They will do nothing of the kind,” he announced, as he walked in front of them. “Hello, Ryan.”

“Evening, James.” The two lawyers stared at each other. “Is the District Attorney’s office sponsoring kidnapping now?”

“Miss Parsons is being taken into protective custody.” James folded his arms. “She’s going to be held as a material witness, most likely against her parents.”

“You cannot compel her to-”

“We didn’t. She called us.” James smiled. “It is a good thing that you’re here, though.”

“And why is that?”

“Because officers are on their way to the Hansen and Wood households right now, to arrest those girls’ parents on charges of first-degree murder.” He gestured to the door behind them. “I assume you’ll want to wait for them to arrive, so you can be there for their interrogations?”

Ryan pursed his lips, looking at James carefully. “Yes, I do,” he finally agreed, before turning back to Rachel and Stacy. “But this is not over. When I get the judge to throw out evidence gathered based on the testimony of a minor, interrogated without parental consent, I expect Miss Parsons to be returned immediately.”

With that, he stepped aside. “Let’s go,” Rachel said quietly, as she grabbed Sadie’s arm. Stacy took the teenager by her other shoulder, and the two of them brought her towards the back door.

The teenager stopped right before the exit and squared her shoulders. “Fuck this,” she said quietly. “I’m not going back.”

“Sadie-”

She spun before either of them could stop her. “I’m gay,” she shot towards Ryan. “So tell my dad that I said congratulations, for raising a proper little pussy-eating dyke.”

SHIT!!

“Sadie, STOP talking!” Rachel pulled her towards the door, but Sadie dragged her feet as Ryan turned to look at her, his eyebrows raising in surprise at the outburst.
“I know what you fuckers did to Jen and Sara!” Sadie yelled, as she was carried out the door. “You tell my parents if they want to do that Sinner’s Exorcism shit to me, they better bring a lot of guys, because I’ll put them in the FUCKING ground!!”

Stacy and Rachel didn’t speak, as they put Sadie in the back of the car.

Neither did Sadie, as they pulled out of the space. Stacy drove back around the front of the building, towards the exit, intent on getting her to the secure foster home as quickly as possible. Jane and Pete are waiting for her, she reminded herself. Best not to keep everyone up too late.

She looked back at the front of the station, as she drove by, noticing Officer Berry still in the entryway. He watched them go by, waving distractedly, as his attention was focused on the inside of the building.

Heads-up about Caulfield coming around the back would have been nice. Stacy looked at him. Need to have a talk with Chief Watson about that guy.

... Interesting that he called him “Elder” over the radio. None of the other cops use those titles.

Stacy shook her head of the random thought. Enough paranoia for the night. Let’s get this girl out of here.

Mom: Are either of you coming home? It’s almost midnight.

Dad: Not anytime soon. We’re between interrogations.

Rachel: Me either. Stacy and I are still at the foster house.

Dad: You’re still there? You left hours ago.

Rachel: Sadie’s in the middle of a nervous breakdown. We’re still trying to get her to calm down.

Mom: The girl you took in? What happened?

Rachel: She outed herself to Ryan Caulfield before we left, and I think what she did hit her when we got to the foster house.

Dad: Yes, I don’t think that was a great move on her part.

Rachel: Have you made any progress yet?

Dad: We managed to confiscate Mr. Wood’s class ring. It’s a perfect match to the impressions they recovered from Sara’s face.

Dad: And we’ve woken a judge to get search warrants. Police have secured both houses, and forensics teams will start tearing them apart tomorrow morning.

Mom: Are you going to arrest them?

Dad: The Woods have already been booked. The Hansens have not, but we can hold them for another twelve hours. With any luck we’ll find something quickly.

Rachel: What about their cell phones? And cars? Are you going to interrogate Sadie’s parents, too?
**Dad:** Sweetie, you know I’ve been doing this for a while now, right?

**Rachel:** ... sorry. Sadie’s really scared, that we’ll have to send her back.

**Dad:** Well, that’s certainly not going to happen now. The entire church will know what she’s done by tomorrow afternoon, and word of her sexuality won’t be far behind it. Sending her back would be a death sentence.

**Dad:** At this point, the investigation your office will have to do is almost for show.

**Rachel:** That’s what Stacy is telling her. She’s still terrified.

**Rachel:** We’re about to have her take a sleeping pill, so she can get some rest.

**Mom:** You need to take her to see a professional, sweetie. That girl is going to need real help.

**Rachel:** We will. Stacy says there’s a really good shrink nearby that works with First Light kids.

**Mom:** Good. I’ll leave leftovers in the fridge for both of you, but I’m going to bed.

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**Stacy:** Overslept?

**Rachel:** Shit. Yes. Sorry.

**Rachel:** I’ll be in as soon as I can.

**Stacy:** Take your time. I just got to the office, too.

**Rachel:** Have you heard anything from Chief Watson yet?

**Stacy:** They’ve arrested the Hansen parents as well. I guess they finally unlocked their phones, and found the proof they needed.

**Rachel:** What about Sadie’s parents?

**Stacy:** I know they questioned them, but they haven’t been arrested.

**Rachel:** ... fuck.

**Stacy:** They’ve made some very unkind statements about their daughter, though. I think Ryan told them what she said last night.

**Rachel:** Yea, I didn’t think that would’ve been kept a secret. I suspect we haven’t heard the last of him on the matter.

**Stacy:** I’m actually fairly certain we have.

**Rachel:** Really?

**Stacy:** They’ve brought in a few others for questioning. Including Vanessa Caulfield.
Rachel: ... are you serious? They brought in Ryan’s wife?

Stacy: They did.

Stacy: By the way, you need to keep all that information VERY quiet.

Rachel: I remember what the NDA said.

Stacy: Good. Not a word to ANYONE.

Rachel: You look good in front of the cameras.

Dad: Thank you.

Rachel: Were you wearing makeup?

Dad: I had to. The lights from the cameras shine off your face if you don’t.

Rachel: Was it YOUR makeup, or theirs?

Dad: If you’re going to try to embarrass me, give it up. This is part of my job.

Rachel: Fine.

Dad: Have you spoken to Max yet?

Rachel: Do you think she saw it? It was a local thing.

Dad: A satellite crew was there from CNN. They mentioned that it would be in their C-Block on yesterday’s national coverage.

Rachel: ... crap. I was going to text her later about it.

Dad: You should do it now. She may have already seen it.

Rachel: I will.

Rachel: ... yours or theirs?

Dad: It was mine. Are you happy now?

Rachel: Yes :)
“Receiving the Bachelor of Arts in Education... Kate Beverly Marsh!!”

Victoria whistled loudly, clapping as hard as she could as she stood up. Her antics drew laughter from the crowd around her, as she watched her girlfriend cross the stage and accept her diploma from the UCLA President.

“WAY TO GO, KATE!!” she screamed, cupping her hands around her mouth.

“You should yell louder,” Stella commented from the seat next to her. “Someone in the back row might not have heard you.”

Victoria smirked as she looked at Kate’s friend. “Am I not allowed to be excited that my girlfriend got her degree?”

“Yea, fair enough.” Stella pushed her glasses up on her nose, as Victoria sat down. “Man, still a lot of people to go. Way more than my graduation.”

“Well, UCLA is way bigger than SDSU.” Victoria looked at the line of students still waiting to receive their diplomas; they weren’t even halfway done. “This is going to take a while.”

“Right.” Stella sat down, glancing at her boyfriend. “You doing okay?”

Eric nodded. “I’m good,” he said as he held up his phone. “Still have most of a charge.”

Stella narrowed her eyes. “Did you even hear what Kate got her degree in?”


“If you say so.”

Victoria chuckled at their back-and-forth. “Hey, um...” she hesitated, as Stella looked at her. “Thank you. Both of you guys. For coming down to see her.” She looked back at the stage. “It meant a lot, to her.”

“Of course.” Stella nodded. “How was she? After the whole...”

Victoria sighed. “About what you’d think,” she replied morosely. “She did kind of expect it, but to actually hear her mother say it out loud... it was a pretty rough night.”

Stella glanced at the front of the crowd, as Kate vanished back into her seat. “Yea. I’ve said it before, but her mom’s a fucking cunt.”

“No argument.” Victoria leaned back in her chair as she remembered the Skype call Kate had done with her parents, to give them the details of her graduation. Her father had seemed excited to go, even if her mother was somewhat less enthused.

Then she had mentioned that Victoria was going to be there as well.

Victoria had offered to back out, before the call. Kate refused to let her; she wanted her girlfriend to be there, when she walked across the stage, and that was that. Which was exactly what she had told her mother, after the expected outrage and argument. Kate had said some very choice words to her mom about the vitriol that fell from her mouth, to which her mother responded in kind.
At the end of the call, her family hadn’t been able to make it. Something had come up. There were no details as to what would be more important than watching their oldest daughter getting her bachelor’s degree.

Kate had been upset, of course. She’d cried a fair amount that night.

Victoria, determined not to be the only one to support her, had gotten Stella’s phone number and asked if she would drive up to be there. Kate’s childhood friend had immediately agreed.

And then she’d offered what Victoria thought was a phenomenal plan to stick it to her girlfriend’s mother.

“Excuse me, excuse me...” Victoria glanced over as Chris shimmied his way back down the row of chairs. “Coming through, so sorry...”

On the other side of Chris’s empty chair, Jaime crossed her arms. “You missed Kate, you big lump!” she exclaimed.

“I did not,” Chris immediately countered, as he sat down next to Victoria. “I was standing in the back. They were almost finished with the ‘L’s, when I got out of the bathroom, and I figured I would watch before I started stepping all over people’s toes to get back to my seat.”

“Probably a good call,” Stella agreed. “Did you get any pictures?”

“A couple.” Chris patted his phone through his pocket. “But I had to zoom in pretty far. They’re not very good.”

“That’s okay.” Jaime held up her phone. “I got better ones. They’ll be perfect for Facebook.”

Stella grinned. “How furious do you think Kate’s mother is going to be, when these pictures start spreading through social media?”

“Are you kidding?” Victoria flashed Stella a conniving smile. “We haven’t even gotten to the good ones yet.”

As soon as the ceremony was over, the others immediately started tracking down Kate. Thankfully, she didn’t take long to find.

“Kate!!” Victoria called, getting her girlfriend’s attention.

Kate turned away from Alyssa, smiling brightly as she saw Victoria. “I got my Bachelor’s!!” She squealed, as she held up the folder.

Victoria didn’t respond, as wrapped her arms around Kate and scooped her up. The shorter girl squealed as Victoria spun her around, finally stopping and planting a dramatic kiss on her lips.

“Got it!” Jaime lowered her phone, as Victoria broke it off and put Kate down. “Nice one!”

Kate frowned. “Nice what?”

“Don’t worry about it.” Victoria smiled. “I am so happy for you!! You got your degree!!”

“I know!” Kate turned the folder over in her hands, admiring the embossed paper with its flowing script. “I mean, I still have more school to go before I can teach, but...”
“Dude, who cares?” Stella interrupted. “You got the four-year degree! The important one!”

Kate scoffed. “I think there are a few people who would disagree with the assessment that a Bachelor’s is more important than a Master’s.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Chris smirked. “You’re a legit college graduate now. Congratulations, Kate.”

“Thanks!” Kate beamed. “And... really, guys, thanks for coming, too.” She paused. “It means a lot, that you came all the way down from San Jose.”

“Honey, if you thought we were gonna miss this, you had another think coming.” Jaime smiled. “Now come on, we need a group photo.”

Jaime and Victoria both passed their phones off to Eric, who had volunteered to stay out of the family drama they’d arranged beforehand. They had even decided on how they would take the picture that morning, going so far as to discuss where they’d be standing in relation to Kate.

Stella was on one far end of the group; the anticipation of Kate’s mother reacting to the photo had her smiling widely. Victoria was next to her, followed by Kate in the middle. Chris was on her other side, and Jaime stood right behind him, her hand positioned possessively on his arm as she smiled for the photo.

The first few photos were the simple ones; Eric took several of the group standing still, posing with Kate as she held up her degree. Then, in a choreographed move, Victoria bent over and planted a surprise smooch on her girlfriend’s cheek. Kate’s face was full of surprise as she laughed. Chris, of course, was watching and laughing cheerfully as well, while Stella and Jaime smirked at both of them. Eric took a burst photo of that moment, to make sure there were plenty to choose from.

“Oh, my God!” Kate blushed, though she couldn’t keep the grin from her face. “Vicky!”

“Sorry.” Victoria and Jaime shared a satisfied smirk over Kate’s head. “Couldn’t resist.”

When it was all said and done, Jaime put four photos on Facebook. The first one was Victoria spinning Kate while kissing her, the degree visible in Kate’s hands as they embraced. The second was the group picture, and the third was the best from the photos of Victoria’s surprise kiss. The fourth was a photo they took later, as a restaurant, that featured Kate and Victoria holding hands.

The effects took a couple of days to trickle down, but Victoria was satisfied with the results.

“Wow.” Kate leaned back on the couch, as the two of them sat in their apartment. Her laptop was open as she browsed Facebook.

“What?” Victoria looked at her, concerned. “What’s wrong?”

“My mom un-friended me on Facebook.” Kate sighed as she shook her head. “I don’t think she likes the photos Jaime posted to our walls.”

“Oh.” Victoria managed to frown, instead of grinning devilishly in joy. “I’m sorry, babe.”

Kate shrugged, as she pushed her laptop off to the side. “I guess that’s par for the course.” She gestured with one hand. “My homophobic mother, ladies and gentlemen.”

“I am really sorry.” Victoria heaved a theatrical sigh, as she glanced at her lap. “Maybe I shouldn’t have gone so over-the-top. Do you...” she bit her lip. “Do you want to ask Jaime to take them
“Not a chance.” Kate shook her head. “If my mother can’t accept that I love you... well, that’s her problem. Not mine.”

A smile crept over Victoria’s face as she moved closer to Kate. “I love you too,” she said quietly, bending down and kissing her girlfriend. “I’m still sorry, about your mom.”

“I’m not.” Kate smiled back. “Not for a second.” she breathed, as her hand moved up to Victoria’s cheek. “Now come here.”

*You hear that, Momma Marsh?* Victoria smiled, as she put her lip’s back on Kate’s. *That’s the sound of being put in Check, bitch.*

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**Max:** I saw the pictures! Congratulations!

**Kate:** Thank you so much!

**Max:** I am incredibly jealous, by the way.

**Kate:** Awe, don’t worry. Four years will fly by, I promise.

**Max:** Little over three. Not that I’m counting, or anything.

**Kate:** LOL.

**Max:** BTW, you and Victoria are adorable in that last group picture.

**Kate:** She caught me off guard. I had NO idea she was about to do that.

**Max:** So what now? When do you start the classes for your Master’s?

**Kate:** In the fall. I’m going to celebrate my four-year degree by being lazy over the summer.

**Kate:** Vicky says we’re going to Napa Valley for a few days, in a couple of weeks.

**Max:** Okay, now I’m REALLY jealous.

**Max:** Ooh, does that mean you might stop by San Francisco on your way through?

**Kate:** No, I already asked. She said we’re taking the I-5 all the way up, so we’ll miss you guys.

**Max:** Aww. That sucks.

**Kate:** Maybe on the way back I can convince her?

**Max:** When are you guys going back south?

**Kate:** Vicky says the 29th.

**Max:** ... boo.

**Kate:** You have plans?
Max: One of Chloe’s friends is in a band that’s playing that night, and we’re going to see him.

Kate: Darn. That sounds like fun, though!

Max: Yea, she had me listen to a couple of their songs. They’re actually really good.

Kate: I kind of want to listen. Do they have a YouTube channel? What’s the name of the band?

Max: I... don’t know if you’ll care for it.

Kate: You never know, I listen to a bunch of genres. What’s the band name?

Max: ...

Max: PissHead.

Kate: Oh, my.

Max: Yea.

Kate: I’m a little reluctant to type that into a search engine.

Max: I did already. Take my advice; don’t.

Alyssa: Guess who’s gonna be using their Communications degree?

Kate: No way! Where are you working?

Alyssa: A consulting firm that’s actually not that far away from you and your girlfriend.

Kate: Really? Consulting for what?

Alyssa: Broadly, public relations.

Kate: That’s... really vague?

Alyssa: I signed, like, six different non-disclosures when they hired me, so I can’t really say much more than that.

Kate: Sounds pretty intense.

Alyssa: It is. I can tell you that my boss says I’ll be working with some pretty famous people, who really value what little privacy they have. Hence, the non-disclosures.

Alyssa: Also, I’ll be making craploads of money.

Kate: Wow. Hey, that is still so cool!

Alyssa: I know, I’m really excited to get to work next week.

Alyssa: Sucks that you still have a couple years of school left.

Kate: Yea. But when it’s done...
Alyssa: You can be a public education professional working for pennies?

Kate: I prefer to think of it as ‘teaching the innovators of tomorrow’.

Alyssa: With a leap like that, maybe you should consider a career in politics.
Steph bit her lip as she studied the drawing she’d been working on for the past hour. She’s a freedom fighter. No way is she going to be that well-endowed while carrying a machine gun through the frozen forests of Siberia. Probably wouldn’t look that pretty, either. Need to give her a rougher face.

Sighing, she leaned back in her chair and examined the rest of her drawing. Her outfit is wrong, too. Need to make it look more battle-worn. Throw in some rips, frayed stitches, definitely put a knife somewhere… she paused. Do I give her kneepads? I mean, they’re important. But we don’t need asshole gamers making kneepad jokes on the internet. Maybe put just one on her dominant knee?

Ooh. I know who I can ask. Steph reached over and retrieved her cell phone.

**Steph:** Hey, you’ve rolled into battle before, right?

**Jake:** That was not the phrase we used. But yes.

**Steph:** Out of curiosity, what phrase DID you use?

**Jake:** “Hey assholes, gear up. We’re going on another pointless patrol because the Lieutenant wants to get promoted.”

**Steph:** … seriously?

**Jake:** Scary, right?

**Steph:** Little bit. Anyway. Did you wear kneepads?

**Jake:** No, I was never that desperate to make rank.

**Steph:** In BATTLE, you asshole.

**Jake:** I did. Some guys didn’t. Came down to personal preference.

**Jake:** Is this for a sketch?

**Steph:** Yea.

**Jake:** Show me?

**Steph:** <screenshot.jpg>

**Jake:** Why are her tits so big?

“Oh, Jesus.” Steph sighed, as she rolled her eyes.

**Steph:** I’m gonna fix that. Any OTHER observations?
Jake: Seriously, we did have a few women go with us sometimes, but their chests were never that big. You know not all gamers lust after big tits, right?

Steph: Women went out with you guys?

Jake: Cultural support teams. The local women wouldn’t talk to men, so occasionally females would go out to speak with them. Sometimes we backed up special forces, so we saw them a fair amount.

She mused over the new information. *I’m gonna have to Google that later. Sounds interesting.*

Steph: Did they wear anything different then the men?

Jake: Oh, yes. They wore special pants with extra padding in the crotch, to accommodate their periods. And they wore pink camouflage with unicorns, and had extra pouches for their makeup.

Steph: Dude, fuck you. I’m working here.

Jake: As far as I could tell, they carried the same shit everyone else did. Including kneepads.

Steph: Did you ever wear just one? On your dominant knee?

Jake: I saw a couple of people do it. But this was ten, fifteen years ago. They’ve got new pants now that have integrated kneepads. They look way cooler.

Steph: This woman is supposed to be a guerilla fighter trying to end the oppressive regime that killed her family. I don’t think she’s wearing three-hundred-dollar combat pants.

Jake: If she’s a guerilla, she’s not wearing kneepads. And if she is, she’s making them, not buying them. We saw insurgents make a lot of gear out of duct tape and scraps of whatever they had lying around.

“Huh.” Steph leaned back, thinking.

Steph: So, if YOU were a freedom fighter in Siberia, what do you think you’d be wearing?

Jake: Give her a watch cap. And a scarf. Cut her hair, too, or put it up in a short ponytail or bun; you’re not running around a war zone with your hair down, it’ll get in the way of everything. Cut the tips of the trigger fingers and thumbs off of her gloves. Definitely worn leather boots, and work pants. And a jacket. Look at Carhartt for some ideas.

Steph: What about her gear?

Jake: Whatever she can get from dead soldiers, but rougher, and held together with anything she can get her hands on. We found insurgents using rifle slings and chest rigs left behind by the Soviets thirty years prior that their mothers sewed back together.

Steph: Cool. So, redo everything, then.

Jake: Hey, you asked.

“Yea, I did.” Steph sighed, as she looked longingly at her sketch. “Well, it was nice while it lasted.”

Saving the old drawing, she opened up a new one. Then she pulled over her laptop, determined to do some research on the female cultural support teams and see what they looked like.
“How was work, sweetie?”

“Ugh.” Rachel plopped down on the stool at the kitchen island, dropping her forehead onto her hands. “I interviewed Sadie’s parents again. Or tried to, anyway.”

Rose frowned. “Tried to?”

“They refused to let me inside.” Rachel looked up at her mom. “Her mother told me that they didn’t raise any filthy dykes in their house. And her father insisted that they didn’t have a daughter.”

“Oh, God.” Rose looked at her in horror. “They won’t get her back, will they?”

“No.” Rachel shook her head. “After statements like that, and everything Dad’s been finding, we’ve got every justification to keep her in foster care until she ages out.”

Rose sighed. “Well. That must be better than living with her family.”

“Totally.” Rachel nodded. “Where is Dad, by the way?”

“Working late.” Rose winced. “He didn’t think he’d make it back for dinner. Him and the other ADAs are still working on the trials for those people.”

Rachel shook her head. “I hope he nails them to the wall.”

“I’m sure he will.” Rose opened the oven, quickly peeking inside before closing it again. “Another ten minutes or so for dinner.”

A buzzing from Rachel’s purse drew her attention, and she quickly retrieved her phone. She immediately smirked.

“Who is it?”

“Max.” Rachel started typing out a message. “She just asked if Steph and I were awake.”

“Well, it is a little late.” Rose sighed, looking at the clock on the wall. “I miss when dinner around here was at a reasonable hour.”

“Me too.” Rachel continued to type on her phone. “Oh, nice.”

“What?”

Rachel turned the phone, showing her mom the screen. “Max met her girlfriend’s mother.”

“Ooh.” Rose smiled. “That’s an important milestone. I remember when I met your father’s family. It was pretty intimidating.”

Rachel looked back at her mom and raised her eyebrows. “Grandpa Joe and Grandma Francine? Really? They were intimidating?”

“Your father was their only son,” Rose reminded her. “Getting their approval wasn’t easy.”

Rachel smirked as she continued to type on her phone. “Well, sounds like Max worked some serious charm. Chloe’s mother is buying her a plane ticket to come visit for Christmas.”

“Wow.” Rose looked impressed, as she leaned on the counter. “Good for her.”
“Yea, no kidding.”

Man, she’s lucky.

Steph felt a little pang of jealousy, but quickly suppressed it. Mom not bothering to make time for me this Christmas isn’t Max’s fault, she reminded herself. Besides, she’s the last person I’m going to bitch to.

Steph: So it went well?

Rachel: No, her GF’s mom brought her a several-hundred-dollar plane ticket because Max acted like Belatrix Lestrange.

Steph snorted in amusement. She thinks she’s so goddamn funny.

...

I miss her. She needs to come back down.

She frowned, the mirth leaving her face as she read Max’s next few texts.

Max: I know. Just... I can’t stop thinking about how lucky I am to have Chloe.

Max: And how lucky I’ve been in general, ever since I ran away.

“Ah, shit.” Steph sighed, the guilt starting to eat away at her. It had gotten better, the more she talked with Max and the better their relationship became. But every time Max mentioned getting her GED, or doing online classes, she felt a cold pit develop in her stomach.

We’re the reason she’s so far behind in life.

She tried to ignore the gnawing feeling as she typed back her reply.

Steph: Max, you know we’ll never stop feeling terrible about what happened.

Rachel: Seriously. Forever.

Max: I know.

Max: But after everything, I can’t think of a way my life would have been better if I stayed.

Max: Running away might have sucked, but I told Chloe last week that I’d do it again in a minute to get back to her.

Max: And I know I told you both, I accepted your apologies already.

Max: I just wanted to make sure you both knew that I really do forgive you guys for what happened, back in high school.

Steph’s breathing hitched, as her eyes zeroed in on the last text.

She... what?

She forgives us?
Steph saw that Max kept texting, but she couldn’t read any of it. Her vision quickly went blurry, as her lips trembled. Her breath started to catch, almost like she had hiccups, as her brain flooded with intense emotions.

*She forgave us.*

Steph had almost forgotten how massive the weight she’d been carrying was, before she felt it lift from her shoulders. A sob exploded from her lungs, and she put her head in her hands as the tears started to carve trails down her cheeks.

*No.*

*I don’t deserve it. I know that. I’m dreaming, or hallucinating, or fucking SOMETHING.*

She pinched the back of her wrist as hard as she could, hissing in pain, and looked back at her phone through watery eyes. The texts were still there.

*I can’t believe it. After everything she went through because of us.*

Steph was practically gasping for air as laid her head down on her arms and cried.

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Rose had no idea what had happened, at first.

When she’d turned back to remove the meatballs from the oven, Rachel had been fine. She’d seemed to adopt a more serious expression, as she texted Maxine, but that was it. Rose paid it no mind, as she placed the hot pan on the stovetop and began using tongs to transfer the meatballs into the pasta.

When she turned back after a few minutes, to let her daughter know that dinner was ready, she did a double take. Rachel’s head was on the counter, buried in her arms. One hand still held her phone, and she seemed to be trembling.

“Rachel?” She quickly pulled her oven mitts off. “Are you okay?”

Her daughter slowly picked her head back up, and the first thing Rose noticed was the streaking mascara as tears slid down Rachel’s face. And how tightly her lips were pressed together, as if she was trying to keep herself together.

It fell apart quickly. As soon as she opened her mouth, Rachel started bawling.

Rose ran around the kitchen island, wrapping her arms around her daughter’s shoulders. Rachel gripped her like a life preserver as she blubbered into her shirt, though Rose didn’t understand any of what she said.

“Honey, take a deep breath,” Rose told her, as she tried to understand what her daughter was saying. “It’s okay, Rachel. Tell me what’s wrong.”

Rachel held up her phone as she cried, and Rose maneuvered her hand to take it from her. She scanned the texts quickly, blinking as she got to the last few lines. “Oh.”

“I didn’t-” Rachel’s breath caught, as she practically hiccupsed while sobbing. “I never- thought-” she paused, inhaling sharply as she cried. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, Max, I’m sorry...”

“Hey, it’s okay.” Rose squeezed her tight. “Max forgave you, Rachel. It’s okay.”

Rachel snorted deeply, trying to stem the flow of mucus from her nose as she took her phone back.
Rose watched her fumble with her thumbs, trying to reply, between her crying and the shaking, the sentences came out as gibberish.

“Here, sweetie.” Rose took hold of the phone. “I got it.”

Rachel gave it up without a fight, putting her face back in her hands and she resumed sobbing.

**Rachel:** Maxine, it’s Rose. Rachel’s mother.

**Max:** Is she okay?

**Rachel:** She’s a little emotional, and is having trouble typing on her phone.

Rose looked at her daughter, noting how hard she was crying.

**Rachel:** Can she text you back later?

**Rachel:** Or maybe call? That looks easier at this point.

**Max:** Of course.

**Max:** Whenever she’s ready.
Rachel nodded, watching Sadie carefully as she sat across from her. “I’m afraid so,” she agreed. “Between the information you gave the District Attorney and the statements made by your parents, we’ve decided that sending you back would be too dangerous. You’re being made a ward of the state, and you’re going to stay here until you’re an adult.”

The teenager had an expressionless face, as she toyed with a lock of hair. Next to her, Jane leaned forward. “Are you okay?”

“It’s...” Sadie hesitated, as she looked at her foster mother. “I’m sorry, Jane. I-”

“Don’t be sorry,” Jane quickly corrected her. “You did nothing wrong.”

“You really didn’t,” Rachel assured her. “If it wasn’t for you, we never would have been able to bring charges against those people. Jennifer and Sara will get justice because of what you’ve done.”

“I know.” Sadie looked down at her lap. “I... honestly feel kind of stupid. I never really processed that I would end up homeless because of it.”

Jane laid a hand on her shoulder. “You’re NOT homeless,” she said forcefully. “Sadie, our home will be yours until you decide that it’s not. You will always have a place here, I promise.”

“... thank you.” Sadie looked back at Rachel. “Um... this is going to sound dumb, but... what about all of my stuff?”

“Your clothes, books, jewelry, all the stuff that was mine,” Sadie clarified. “Is there any way I can get it back, from my parent’s house?”

She’d really been hoping the teenager wouldn’t ask. Rachel felt incredibly bad, as she sighed. “Sadie... did you buy any of that stuff yourself?”

“... no,” she admitted. “My parents brought it all for me.”

“Then... I’m sorry, Sadie, but there really isn’t any way to get it back,” Rachel informed her. “Legally, everything in your house was yours by the grace of your family. And possession is nine-tenths of ownership, where the law is concerned.” She shook her head. “If your parents tell us that nothing in your room belonged to you, we have no way of proving otherwise.”

“But it did!” Sadie objected. “What, are the cops going to think my bras and underwear belong to my younger brother? Or my mom? Or all my necklaces belong to my dad? And what about my books? I had dozens of them!”

“I’m so sorry,” Rachel said sincerely. “But there really isn’t anything we can do.”

“But...” Sadie blinked, as she looked off into space. “I didn’t bring anything with me. I don’t have anything else.”

Jane squeezed Sadie’s shoulder. “Tell me about your books,” she said. “Maybe we can find some copies at the used-”
“No.” Sadie clenched her fists in her lap, as she adopted a frosty tone. “I don’t want them anymore.”

“The jewelry, then,” Jane offered. “I’m sure we can find some nice stuff at the mall, to replace what you lost.”

“I don’t want them, either. My parents can keep all of it.” Sadie stood. “I need to use the bathroom.”

Rachel and Jane watched her walk upstairs, and listened to the door close. “How has she been?” Rachel asked quietly.

Jane shook her head. “She hasn’t said a lot,” she murmured. “I don’t think she’s sleeping very well, either.”

“Is she adjusting?” Rachel nodded towards the stairs. “How is she doing, now that she doesn’t have to wear that dress all the time?”

“She wore it all day yesterday.” Jane rubbed her hands together. “When I asked her, she said it felt weird not to. I think she’s still... I don’t know. Maybe ‘conditioned’ is the best word.”

“I believe it.” Rachel stood from her seat on the coffee table, sliding over to the more-comfortable easy chair. “Jane... you know the state will only make support payments until Sadie turns eighteen, or graduates high school?”

“I do.” Jane nodded. “Pete and I read the paperwork very carefully, before we signed it.”

“I’m just asking, because of what you told her.” Rachel leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m not saying you shouldn’t have said it. And I’m sure she’s incredibly grateful.”

Jane smirked. “Rachel, between Pete’s military retirement, what we make at our jobs, and our investments, we’re not hurting for money. The payments from the state are very helpful, but if they were to stop, we would still be able to take care of Sadie.”

“You’re on the list to possibly receive a second child,” Rachel reminded her. “Would you still be okay if you did?”

“We would.” Jane fixed Rachel with a look. “I know, it might not have been the smartest thing to say. But that poor girl needs someone who will commit to her, no matter what.”

Rachel raised her eyebrows. “You know that’s my job, right?”

“You track dozens of kids,” Jane countered. “We’ll be responsible for one or two. You’re going to do a great job, Rachel, I’m sure of it, but you can’t be everywhere.” She smiled. “You focus on making sure they stay safe. We’ll make sure they’re taken care of.”

“... fair enough.” Rachel leaned back. “Appreciate the vote of confidence, too.”

“You’re welcome.”

The garage door opened, and they both watched as Pete walked inside. “Afternoon, ladies,” he greeted, as he wiped his hands on his jeans.

“Hey, Pete.” Rachel smiled. “How’s the car?”

“Fixed.” He sat down on the couch beside Jane, the couch creaking under his muscular frame. “I told that fool not to mess with anything he doesn’t know about. I’m not even sure he knew what he was
trying to do. But it’s un-done now.”

Jane rolled her eyes. “One of his buddies from the VFW thinks he’s a gearhead,” she explained. “Pete says he’s not.”

“I’ve been saying a lot worse about him than that, for the past couple of days.” Pete leaned back into the couch. “I’m gonna tell him that if there isn’t a bottle of Eagle Rare in his hand when I see him, he isn’t taking his car home.”

Rachel frowned. “You fixed his car for a bottle of bourbon?”

“No, I fixed his car for a few hundred bucks.” Pete grinned. “The bourbon’s on account of him being a pain in my ass.”

“Language,” Jane reminded him.

“Oh, right.” Pete grimaced. “Sorry, Rachel.”

“Takes a little getting used to.” She shrugged. “I still slip up sometimes.”

“Thank you. See, babe?” Pete gestured towards Rachel, as he looked at Jane. “Twenty-two years in the Army does a lot for a man’s vocabulary. You can’t just fix it with some signed paperwork. Ask her.”

Jane rolled her eyes. “You can still make an effort.”

“I am,” Pete said, sounding offended. “Besides, you heard how Sadie talked, when Rachel and Stacy brought her here. I’m sure we’re not corrupting her.”

Rachel sat up, frowning. “Speaking of Sadie. Is she still in the bathroom?”

Jane looked towards the stairs. “I don’t... maybe?” she said uneasily. “I never heard the toilet flush.”

All three of them stood and headed upstairs, Rachel taking the lead as she walked towards the bathroom. As she got closer to the door, she heard a noise from the other side that she couldn’t identify. “Sadie?” she asked, knocking quickly. “Are you okay in there?”

“I’m fine,” the teenager replied, her voice muffled through the door.

Rachel frowned, as she heard the noise again. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing.”

“Sadie, we can hear you in there.” Rachel jiggled the doorknob; it was locked. “Please open the door, sweetie.”

“In a minute.”

“Hang on.” Rachel looked over as Pete reached over her head, feeling above the frame of the door and producing a bent paperclip. He stuck it through the pinhole of the handle, and Rachel heard the door unlock. She twisted the knob and shoved the door open, before Sadie could re-lock it.

The teenager was standing in front of the mirror, and Rachel blinked in horror at the scene. She was holding a pair of scissors, and chunks of hair were scattered all over the ground. She’d chopped off almost all of it; what hair remained on her head was cropped close, in a ragged bob. As Rachel watched, she snipped off another length of hair, which floated towards the floor.
“Sadie!” Rachel took a quick step and grabbed her wrist. “Oh my God! What did you do?!”

“I’m FINE!” The teenager struggled, as Rachel fought to remove the scissors from her hands. “Let go of me!”

“Give me those!!” Rachel continued to struggle against her, finally prying the scissors free and holding them away from the teenager. “Jesus, Sadie!”

Jane pushed in behind Rachel, blinking as she stared at the teenager. “Oh, my.”

“Are you okay?” Rachel dropped the scissors into the trash can, grabbing Sadie’s wrists and checking her skin for cuts. “Did you hurt yourself?”

“No!” Sadie exclaimed, jerking her hands back. “I’m not suicidal!”

Rachel breathed a sigh of relief as she inspected the teenager’s hair. “What in the world were you thinking, then? Why would you cut off all of your hair?”

“I don’t know.” Sadie looked back in the mirror, brushing the jagged locks from her forehead. “I just… wanted to see what it looked like.”

Rachel watched the teenager closely. Crap, she thought, as her mind raced. I knew Stacy should’ve come with me. This wasn’t something they told us to watch out for in our classes. I don’t know what to do.

“Why?” she asked.

“Because I can.” Sadie shot her a look. “That’s not against the rules, is it? I still have bodily autonomy? Or am I not allowed to cut my own hair?”

“No- Sadie, of course you can.” Rachel said. “I want to know why you wanted to do it yourself.”

“I just…” Sadie paused, as she looked back at the mirror, and didn’t answer.

Jane stepped behind the teenager. “You know, it doesn’t look that bad,” she told her gently.

Sadie smirked, and Rachel watched the tension ease from her shoulders. “Just okay?”

“The bob looks pretty good on you.” Jane brushed a few loose hairs off Sadie’s shoulders. “Aside from the cuts; they’re a little ragged. But the style really suits you. I like it.”

“… thanks.”

“Did your parents ever let you cut your hair?”

She shook her head. “My mom trimmed it, so it wasn’t too long. But she never really cut it. Or styled it.”

Jane hummed. “Well. I think you did an okay job.”

Sadie smirked, and Rachel watched the tension ease from her shoulders. “Just okay?”

“Well, styling you own hair isn’t easy. Especially when it’s your first time.” Jane checked her watch. “There’s a salon a few minutes from here that’s still open, and they’re not too busy. Why don’t we take you down there and have them clean this up?”
“It’s apparently known as a Big Chop.”

James frowned, as they sat at the dinner table later that night. “Never heard of it.”

“Me either. Jane told me about it, while we were waiting for the stylist to fix Sadie’s hair.” Rachel ate another spoonful of mashed potatoes, swallowing before she continued. “She also assured me that it’s not a method of self-harm. I guess some girls do it, after a really stressful life event. Like being removed from their home and finding out that that have to start over from scratch.”

“Why?” Rose asked, leaning forward with interest. “I don’t understand. What does she get, aside from a bad haircut?”

“Actually, Jane wasn’t really wrong. Once it got cleaned up, Sadie did look pretty good. Especially after the stylist gave her some blonde highlights.” Rachel smirked. “It’s a method of taking back some measure of control. A way of starting over, you could call it.”

“I guess that’s apt.” James nodded. “How is she doing, besides?”

Rachel sighed. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “I feel really bad for her. She ran away with nothing but the clothes on her back. Everything she has was brought for her by Jane. She’s in a shitty spot.”

“Maybe we can do something about that,” James pondered. “I’m sure we could take up a collection at work, or something.”

“What about the police auction?” Rose asked. “They did a charity drive there last year. And there’s a lot more people there.”

James shook his head. “They’re already committed to the Wounded Warrior Foundation,” he explained. “Maybe next time, though. They’re doing another one in a couple of months. I can ask Chief Watson when I get there.”

Rachel raised an eyebrow. “Why are YOU going to the police auction?” she asked pointedly. “What are you going to buy, a drug dealer’s old car?”

Her father snorted in amusement. “Probably nothing,” he admitted. “It’s really just expected of me, as the DA. It is interesting to see what gets confiscated, if nothing else. The last one had a very impressive vinyl collection.”

“Really?”

“Yep.” He nodded. “Are you interested now?”

“Not in old records. But maybe.” Rachel leaned forward. “What else have they got?”

“Here.” Her father produced his phone and tapped it a few times, before showing her an email. “They sent me the list of everything they’re selling.”

Rachel skimmed through it. “There’s a lot of jewelry in here.”

James shrugged. “Usually is. Easy to pawn for bail money.”

“Fair enough.” Rachel kept reading through it before one of the entries made her stop. “... huh.”

“What?”

Rachel looked up. “You said Chief Watson is running this?”

“Any chance you might be able to call in a favor?”

She knocked on Jane and Pete’s door three days later.

Sadie was lounging on the couch when she was let in, watching TV. “Hi Sadie,” Rachel greeted her.

“Hey, Miss Amber.” Sadie sat upright. “Checking to make sure I didn’t cut off any more hair?”

“No. But I am glad to see that you still have the same amount as when I left.” Rachel sat down next to her on the couch, facing the teenager. “Feeling better?”

“A little.” Sadie nodded. “Jane took me to Blackwell, and got me registered for classes.”


“No. She wasn’t in.” Sadie shook her head. “But they made me an appointment for her.”

“You’ll like her, too. The other teenagers who’ve left First Light have very nice things to say about her.” Rachel shifted, setting her purse down in her lap. “Has Jane taken you shopping for school supplies?”

“Yea, she hooked me up.” Sadie watched Rachel fish into her purse. “What are you doing?”

“What?!” Sadie took the phone and immediately hit the power button, turning the screen on. “No way! Even my mom didn’t have one of these!”

“Easy, Sadie, calm down,” Rachel told her. “Now, it’s a prepaid phone, so you’ve got a limit on how many calls you can make. Try not to use it if you don’t have to, unless you’re on a WiFi connection.”

Sadie barely heard her, as she used her finger to flip through the phone. “This is awesome,” she breathed, looking up at Rachel. “Oh my God. Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome.” Rachel pulled a charging cable out of her purse, handing that to Sadie too. “You’ll need this.”

“Yea, probably.” Sadie paused, glancing up at her. “This didn’t, like, cost a ton of money, did it?”

Rachel shook her head. “Don’t worry about it,” she assured her. “But Sadie, there’s an app I want you to know about. That red one, there on the home screen.”

Sadie flipped back, looking at the icons. “This one?”

“Yes. That’s an anonymous messaging app,” Rachel explained. “I want you to make an account
with that, so you can talk to me and the other First Light teenagers without leaving phone records or accidentally giving away your location.”

“Yea, that would suck.” Sadie looked up at her. “Thank you so much, Miss Amber.”

“You’re welcome.” Rachel closed her purse and stood. “Sorry to run so quickly, but I have to be someplace. Remember to be careful with that phone, okay?”

“You got it.” Sadie turned back to the device as Rachel walked out.

Jane followed her to the door. “Where did you get that?” she asked quietly. “I know CPS doesn’t give out phones.”

Rachel gave her a half smirk. “I managed to snag a box of them before they went up for a police auction,” she explained. “Apparently, some drug supplier in Portland was using them to give orders to his dealers. The cops did factory resets, and were going to sell them off.”

Jane raised an eyebrow. “And they just gave them to you?”

“No. I had to buy them.” Rachel shook her head. “Small price to pay.”

“Somehow, I doubt it was small.” Jane glanced back towards the living room where Sadie sat with her new phone, completely immersed. “But definitely worth it.”

“Agreed.” Rachel reached back into her purse. “This is for her, too.”

Jane frowned, as she took the envelope. “And this is...”

“The DA’s office took up a collection on her behalf the other day,” Rachel explained. “There’s about four hundred bucks in there, to help with her new wardrobe. Just tell her it’s some back-to-school funds the CPS office freed up, or something like that.”

“Do I have to?” Jane asked. “I’m sure she’d love to thank them.”

Rachel shook her head. “She can’t. If First Light finds out that their office gave it to her, Ryan Caulfield might try to twist it as them bribing her for the information.”

“Ah ha.” Jane closed the envelope. “Then... back-to-school shopping money it is.”
“Mother, for the life of me, I cannot understand why you thought that would happen.”

Victoria watched Kate carefully, as she spoke to her mom over the phone. Her face seemed to be made of stone, and her arms were folded.

“Oh, let me make this very clear, so there is no confusion.” Kate leaned forward. “I am spending this Christmas with my girlfriend. Whether it’s in San Diego or Los Angeles makes absolutely no difference to me.”

She listened some more.

“I will not have this argument with you again, Mom,” she stated after a few minutes. “You need to get over the fact that I’m a lesbian, not just confused or going through a phase. I love Vicky, and I don’t give a damn about your opinion on the matter.”

Victoria got up from the couch and made her way to the table, sitting next to Kate as her mother yelled through the phone.

Kate finally sighed. “Okay, I’m tired of this conversation,” she said. “Do you have anything substantial to say, that you didn’t lift from the Westboro Baptist website?”

Victoria couldn’t help but snort. Okay, that was good.

“I don’t believe you.” Kate glared at the far wall. “You fooled me last year with Grandma Louis. Who, by the way, is doing surprisingly well for someone who was supposedly in kidney failure. All of your credibility is gone, as far as I’m concerned, so I don’t care if YOU’RE dying, Mom. This year, I am spending Christmas with Vicky. Period, end of story.”

Kate looked at Victoria and shook her head slowly, clearly being fed up with the conversation.

“Okay, I’m done. Have a wonderful Christmas, Mother. Give my love to Dad and my sisters.” She took the phone from her ear and hung up, placing it on the table.

“What did she say?” Victoria asked.

“That my dad was having surgery, and she needed my help.” Kate shrugged. “I know he’s not. And if he is, that will teach her a harsh lesson when it comes to crying ‘wolf’.”

Victoria shook her head. “I’m sorry your mom’s a cunt.”

Kate blinked, looking at her. “I think I’m supposed to defend her, or something. But... I really don’t care to.” She sighed. “Doesn’t matter. I get to spend Christmas with you here in Los Angeles.”

“Actually...” Victoria bit her lip. “Um...”

“What?” Kate looked at her. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Victoria said quickly. “I’m just... nervous.”
Kate raised an eyebrow. “About...?”

“Well, I mean, if we’re not going to San Diego, then... I would really like to bring you to Seattle.” Victoria scratched the back of her neck. “It’s the tenth. If I tell my dad now, he can make sure that him and my mom are in town.”

“You...” Kate paused. “You want me to meet your parents?”

“I’ve wanted my parents to meet you for, like, two years now,” Victoria pointed out. “Everyone’s schedules just sucked for it. But if I give them this much notice, they’ll have no reason to not be home.”

“Mm.” Kate shifted in her chair. “Is... it wrong, that I’m still nervous to meet your family?”

“Oh, my dad isn’t that intimidating.” Victoria took Kate’s hand, squeezing it. “I know my parents will love you. I REALLY want them to meet the girl I’ve been telling them about for two years now.”

Kate grinned. “You need to prove to them that I’m real, don’t you?”

Victoria rolled her eyes. “My parents have SEEN your picture, Kate.”

“And they still don’t believe you? How could they?”

“Oh, shut up.”

Despite Kate’s cavalier attitude, Victoria still worried that her girlfriend would have difficulty with her family’s lifestyle; their relationship thus far had only given her a taste of it.

She worried when they got to the airport, and she brought them through security. Victoria had essentially tricked Kate into letting her pay for the TSA Precheck, so she could move through quickly; she’d taken all of her info during a casual conversation, before Kate could stop her, and had then guilted her into going to the in-person appointment.

And then when they got to the premium lounge, since they’d arrived early, Kate couldn’t stop looking around at the tasteful decorations and comfy seats. Or the nice food that was brought to them, rather than greasy pizza or burgers. She’d commented several times that she hadn’t even realized the lounge was ever there.

Victoria kept worrying, as they took their seats. While Kate had allowed Victoria to buy their tickets, she hadn’t known that Victoria had brought First Class seats, as she always did.

“I don’t fly Coach,” she told her girlfriend, as they sat down.

“Vicky,” Kate started, looking around at her large seat uncomfortably, “I don’t want-”

“I will die on this hill.” Victoria fixed Kate with a look that showed she was serious. “My father owns eleven percent of this airline. That’s why I always fly it. Important people know when I fly on these planes. And I will not embarrass my father, or indicate that he’s having any kind of financial difficulty, by flying less than First Class.”

Kate blinked, as Victoria ran through her spiel. “Okay,” she said carefully. “Um... does your dad know that you brought me a First Class ticket, too? I know they’re expensive.”

“My father doesn’t care.” Victoria smirked. “We’ve been together all these years, and you still don’t
have a sense of how rich my family is?"

“No, I get it, trust me.” Kate squirmed, as she looked at the floor. “I just... I don’t want him to think...”

Victoria furrowed her brow. “What?”

Kate sighed, as she fidgeted with her fingers. “I don’t want your family to think that I’m with you for your money,” she finally said quietly.

“Is-” Victoria was taken aback. “Really? Is that what you’re worried about?”

Kate nodded, as she bit her lip.

“Ok, Kate, look at me.” Victoria reached over and grabbed her hand, as Kate met her gaze. “I have told my parents all about you. Including how much you hate it when I pay for things, or how reluctant you were to live with me and not pay rent, and that you got mad when I paid off the speeding tickets you got in my car.”

“Tickets?” Kate furrowed her eyebrows. “Wait, I got more than the one?”

“That’s not important,” Victoria said quickly. “Kate, my parents had SEVERAL conversations with me, when I was growing up, about watching out for people who would try to court me for our money. I have fended off a few of them, and they know that.” She smiled. “They also know I wouldn’t be bringing you to meet them if I wasn’t sure that I loved you.”

Kate blushed. “I... still. I mean, I grew up in the suburbs, not Beverly Hills.”

“My parents aren’t elitist, Kate.” Victoria rolled her eyes. “Or classist. They’re not going to give a damn.”

“... okay.” Kate settled back into her seat. “This is a lot comfier that Coach.”

“Right?” Victoria reclined her seat. “It’s a short flight, too. We’ll be on the ground in a couple of hours.”

“Yea.” Kate paused. “How many-”

“Two.”

“What?!’” Kate looked at Victoria with wide eyes. “When did I get the second one?!“

Victoria grinned. “September. I’m pretty sure it was that day you woke up late, and you took my car keys because you couldn’t find yours. Fifty in a twenty-five, by the way.”

“... I’m sorry.”

“I forgive you.”

The car her father had sent to pick them up from the airport didn’t ease her worries.

Kate almost didn’t see it, because of how nice it was; Victoria guessed that she probably assumed it was for someone else, as she kept looking. “It’s this one,” Victoria finally told her, directing her attention to the black Mercedes that pulled up to the curb.
Her girlfriend was very taken aback, as the driver got out to help them with their bags. “I can do that,” she tried to tell him, after he took Victoria’s suitcase.

“I must insist, ma’am.” He held his hand out expectantly. “If you could, please.”

“No, really, I-”

“Kate, it’s a company car, and he’s liable for any damage,” Victoria interrupted. “He has to load the luggage, to make sure we don’t accidentally scratch the paint. Give him your bag.”

“Oh.” Kate handed him her duffle bag, an abashed look on her face. “Sorry.”

“That’s quite all right.” He placed her bag next to Victoria’s in the back, as Kate climbed into the car after her girlfriend. The driver surprised her again by closing the door for her, as she buckled her seatbelt.

“It will be about fifty minutes,” the driver informed them, as he pulled away from the curb. “Unless either of you would like to make any stops along the way?”

“We’re good.” Victoria rested a hand on Kate’s knee, to stop it from jiggling nervously. “Just take us to my father’s house, please.”

“Of course, ma’am.”

The big thing Victoria worried about was, of course, Kate seeing the house her parents owned in Seattle.

She remembered how big Kate’s house was, back in San Diego. And she remembered Kate’s reaction, the first night she’d seen the apartment. Victoria was extremely nervous about how her girlfriend would react when she saw the mansion, as the driver pulled down her street.

Her expression was about what Victoria expected, as they pulled into the u-shaped driveway and stopped in front of the house. Which was, to say, shock.

“Kate?” Victoria asked cautiously.

Her girlfriend nodded, unable to take her eyes off the three-story mansion on the waterfront. Even Victoria had to admit sometimes, it was kind of over-the-top. The mansion’s walls were almost entirely glass, and was fully exposed on all sides; only the tall trees gave them privacy from the neighbors. It was an incredibly sleek and modern design, and at over six thousand square feet, it was three times the size of Kate’s childhood home.

“That’s... really big,” she managed to get out, as the driver opened their door.

“I know.” Victoria exited the back seat, reaching back to help Kate out of the car. “Are you okay?”

“I mean...” Kate shifted nervously. “I expected your parents to live in a mansion, but... that’s really, really big.”

“It’s the glass.” Victoria looked back at the house. “It makes it look bigger than it really is.”

“Uh huh.”

The driver set their luggage down next to them. “Will you be needing any help, miss?”
“No, we’ve got it.” Victoria smiled and shook his hand, discreetly slipping him a cash tip. “Thank you so much.”

They both took their bags and walked up to the front door. Kate couldn’t seem to keep still as she looked around, taking in all the details; the impeccably-manicured lawn and bushes, the cement siding, and the pair of steel pillars that held up a full half of the third floor of the house; it jutted out, over the small courtyard, seemingly floating in mid-air were it not for the external supports.

The opening front door distracted her. An older version of Victoria with longer hair practically threw the door open, her wide smile threatening to break her face. “Victoria!”

“Hi, Mom.”

Her mother immediately wrapped Victoria in a hug, kissing her cheek. She released her after a couple of seconds. “And... this must be Kate!!” she squealed, turning and throwing her arms around the smaller girl. Kate’s eyes widened in surprise, as Victoria’s mother practically crushed her. “It’s so nice to meet you!!”

“Hello,” Kate croaked as the air was forced from her lungs.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” Victoria’s mother let her go. “I’m sorry! I’ve been so excited! Victoria’s told us so much about you!”

“You, too.” Kate smiled, and Victoria saw a little bit of the nervousness leave her face. “It’s so nice to meet you, Mrs. Chase.”

“Oh, please don’t. You can call me Mary.” She clasped her hands in front of her face. “I am SO happy to have you here. How was your flight? Are you tired?”

“We’re good, Mom.” Victoria couldn’t help but smirk at her mother’s enthusiasm. “Where’s Dad?”

Mary winced. “Your father did promise that he would be home the entire time you were, but he had to run to the office today,” she explained. “There was a meeting, and a conference call with some people in China that he couldn’t miss.” She glanced at her watch. “He should be back soon, though. Come in, I just started cooking dinner.”

Victoria and Kate carried their bags in, and Kate resumed looking around, blinking in astonishment. The inside of the house was just as nice as the outside, with very tasteful furniture and professionally illuminated art. The soft lights seemed to make everything more exquisite, as gentle music flowed from hidden speakers.

“Wow,” Kate breathed. “You have such an amazing house, Mary.”

“Thank you. I know it’s a lot to take in; my husband doesn’t like to flaunt his wealth in people’s faces. We do have important people come over for dinner, though, so we have some appearances to keep up.” Mary smiled. “But Kate, I don’t want you to think for a second that you can’t make yourself at home.”

“Thank you so much.” Kate smiled back, as she continued to look around. “This... wow. I’m sorry, it’s such a lovely home.”

“Wait until you see where you two will be staying.” Mary looked at Victoria. “Why don’t you take her to the guest room, Victoria, and you two can get changed for dinner. I’m sure you want out of those clothes after traveling.”
The mansion was amazing enough. But the bedroom almost made Kate’s heart stop.

It was not completely glass-walled, thankfully. But one entire wall was, including a door that opened onto a small balcony overlooking Puget Sound. Kate couldn’t look away from the water, as she admired the view.

*I never knew people actually lived like this.* She placed her hands on the cold glass, admiring the boats in the water. Off in the distance, she saw a larger ship leaving the Sound. *I thought houses like this were only in movies.*

*This is incredible.*

Victoria appeared next to her a few seconds later. “It’s a cruise ship.”

Kate blinked, looking at her girlfriend. Victoria had already changed out of her jeans and jacket into a blue sweater, and slim-fitting khaki pants. “Hmm?”

“That one. The big one.” Victoria pointed to the larger ship. “It’s a cruise liner. Royal Caribbean sails out of the port nearby for their Alaska tours.”

Kate looked back at the boat. “How can you tell?”

“I’ve sailed on one before,” Victoria replied. “And I’ve been here enough to know the schedule. They always leave this time of the evening on Tuesdays and Thursdays.”

“Ah.” Kate nodded. “That sounds like fun.”

“It is, once. There isn’t very much to do in some of the small towns the ship stops at.” Victoria stepped behind Kate, wrapping her arms around her girlfriend’s shoulders. “You’re... you know, doing okay? I know this is kind of a lot to take in.”

Kate craned her head to look up at Victoria. “Your parent’s house?”

“The house, the car and driver, the first-class seats...” Victoria bit her lip. “I know my family’s wealth can be pretty intimidating. Especially when we spend that kind of money on what a lot of people think is trivial stuff. I just... hope you’re not turned off by this.”

Kate bit her lip, as she gathered her thoughts while turning to face her girlfriend.

“It’s a little disconcerting,” she admitted. “I mean... you know I grew up in a frugal household. My dad was the only one who worked, and with three kids... the idea of splurging like this is pretty scary.”


“But... I don’t care, that your family is rich. You know that. Or at least you should, by now,” she added with a smirk. Victoria returned it, as she kept going. “I don’t care about your family’s money, or the cars, or the mansion. All I want is you.”

“Well. You got me.” Victoria smiled, as she kissed Kate gently. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” Kate smiled back. “I... don’t have to dress fancy for dinner, do I?”

“No, of course not.” Victoria glanced down at her outfit. “Do you think I’m dressed fancy?”

“I mean...” Kate hesitated. “Casual fancy, maybe.”
Victoria rolled her eyes. “That’s not a thing.”

“It should be, because you’re wearing it.”

A buzzing sounded, before Victoria could retort. She frowned as Kate reached for her pocket. “Please tell me that’s not your mother.”

Kate retrieved her phone and glanced at it. The shake of her head was the only answer Victoria needed.

“Okay, babe...” Victoria sighed. “Will you do something for me? As an early Christmas present?”

“What?”

“Turn off your phone while we’re here.” Victoria took a breath before she continued. “We’re probably gonna be busy for the whole visit anyway. I don’t want you stressing over your mother and her phone calls, I want us to have fun.”

Kate blinked, looking deep in thought as she glanced down at the phone in her hand. She seemed to be wrestling with herself for several seconds, while Victoria waited with bated breath.

Finally, Kate’s thumb moved to the power button, holding it down and turning the phone off. Victoria breathed a sigh of relief.

“This is gonna be really weird,” Kate commented quietly. “I don’t know if I’ll get used to not having it on.”

“You won’t even think about it, babe. I’m sure we’ll be busy tomorrow. And you still have your tablet anyway.” Victoria smiled, as she took Kate’s hand and interlaced their fingers. “Come on, get changed. And you can wear casual clothes to dinner.”
Kate & Victoria: Shrimp Pasta

Victoria couldn’t help but watch in admiration, as her mother and Kate moved around the kitchen.

“How’s the sauce, Kate?” Mary asked.

Kate quickly leaned over and examined the boiling pot, as she continued dicing garlic. “Still simmering,” she said quickly, returning her attention to the knife and cutting board. “Probably another twenty minutes. Do you want me to start the pasta?”

“Not yet.” Mary continued to season the shrimp on her plate. “In about ten minutes. I need more garlic, though.”

“Just a sec.” Kate made a few more slices, then picked up the whole cutting board and brought it over to Victoria’s mother. She used the knife to swipe it all into a small bowl. “You want another clove?”

“Two, I think, for the bread.” Mary took the bowl and upturned it into the frying pan, then started placing the shrimp on top of it. They immediately started to smell amazing, as they popped and sizzled. “It’s on the counter next to you.”

Kate immediately picked up the loaf of French bread and took another knife from the kitchen block, as she started cutting it into quarters. “Is the butter in the fridge?”

“No, I have it here.” Mary picked up the container and held it towards Kate, who took it without looking.

Victoria made sure to stay clear, sitting at the kitchen island while she sipped on a glass of wine. As soon as they’d come back down from the bedroom, Kate had asked if her mother wanted help in the kitchen. Of course, her help had been immediately accepted, and she’d been put to work.

No way am I jumping in there, she mused. The kitchen was large, but the space between the counters was narrow. Kate and her mother were using all of it, as they moved back and forth between the counter and the stove. She was content to sit back and drink wine, while she watched them cook.

Fifteen minutes later, Kate was wrapping up the pasta while Mary placed the finished shrimp in the sauce. “That looks SO good,” Kate complimented as she stirred the pot. “Smells amazing, too.”

“Wait until you taste it. This is one of my favorite recipes.” Mary smiled as she moved the sauce pot to a pad on the counter.

“Where’s Dad?” Victoria finally spoke up. “Shouldn’t he be back soon?”

Mary looked at the clock on the wall while she stirred the sauce. “Any minute now, or so he said when he called,” she acknowledged. “You know your father, though. If he could accurately predict his schedule, he would have been home all day instead of his office.”

“I take it he enjoys his work?” Kate asked.

“Oh, of course.” Mary nodded. “But he doesn’t very much care for the hours. Especially when it comes to his international interests. He’s woken up at two in the morning FAR more often than he’d like.”
Victoria smirked. “I think more than once is too often.”

“I would agree with you.” Her mother smirked back. “But it would appear that your father is a glutton for punishment.”

“What is he doing now, exactly?” Kate asked as she lifted the pasta pot from the stove. “I know you said he’s on a call to China...”

“He’s talking to the owner of a manufacturing company in Shanghai.” Mary pulled on some oven mitts. “They’re going to be signing a contract to produce... something for cell phones, I think.” She shrugged. “I honestly didn’t hear everything he said, when he mentioned it.”

“That sounds interesting.” Kate poured the pasta into a strainer, letting the water drain into the sink. “Does he do a lot of business in China?”

“Generally, no.” Mary pulled the garlic bread from the oven, setting it on top of the stove. “He usually avoids using Chinese manufacturing as a rule. He’s making a special exception in this case.”

“Oh?” Kate looked over at Mary, as she set the empty pot down. “Why is that?”

“Because Mister Liu has agreed to abide by fair work policies.”

All of their heads turned as Derek Chase walked into the kitchen, removing his blazer and hanging it on the back of a chair. He had a little more gray in his hair than Victoria remembered, but he hadn’t change much otherwise. His figure was very slim, from the swimming he did every morning, but his voice seemed to project itself as if from a more powerful man.

He continued to talk, as he unbuttoned his shirt cuffs and started to roll his sleeves; the sign that he was done working, and ready to relax. “As part of the contract they’re signing, Yangpu Manufacturing is paying its factory workers at a competitive market rate, and providing healthcare to their families. They’re also enforcing safe work practices, in an effort to reduce injuries.”

Victoria raised her eyebrows. “A Chinese manufacturer is adopting American standards?”

“Well, Mister Liu wants our business, so he’s willing to abide by our terms. He’ll still make lots of money, so it wasn’t a difficult sell.” Derek smiled as he walked over, hugging Victoria with one arm as he kissed her temple. “It’s good to see you, sweetie.”

“You too, Dad.” Victoria smiled back.

“And I see your mother has already put your girlfriend to work.” He looked at Kate with a smirk. “Nothing to strenuous, I hope.”

Victoria looked at Kate, noting the nervousness on her face as she shook her head. “No, of course not,” she said quickly, as she wiped her hands on the borrowed apron. “It’s so nice to meet you, Mister Chase.”

“Derek, please.” He reached over and shook her hand. “God, that smells wonderful. Is it your shrimp pasta, dear?”

“It is.” Mary took the pasta, pouring it into a large bowl. “And your timing is perfect,” she added, as she poured the sauce over it. “We just finished.”

“Good, because I’m starving.” With one hand, Derek reached up and loosened his tie while unbuttoning his collar. “Let’s eat.”
Victoria did place herself between Kate and her father, as they sat down to eat. Not because she was worried, but to make Kate feel a little more at-ease.

She was doing well at maintaining a neutral face, unlike her girlfriend; Kate’s anxiety was practically visible from space, as she ate dinner and tried to act casual. “This is really good, Mary,” she complimented.

“Thank you!” Victoria’s mother beamed. “I appreciate the help, too.”

“Mm.” Derek ate another bite with a smile. “This dish is one of the reasons I married her.” He dabbed at his lips with a napkin. “So, how was your girl’s flight?”

“It was good,” Victoria answered. “Are you really off for the entire week?”

He nodded, pausing to swallow before he answered. “Kimiko actually asked if I was being held against my will,” he chuckled. “I may still have to answer a couple of phone calls, but everyone else is trying to avoid working, too.”

“How was your girl’s flight?”

“Mm.” Derek ate another bite with a smile. “This dish is one of the reasons I married her.” He dabbed at his lips with a napkin. “So, how was your girl’s flight?”

“It was good,” Victoria answered. “Are you really off for the entire week?”

He nodded, pausing to swallow before he answered. “Kimiko actually asked if I was being held against my will,” he chuckled. “I may still have to answer a couple of phone calls, but everyone else is trying to avoid working, too.”

“About China?”


“Do you usually work holidays?” Kate piped up.

“More often than I’d like.” Derek shrugged. “But enough of work. Kate, you just got your Bachelor’s, right?”

“This last summer.” Kate smiled.

“Congratulations.” Derek smiled back. “You’re still in school for graduate classes?”

Kate nodded. “I want to be a teacher, but you need a Master’s degree in California,” she explained. “I just started classes this fall, so I still have a little while to go.”

“I didn’t realize you needed a Master’s to become a teacher.” Mary frowned. “Is that everywhere? Or just California?”

Kate shook her head. “It depends on the state, and whether a school is public or private,” she explained. “I’m on an Early Childhood Education path, too, and that takes a little longer.”

Derek looked impressed. “How is the classwork? Not as strenuous as Victoria’s, I hope.”

“No, thankfully.” Kate smirked as she looked at her girlfriend. “I still go to bed at a reasonable hour. I’m not up to midnight with Vicky doing homework.”

Victoria scoffed. “I don’t think a graduate program is comparable to law-”

“I’m sorry,” Derek interrupted. “I don’t mean to butt in. But I feel like I have to.” He glanced at Kate. “What did you just call my daughter?”

“Um...” Kate’s face slowly started to flush. “Vicky?”

Mary blinked, as her and Derek looked between the two of them. “I cannot believe what I just heard,” she said, surprise in her voice.
“I’m sorry,” Kate said hurriedly. “I-”

“You used to HATE it, when your mother and I shortened your name when you were a little girl.” Derek dramatically planted his elbow on the table, leaning his head on his fist as he stared at Victoria with a bemused expression. “You were SO emphatic, when you corrected us, stomping your tiny little foot on the ground while you shouted ‘my name is Victoria!’”

Victoria sighed. “Dad, can we please not do this?”

“Do you remember the phone call we got from her principal?” Mary asked, a wide smile on her face as she looked at her husband. “What grade was that? Ninth? Tenth?”

“I believe it was the ninth grade,” Derek answered. “And I couldn’t possibly forget.”

Mary held her hand to her face, extending her thumb and pinky to mimic speaking on a phone. “Yes, Mrs. Chase, this is Principal Edith. We’re calling because your daughter got in an altercation between fourth and fifth period this afternoon.”

Kate glanced at her girlfriend’s face, watching as Victoria turned a light shade of pink.

“According to witnesses,” Mary continued, “a Sophomore called her a name, and Victoria shoved her into a wall locker, repeatedly, and shook her by her collar.”

“What?!” Kate looked at Victoria, flabbergasted.

“It was a REALLY long time ago,” Victoria muttered.

“What did she call you?!”

“It was ‘Tori’,” Derek said simply, a wide grin on his face. “My wife had to go pick up our daughter from school after she received a two-day suspension for fighting with another student, simply because they tried to call her ‘Tori’.”

Kate couldn’t help it. She snorted in amusement. Victoria shot her a look, as she clasped both hands over her mouth.

“I couldn’t believe my ears,” Mary added. “I thought I was being pranked. I could not believe that MY daughter,” she emphasized, looking at Victoria, “who had never gotten in a fight in her life, had just exploded on someone for trying to call her by a nickname.”

“And here we are now.” Derek threw Kate a smile. “Congratulations, Kate. You’ve tamed the beast.”

“Do not call me that,” Victoria muttered.

Kate finally lowered her hands from her face, stifling chuckles. “I didn’t know she was so insistent about it.” She glanced at her girlfriend. “You really got in a fight?”

“That girl had been doing it all week,” Victoria replied back, as she shrunk in her chair. “I told her to stop, like, six times, and she just got more annoying about it.” She flashed a smirk. “She never did it again, though.”

“Does this mean you’re going to soften your stance on nicknames?” Mary asked.

Victoria glared at her mother. “No.”
“Well, hang on now,” Derek protested. “Why does Kate get to use a nickname and we don’t?”

“Because I love her,” Victoria answered.

Mary raised an eyebrow. “And us?”

“Right now, the jury’s out.”

Kate was much more at ease, as dinner went on. Even after they’d finished eating, Mary retrieved a bottle of wine and a decanter of whiskey, and the four of them sat at the table for hours. They talked and drank late into the evening.

“Are you coming?” Kate asked Victoria, on her way up the stairs afterward.

“In a minute,” Victoria replied. “I need to find my dad for something.”

“For what?” Kate frowned. “It’s almost eleven at night.”

“It won’t take long,” Victoria assured her. “I’ll be right there.”

It wasn’t hard to locate her father; if he wasn’t in the living room, he was invariably in his study. Which is where she found him, typing out an email.

“No working, my foot,” she said with a smirk.

Derek shot her a grin over his shoulder. “Sorry, sweetie. It’s just a couple of emails.”

“Yea?” Victoria walked next to him, leaning against the desk. “Anything interesting?”

“No, just some questions that need answers.” He shrugged. “Sadly, my input is still needed for a few decisions.”

“Of course.” Victoria paused. “Hey, um... I wanted to ask you a question.”

“Oh?” he looked up at her. “What’s that?”

“Well...” she hesitated. “You like Kate, right?”

Derek chuckled. “Of course I do. She’s very charming. And I know your mother adores her, too,” he added. “You need to hang on to her, Victoria. She’s good for you.”

“Okay.” Victoria took a deep breath. “That’s good, because I, uh... I was hoping that...” her nervousness affected her speech, as her voice trailed off and she found it again. “I wondered if you’d be okay with me seeing Eli, before I leave.”

Her father blinked, sitting back upright. He slowly turned to face her. “You want to see Eli?” he asked.

Victoria nodded, trying to act like her heart wasn’t in her throat.

Derek’s computer dinged, announcing another incoming email. He reached out, not looking as he closed the laptop. “You’re serious about this,” he commented.

Victoria nodded again, trying not to let her anxiety show.

“Well.” Derek leaned back. “I can’t say I disagree.”
“Really?” Victoria said with a smile.

“Like I said, you need to hang onto her.” He smiled back. “I don’t think you could possibly do any better. When are you going to ask her?”

Victoria shifted. “I, ah, was thinking about New Year’s Eve,” she replied, checking the entrance to the study and making sure they were alone. “The city’s doing fireworks.”

Derek nodded. “She’s a good one, Victoria,” he said. “I think you’re making a good choice.”

“So...”

“I’ll call Eli tomorrow,” he assured her. “We’ll see how quickly we can get him down here.”
The rest of the week passed by quickly, though Victoria was still apprehensive about her parents making show of their wealth. The big test was when they insisted on taking them to dinner at one of the nicest restaurants in town, where Victoria knew the entrees were upwards of a hundred bucks.

Her fears were unfounded, though. Unlike their first date, Kate didn’t bat an eye as she ordered a hundred-and-twenty-dollar plate of seared tuna and scallops.

“No, I definitely noticed,” Kate mentioned later that night, when they were alone and winding down for bed.

Victoria raised an eyebrow. “You won’t let ME buy you fancy food.”

Kate smirked. “I’m not trying to impress you,” she said. “And I was trying very hard to disguise my heart attack. Placing that order wasn’t easy.”

Her biggest and worst fear was Christmas Day. She was extremely worried about what her parents had gotten for Kate, and they wouldn’t tell her, no matter how much pressure she put on them. “She doesn’t like it when people spend a ton of money on her,” Victoria emphasized in a pleading voice when she cornered her mother on Christmas Eve.

“So you’ve told us.” Mary smiled. “We do listen, Victoria.”

“Yea, Mom, we have a different definition of ‘a ton of money’ than she does.” Victoria clasped her hands in front of her face. “PLEASE tell me what you and Dad got her.”

“I could.” Her mother patted Victoria’s shoulder. “But watching you squirm is entertaining.”

“Mom, I swear to God—”

“I got the wine!” Her mother turned and rounded the corner of the hall, re-entering the dining room before Victoria could finish her threat. “Kate, darling, would you pass me the corkscrew?”

And that was it. Victoria spent the rest of the dinner worrying about what her parents had done.

The icing on the cake was the Facebook messages, between the two of them and Max. Kate had been in the living room, with her parents, while Victoria had gone to the kitchen to get a drink. She put down her phone and spent a few seconds un-corking the bottle of wine, pouring a fresh glass while Kate and Max texted back and forth.

When she picked it back up, her heart almost stopped.

Kate: Oh! You and Chloe should totally come hang out with us in LA for New Years! They’re going to do fireworks over the Hollywood sign! It’s been too long since we saw you last. And we still have to meet your GF!

NO, NO, NO, SHIT!! Victoria glanced back towards the living room, but she couldn’t see Kate. *Fuck! Come on, say you can’t, say you can’t...*

Max: That would be awesome, but I don’t know if Chloe’s truck can make that drive

*Oh, thank you fucking God.* Victoria sighed in relief. *I do NOT want to deal with Max and her*
girlfriend being there when I’m proposing to Kate.

Kate chose that time to appear in the kitchen, carrying her tablet with her. “Hey, what do you think?” she asked brightly, as she leaned on the counter.

Victoria frowned. “About?”

“Max and Chloe.” Kate waved her tablet. “Them coming to see us? It would be awesome, to have them in Los Angeles. And I know they’ve never been.”

“How do you know that?”

“Max told me a couple of months ago.”

*Oh, Christ. I forgot that those two talk.*

“It’s an awesome idea, babe,” Victoria said, thinking quickly. “But it doesn’t sound like they can do it. I mean, if their truck can’t make the trip...”

“What about the train?” Kate pressed. “I know there’s one the runs from San Francisco to Los Angeles.”

*Shit.*

“I mean, yea,” Victoria said. “But Kate, I... I don’t know if-”

“Oh.” Kate bit her lip. “I’m sorry. I probably should have asked first.”

“What- no! No, Kate, it’s totally fine to invite them to see us,” Victoria said hurriedly. “I would totally love to see her again, and meet her girlfriend.”

Kate brightened. “Really?”

*... couldn’t have walked into that any harder if I fucking tried.*

“Yea, totally.” Victoria tried to sound enthusiastic, instead of dejected. She picked up her phone and typed out the text, letting Max know about the train.

“Yay!” Kate smiled. “Oh, that would be so cool, for them to come down!”

Victoria smiled, as her phone and Kate’s tablet continued to jingle with incoming texts. *Okay, maybe I can save this,* she thought as she asked Max a question. *I mean, it’s Max. I can probably ask her to go...*

She blinked, as Max sent them a picture. “Oh my good lord.”

Kate’s eyes widened. “Oh, gosh, that’s what Chloe drives?”

A conniving grin came over Victoria’s face, as Kate texted back her reply. Victoria followed right behind her.

**Victoria:** Oh my God, did an auto-theft ring steal that truck in Mexico to sell here?

“Vicky!” Kate gasped, looking at her. “That’s so mean!”

“I know!” Victoria cackled, as she read Max’s reply. Her fingers started flying over the keyboard on
her phone. “Look at that thing, though! Why would you willingly get into that car?!”

“I, uh... I wouldn’t,” Kate admitted, as Victoria sent more texts.

**Victoria:** Did she do that on purpose for the insurance money?

**Victoria:** How difficult WAS it, to negotiate a sale from one of Immortan Joe’s War Boys?

**Victoria:** It’s the elusive Autobot, Wreckasaurus Rust!

**Max:** She says that last one was weak.

“Crap, she’s right.” Victoria looked up in thought. “I can do better than that.”

Kate didn’t reply. She bit her lip, as she typed out her own text.

**Kate:** Ask her if she got Larry the Cable Guy’s autograph, when she brought the life-sized model of Mater.

A huge smile spread over Victoria’s face, as she looked at her girlfriend.

“That... might have been too callous,” Kate admitted, her face flushing from embarrassment.

**Max:** ... ouch.

Victoria typed out a few more texts.

**Victoria:** Babe.

**Victoria:** I am SO proud of you.

“Oh, hush.” Kate rolled her eyes. “I don’t want Chloe to not like me before we even meet.”

“Babe, if that’s what she drives, I guarantee you she has a sense of humor about it.”

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They got out of bed the next morning and assembled in the living room, all of them still in their PJs. “Merry Christmas, Mary,” Kate said as she handed Victoria’s mother a gift, a hint of nervousness in her voice.

Mary smiled as she opened the gift bag and retrieved a gift set of high-end soap. “Oh! I love this brand!” she exclaimed, holding one of the bars to her nose and inhaling deeply. “Mm! This company makes the BEST soap on the market! Thank you so much, Kate!”

Derek’s gift made him laugh; in addition to a spinning decision maker, she’d gotten him a desk sign that was engraved with **THE BOSS IS IN**. “I’ve always meant to get one of these,” he commented, admiring the etched metal. “This is definitely going on my desk.”

Then it came time for Kate to open her gifts. Victoria had gotten her a necklace that she adored, and immediately strung it around her neck. But when she picked up the bag with the gift from Victoria’s parents, her heart was threatening to leap into her throat. When Kate gasped, her heart almost stopped.

“Oh my GOD!” she squealed, lifting... a small metal statue of a ball? Victoria furrowed her brow, confused, until Kate turned it and she saw the oblong shape, and the stem poking from the top. And
the unique shine that she recognized.

It was a silver sculptor of an apple.

“This is amazing!” Kate exclaimed. “Thank you so much!”

“Well, we thought it would look good for your eventual desk.” Mary smiled, discreetly winking at Victoria.

When your job is to sell high-end jewelry, you don’t get the luxury of days off.

When some of your biggest clients are multi-billionaires, you don’t have them go to your store, either. Victoria walked into her father’s study to see Eli Greene, the jeweler her family had been using for over two decades, waiting for her with a metal briefcase.

“A pleasure to see you again, Miss Chase,” he greeted her with a slight accent. His gray beard was neatly trimmed, as was the hair sticking out from under his yamaka. His back was bowed slightly with age, though he easily lifted his metal briefcase to place on the table in her father’s study.

“You too, Eli.” She smiled back, glancing at the door. “Thanks for coming down so quickly.”

“Of course.” He quickly entered a combination into the keypad, unlocking the case. “I understand we’re looking for an engagement ring?”

“Yea.” Victoria glanced at the door again. “We don’t have a lot of time, though. My mother took Kate out to get some groceries, but they’ll be back in half an hour or so.”

Eli nodded. “Well, hopefully this won’t take too long,” he assured her as he opened the case. “Tell me about your girlfriend. Does she wear much jewelry?”

“Not really.” Victoria shrugged. “She wears a crucifix necklace, sometimes, but she hasn’t lately. She mostly just wears a watch I gave her for our first Christmas.”

“Earrings?”

“No.” Victoria shook her head. “Her ears aren’t pierced.”

Eli frowned. “Unusual for a girl her age.”

Victoria shrugged again.

“When you’re looking for an engagement ring?”

She retrieved her phone, bringing up a photo of Kate and showing it to Eli. He looked over it studiously, taking in a hundred details before he handed it back. “So. We’re looking for a ring that’s elegant, without being too extravagant, fitting for a woman who wears a minimal amount of jewelry. Her watch, that’s white gold, correct?”

Victoria nodded.

“We’ll keep that for the band, then, so they match.” He removed a couple of trays, setting them aside as he continued to speak. “You would like to stick to a diamond, for the stone? Or are we thinking something with more color?”

“Ah...” Victoria thought, then shook her head. “No. That seems a little out-there for her.”
“Very well.” Eli finally placed a tray in front of her, carefully lifting the black velvet cover. “I have some exceptional pieces here, from the Theodore Brown collection. What do you think?”

Victoria looked over all of them. All of the rings were made with white gold, with impressive diamonds mounted in the settings. They were also intricately decorated, with the vein-like patterns that were typical of that particular designer.

Ultimately, she shook her head. “I don’t really think these fit her style,” she said. “She doesn’t really like stuff like this, she’s more into... I don’t know. Simple designs?”

“Ah. Yes, the Brown pieces are a little loud.” Eli was unfazed, as he re-covered the rings and set them aside. He plucked out another two trays, setting them down. “I should ask; how big of a diamond were you thinking about?”

“Nothing TOO big,” Victoria said. “But... you know, something she can show off, so people know that I love her that much.”

“Of course.” He slid the trays aside, removing another one. “I think you’ll find these more to your liking,” he said, as he revealed the new pieces. “Now, these were designed by one of our in-house jewelers... I hope you don’t take offense, but your girlfriend doesn’t strike me as a woman who stays up-to-date with the latest in fine jewelry trends.”

Victoria snorted in amusement. “I’m pretty sure she doesn’t know who Theodore Brown is.”

“And who would care, but trophy wives trying to out-do each other?” Eli smiled. “Now, what do we think?”

Victoria looked over the tray. “I kind of like this,” she admitted, tapping one of the rings. “This is a Marquis cut, right?”

“It is.” Eli removed it from the tray, holding it up. “A very popular design. And it makes the stone seem bigger; this is only one-point-four carats.”

“Wow.” Victoria looked at it, impressed. “It looks like two.”

Eli nodded. “Do we like it?”

“I like the style,” she admitted. “I’m not sure about the ring, though.”

“Mm. I have a few more here...” Eli went back into his case, rummaging through. “Ah, here we are,” he proclaimed, as he removed another, smaller tray. “Now, these are from a lesser-known jeweler named Elizabeth Parisa. She’s not quite as popular as, say, Theodore Brown, but her pieces are very quickly becoming prevalent.”

Victoria took in the rings as Eli uncovered them, but her eyes were quickly drawn to one in particular. A thin silver band, with a Marquis-cut diamond, but the band had a very unique design; each side of the band looped around the diamond, giving it the appearance of being set in the middle of two circles.

“This one, here.” She tapped the ring. “I like this one.”

“Ah.” Eli picked up the ring, producing a loupe as he examined it closely. “Mm. This is a good stone. Only very small inclusions, and the color is exceptional. Weighs in at one-and-three-quarters carats.”
“That’s it.” Victoria nodded. “That’s the one.”

Eli smiled. “An excellent choice,” he remarked. Reaching back into the case, he extracted a couple of boxes. “Do we have a preferred color?”

Victoria looked between them. “The blue one.”

He nodded. “Any reputable jeweler will be able to size this for you,” he assured her as he retrieved a black cloth from the case, quickly polishing the ring before he placed it in the box. “Your Kate is a very lucky woman.”

Victoria took the box and looked at the ring, before she snapped the box closed. “I’m the lucky one.”
“Just admit it.”

“I will not.”

“You have to.”

“No, I don’t.”

Victoria smirked, sipping her coffee as she looked across the kitchen counter at her girlfriend. “You got to board the plane first. The seats were extra roomy. You had the options for complimentary alcohol and premium snacks.”

“That is all true.” Kate folded her arms, a smile playing across her face. “I still don’t think First Class is worth the extra money you had to pay for it.”

Victoria rolled her eyes. Though they had returned to Los Angeles a couple of days ago, they were still having the circular argument. “Fine. Next time we fly somewhere, you can go Coach.”

Kate raised an eyebrow. “You’re going to make your girlfriend sit in the back of the plane?”

“Hey, I have to ride up front.” Victoria grinned maliciously. “The airline doesn’t know who YOU are. And if you really don’t think it’s worth the money...”

“Ugh.” Kate sighed. “Fine. Flying First Class is... worth it. IF,” she added, “you can afford it.”

“That’s all I’m saying.” Victoria put her coffee mug down. “When are Max and Chloe getting here?”

Kate checked her phone. “A little after lunch. Max texted about an hour ago, that they weren’t far away from the city.”

“I still can’t believe that she’s willing to risk her life in Chloe’s truck.” Victoria smirked. “I mean, I love you, but if THAT was your ride...”

“I’m sure it’s safe,” Kate said, as she returned the grin. “Chloe loves Max, too. I’m sure she wouldn’t put her in danger. Are you going to be ready to get some lunch, when they get here?”

“I am ready.” Victoria glanced down at herself. While not dressed as fashionable as usual, she thought she still looked ready for company, in her white blouse with jeans. “I just have to put some makeup on.”

Kate rolled her eyes. “You look fine, Vicky.”

“Of course I do.” Victoria smiled smugly. “I just need to-”

Kate’s phone jingled from the counter, where she’d plugged it in to charge. “New text,” Victoria observed.

“Yea.” Kate sighed. “I really don’t want to deal with that right now.”
She’d turned her phone back on when they’d landed in Los Angeles. It had, predictably, started blowing up as soon as it got reception. Kate had received over one hundred text messages from her mother during the holiday, and twenty-six voicemails. Victoria hadn’t been allowed to hear them, but Kate had assured her that they weren’t filled with anything good.

“I’m sorry.” Victoria shook her head, looking back at Kate’s phone. “What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know.” Kate looked back at her phone. “I wish I knew how to get it through her head, that I’m never going to marry Chris.”

“Hammer and chisel,” Victoria said immediately.

Kate shot her an amused look. “I would prefer a method that keeps us out of prison.”

“Meh.” Victoria shrugged, as the phone jingled again. “Ugh. God, woman, get a clue.”

Kate opened her mouth to speak, but was interrupted by her phone’s ringer. “Oh, good, she’s calling again,” Victoria sighed.

“That’s not her. She has a different ring tone.” Kate stood and retrieved her phone. “It’s one of my professors.”

Victoria blinked. “Why are they calling over the holidays?”

“I don’t know.” Kate answered her phone and held it to her ear. “Doctor Edwards?”

She listened silently.

“Oh, no, it’s fine.” Kate frowned. “Is there a problem?”

She listened some more. Her eyes slowly started going wide.

“EXCUSE me?!”

Victoria immediately stood upright. She watched warily, as Kate’s face started turning a deep shade of crimson.

“NO. No, absolutely not,” Kate said hurriedly. “Of course I’m- I don’t know where you heard that, but it’s not true.”

“Kate?” Victoria asked carefully. Her girlfriend didn’t look at her, staring at the far wall with a shocked expression on her face.

“Oh, my God.” Kate brought her free hand to her forehead, pressing the heel of her palm into her skin as she closed her eyes. “Oh my God, Doctor Edwards, I am so sorry. I would never-” she paused. “That’s right. I have no intention of dropping your class.”

Victoria’s eyebrows shot up, her mouth gaping in surprise.

“No. No, Doctor Edwards, I am SO sorry about this,” Kate said hurriedly. “There’s... I’m very sorry. There’s some family drama, and you’re caught in the middle. Please forgive me, I would never... yes. Yes, of course, it’s...” she sighed. “It’s my mother.”

You have got to be fucking kidding me.

“Of course. I will handle it,” Kate exhaled. Her face was still a bright shade of red. “Yes. Thank you
so much, Doctor Edwards, I- yes. I will take care of it right away. Again, I am SO sorry.”

She pulled the phone from her ear and ended the call. “FUCK!!” she shouted explosively.

Victoria physically recoiled; she could count on one hand, the number of times she’d heard Kate use foul language. “Babe?” she asked quietly.

“It’s...” Kate’s face was slowly turning purple. “My... FUCKING mother just tried to have me dropped from my class!”

“What?!” Victoria exclaimed.

“She just fed my Curriculum Development professor a line about me having to go back to San Diego!” Kate started tapping madly on her phone. “She told him that my grandmother was getting sicker, and I was needed to help care for her!”

“Oh my God,” Victoria breathed.

“And he said that he wasn’t her first phone call.” Kate didn’t look up from her phone. “I have to call my other professors and-”

Her phone rang again, and her face fell. “It’s my Student Advisor,” she muttered. “Oh, God, this can’t be happening.”

“Who do you want me to call?” Victoria asked urgently. “I can call your other teachers, if you want, and tell them-”

“No,” Kate said shortly. “I have to do this myself.”

She answered her phone before Victoria could argue the point.

Victoria barely spoke for the next hour.

She sat on the couch, across from her girlfriend, and listened to Kate tell her student advisor what had happened. Her explanation was full of embarrassed apologies, her face remaining a consistent shade of maroon.

When she finally got off the phone, she immediately called her next professor. Victoria tried to interject, and offer to help, but Kate brushed her off brusquely as she hurried to talk to her teacher. Victoria had to sit silently while Kate repeated the process twice more. Her hands were clasped in front of her face, and she squeezed her fingers together tightly while she listened to Kate apologize over and over again.

“No, no, of course not, Miss Lowe, and I am so sorry for all of this...”

God damn it. Victoria leaned her forehead against her thumbs, trying to control her breathing as she listened to Kate fumble through another apology. This fucking bitch.

“Yes, I am. I will make sure that I...”

I just wanted my parents to meet my girlfriend. Victoria tightened her grasp, to the point where her fingers actually hurt. Is that too much to ask? Is it?

“Thank you, yes, again, I am SO sorry...”
Jesus. Victoria unclasped her hands, running her fingers carelessly through her hair.

“Of course. You, too.”

Victoria looked up as Kate ended the call. Her girlfriend slammed the phone down on the couch next to her. “God DAMN it,” she bit out through gritted teeth.

“Babe?” Victoria felt her voice catch, more that she heard it. “Are you okay?”

“I’M-” Kate stopped herself, as she took a breath. “No. No, I’m not.”

Victoria bit her lip.

“I have never been so humiliated in my life,” Kate breathed, as she stared at her feet. “I cannot believe she just did that.”

“I’m sorry,” Victoria said quietly.

Kate looked at her. “It’s not your fault.”

“I was the one who wanted to go to Seattle.”

“Vicky, it’s-”

Kate’s phone rang again, before she could finish her sentence. This time with a different ringtone. She looked at her screen and her face hardened, as she answered the call.

“What.”

The single word was forced out through her teeth, as she glared at the opposite wall while she listened. Neither her nor Victoria moved for several seconds.

“You. Want me. To tell you. How long it will take. To pack a bag,” Kate ground out. “So you can buy a bus ticket?”

She slowly inhaled.

“HAVE YOU LOST YOUR FUCKING MIND?!”

Despite her anger, Kate was not oblivious to the effect she was having on Victoria.

She could see, from the corner of her eye as she yelled through the phone at her mother, how Victoria looked at her with worry. The color draining from her face, as she ran her hand through her hair again.

So she decided that she didn’t need to explode in front of her girlfriend. Continuing to yell at her mother, she stood and stalked outside onto the apartment balcony, closing the door behind her and leaving Victoria on the couch.

“I don’t know WHAT you thought you were trying to accomplish!” Kate yelled, as she walked back and forth.

“Young lady, I don’t know who you think you’re talking to, but you will not raise-”

“TELL ME!!” Kate screamed, ignoring her mother’s idle threats. “Did you think that my professors
wouldn’t CALL ME?! Try to confirm that I was ACTUALLY dropping my classes?!”

“I am your MOTHER!!” she retorted. “Your behavior has been ATROCIOUS! You have strayed too far from the light, and.”

“And NOTHING!!” Kate shouted back. “This is NOT happening! I am NOT running back to San Diego on your say-so! I am NOT a fucking CHILD!!”

“DO NOT CURSE AT ME!!” her mother yelled. “I am the grown-up! I will-”

“NOTHING!!” Kate screamed. “You will NOTHING! There is NOTHING you will do here! You can take your homophobic self-righteousness BULLSHIT and SHOVE IT UP YOUR ASS!!”

“How DARE you!!” her mother screeched. “Don’t you EVER speak to me in that-”

“Or WHAT?!” Kate continued to pace around the balcony. “WHAT, Mother? TELL ME! Because I would LOVE to know what you think you can POSSIBLY do to me from atop your FUCKING broomstick!!”

“I WILL BRING YOU BACK TO THE LIGHT!!” Her mother’s voice had taken on an incredibly high pitch. “YOU ARE MY CHILD, AND I WILL BRING YOU BACK TO.”

“FUCK YOUR LIGHT!!”

Hearing her mother choke over the phone was far more satisfying than Kate was willing to admit.

“YOU CAN HOP ON YOUR LIGHT AND RIDE IT TO HELL!!” Kate continued to shout. “I am DONE!! I am done with your light, your attitude, and YOU!!”

“I WILL TELL YOU WHEN YOU’RE DONE!!” Her mother’s voice was approaching banshee levels, and Kate had a brief worry that she was within earshot of her sisters. “You WILL come back to God! I know what that succubus has done to you! She-”

“Don’t you DARE say anything bad about Vicky,” Kate replied in a voice that was a combination of deadly calm and knife-edge. “You leave her out of this, or so help me GOD I will make you regret it.”

The sharp inhale of breath was audible through the speaker. “Letting you go to that college was a mistake,” her mother ground out. “I told your father we should have stopped you.”

“So you... what?!” Kate snapped, as she stalked back and forth. “Thought you’d just pull me out YOURSELF?!”

“You’ve have been TWISTED from the light!” her mother yelled. “You NEED to come home! You need to-”

“I DON’T CARE!!” Kate yelled back. “I DON’T CARE WHAT YOU THINK!! This is not about you! This is MY LIFE! Not yours! You had NO RIGHT to interfere with MY education and MY future!!”

“This is about US!!” Her mother screeched. “Do you have any idea what this is DOING to your FAMILY?!”

“NOTHING!” Kate retorted. “This is doing NOTHING to our family, and don’t you DARE tell me that it does! YOU are the one with the issues!!”
“You are TARNISHING our REPUTATION with your-”

“That is not my FUCKING PROBLEM!! I do NOT need to be fixed!”

“YES!! YES YOU DO!!”

“No! I don’t-”

“And I am TIRED of hearing your foul lang-”

“I DON’T GIVE A SHIT!” Kate yelled. “I am an ADULT, and I will curse at you if I FUCKING feel like it, and I could give a FUCK if you’re tired of hearing it, because I’m FUCKING tired of YOU!!”

“ENOUGH!!” Kate could practically feel her mother’s mind snap, with the force of her outburst. “I WILL NOT TOLERATE THIS!!”

“AND I WILL NOT TOLERATE YOU!!” Kate shouted. “I am DONE with your shit! You-”

“KATE MARSH, YOU LISTEN TO ME!!” her mother roared. “There will be NO more discussion! You are going to pack a bag and come home RIGHT NOW-”

“No! NO! I am NOT! I don’t-”

“-OR I WILL HAVE YOU DISOWNED!!”

Kate barely absorbed the threat. Her anger was at a level where she no longer cared.

“You know what?! Fine! FINE!!” she yelled over her mother. “FUCKING DO IT, THEN!!” She took the phone from her ear and screamed, as loud as she could towards the device, “FUCK YOU!!”

She stabbed her thumb onto the screen to the end call. Her fingers gripped the phone so tight, it felt like she was about to crush it in her hand. Acting before she could think, she reared back and threw her phone as hard as she could.

It sailed in a graceful arc over the balcony, towards the pond below.

“FUCK!!” she yelled after it, breathing heavily.

I cannot BELIEVE, Kate fumed, that she would EVER-

“...Kate?”

She spun to see her visitor.

Oh, no.

“Max,” she gasped. “I... um...”

The brunette across the balcony took slow steps towards her, concern in her eyes. “Do you, ah, want to... talk?”

“I forgot you were...” Kate struggled to draw a proper breath. “I...”

Oh, God, she just watched me tell my family to disown me.

The weight of her emotions crashed down on her all at once, and she grabbed the balcony railing as
her knees became unsteady. She used it for support as she sank to the floor, Max rushing to catch her as tears started to leak from her eyes.

She felt terrible, later, after she had calmed down enough for Max to bring her back inside.

Especially when she looked at Victoria. Her girlfriend was sitting on the couch looking utterly defeated, as she held her head in her hands. Chloe sat next to her, one hand on her back in comfort. She quickly stood and moved to the other side of the coffee table, letting Kate take her seat.

She spilled her guts to Max and Chloe, telling them what she’d been going through with her mother. Victoria interjected briefly, at points, but she mostly stayed silent while Kate spoke.

Kate knew that people did drink a lot, when they were trying to forget about their problems. She’d never been one to do it, of course; she thought the practice was juvenile. She certainly enjoyed wine, but she’d never been drunk before.

Waking up the next morning to Victoria pulling the curtains aside, she discovered that she didn’t particularly care for it.

“Owww,” she moaned as the light hit her eyes.

“Morning.” Victoria spoke softly as she leaned over her, already dressed. “How’s your head?”

“It feels like a jackhammer.” Kate rolled back over, avoiding the light as best she could. “This sucks, Vicky.”

“Yea, I know. Hang on.” Victoria went to their bathroom, returning with a white bottle of pills. She tipped two of them into her hand. “Here, these will help.”

Kate accepted them with an outstretched hand. “Thanks,” she muttered as she took them, swallowing them with the glass of water she kept on her nightstand. She wound up chugging the whole thing, putting down an empty glass. “I didn’t make a fool out of myself, did I?”

“No, of course not.” Victoria sat next to her on the edge of the bed, rubbing her shoulder. “Give the pills a few minutes.”

“I- wait a minute.” Kate frowned. “How did I get to the bedroom? Last thing I remember was being on the couch.”


Kate peeked at herself under the covers. “Why am I still dressed?”

“Because you’re hard to maneuver when you’re dead weight,” Victoria replied. “And it was difficult enough to get you here. Figured you were already asleep, so you wouldn’t mind.”

“Ah.” Kate dropped the covers. “Fair enough.”

Victoria took her hand, squeezing it. “You sure you’re okay? You want anything?”

“Yes. Tea.” Kate smiled. “I would love a cup of Earl Grey.”

“Well, if you get up, we can arrange that.” Victoria nodded towards the bedroom door. “Chloe’s already awake, and raiding the fridge. I’m sure they wouldn’t mind going out to get some coffee.”
Kate raised an eyebrow. “You and Chloe seem to be okay, considering last night.”

“I’m pretty sure we have higher tolerances than you and Max.” Victoria grinned. “She passed out around the same time you did, so she probably wants some coffee pretty badly.”

“Yea?” Kate looked at her. “What about you and Chloe? How much later were you guys up for?”

Victoria shrugged. “Couple of hours.”

“Wow. What’d you two talk about?”

“We...” Victoria hesitated. “You know, it was mostly small talk. Little bit about you guys.”

Kate grunted, as she pushed herself upright in bed. “Trading notes?”

“Something like that.” Victoria smiled. “Are you feeling better, after...” she let the sentence trail off, watching Kate expectantly.

“A little.” Kate sighed. “I still can’t believe my mother did that. And threatened to disown me.” She shook her head. “I just wish she would accept who I am.”

“Yea.” Victoria took hold of her hand again. “You know I love you, right?”

Kate smiled. “I know. And I love you, too.”

“Good.” Victoria leaned over and gave her a quick kiss. “Now, get up and get ready. We’re gonna swing by the store and get you a new phone before we go to coffee.”

“You don’t-”

“I’m doing it,” Victoria interrupted. “You need a phone. You also can’t afford to replace your old one. I can, so I will. Deal with it.”
“Your landlord is so cool, that he lets you have roof access.”

Victoria threw a grin at Max. “He, uh, usually doesn’t. I had to convince him to give me a copy of the key.”

She felt Kate nestled deeper into her, as she hugged her girlfriend from behind. “She was very insistent that we watch from the top of the building,” She added. “How much longer?”

“Three minutes or so.”

“Sweet. Hey. Come here.” Victoria looked over as Chloe pulled Max away from them. The bluenette cast one last look at her, knowingly grinning as she tapped the phone in her pocket, before turning back to Max.

“Mm.” Victoria kissed the top of Kate’s head. “How are you doing?”

“Wonderful.” Kate squeezed Victoria’s hands. “I don’t ever want to forget this moment.”

Victoria smiled. “I know how you feel.”

Kate craned her neck, looking Victoria in the eyes. “Oh, yea?”

“I never want to forget anything, when I’m with you.” Victoria slowly spun Kate so she was facing her, and looped her arms around Kate’s neck. “All the time we spend together is precious to me, babe. I cherish every single second.”

Kate smiled, her teeth flashing in the low light, but it faded a little bit. “Even when my mother starts acting up?”

“I don’t care about your mother.” Victoria leaned in and gave Kate a peck on the forehead. “If dealing with her is the price I pay for being with you, then I’ll pay it as often as I have to. Having you is worth everything to me.”

Kate’s smile returned, wider than before, and she sniffed deeply. “I love you, Vicky,” she said as she quickly wiped her eyes. “I don’t know how I got lucky enough to land you as my girlfriend.”

“Babe, I...” Victoria trailed off for a second.

You can’t ask for a better setup than that.

“Look, Kate...” She paused. “I, uh, have a confession to make. I’m... honestly...”

Kate’s brow furrowed in confusion. “What is it?”

“Well, it’s just...” Victoria watched Kate’s face illuminate, and realized in the back of her mind that the fireworks had started. The two of them weren’t paying any attention, though, as Victoria took one hand from Kate’s shoulders and dipped it into her pocket. “Kate, I’m tired of having you as my girlfriend. I don’t want to do it anymore.”

“You...” Kate blinked. “Wh... what? You don’t... what does~”

“Yea.” Victoria produced the engagement ring. “I want you to be my wife.”
As soon as Kate laid eyes on the ring, she let out a sharp scream. Her hands flew to her mouth, her wide eyes not moving. It couldn’t have been more than a few seconds, but to Victoria, it felt like hours, as she waited for another reaction.

Finally, Kate started nodding frantically. “Okay,” she managed to croak out past her fingers, and Victoria watched tears start to slide down her cheeks.

“Yea?” Victoria’s smile was so wide, it felt like her face was about to break.

“Y-” Kate’s throat caught, and she started sniffling. “Yes!”

Victoria reached out and took Kate’s hand. It wasn’t until her eyes started blurring, as she tried to put the ring on Kate’s finger, that she realized that she was crying, too.

Once the ring was finally on Kate’s finger, she launched herself into Victoria’s arms and started sobbing into her shirt. Victoria barely managed to grab her, as she tried to blink back tears of happiness. She said yes!! Holy FUCK, she said yes!!

She leaned back after a few second, using one hand to tilt Kate’s head up. The blonde was an absolute mess; tears were carving paths down her face, and her lips quivered as she sobbed loudly. Her face was illuminated at random, as fireworks went off over their heads. “I love you,” Victoria managed to get out, sniffing.

“I love you too,” Kate choked back.

Victoria leaned back in and kissed her fiercely, as the soft explosions over her head died down.

“... holy shit.”

Oh, right. Those two are still here.

The two of them ended the kiss, and came apart. Kate immediately turned to Max as she approached, and resumed sobbing as she held up her hand to show the ring. Chloe went straight for Victoria, wrapping her in a tight hug.

“I told your dumb ass,” the bluenette whispered in her ear.

“Shut up.” Victoria couldn’t help but smirk, as she hugged Chloe back. “Please tell me you got it all.”

“Every second.”

“Kate,” Max started next to them, “I can’t understand a fucking word you’re saying.”

Victoria glanced over, watching Kate struggle to regain control of her breathing; she wasn’t doing a very good job. “I’m... getting... married!” she finally gasped past the tears.

Fuck yea we are. Victoria let herself get pulled into the group hug, holding her fiancé as tight as she could. This is the best day of my life.

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**Victoria:** Taylor!

**Victoria:** Rise and shine!!

**Victoria:** Wake up, bitch!!
Victoria: Get your ass out of bed and answer your goddamn texts!!

Taylor: OMG, can a girl get some fucking sleep or what?

Victoria: Not right now she can’t. Remember the deal we made, back when we were teenagers?

Taylor: That if you ever met George Clooney, you’d give him my number?

Victoria: No. And he’s married now, you slut.

Taylor: That if you caught something terminal and incurable, you would put me in your will?

Victoria: Deals made while drunk don’t stand up in court.

Taylor: That if 98 Degrees ever went back on tour, you would get me front row tickets?

Victoria: How the fuck do you even remember that?!

Taylor: I still dream of Nick Lachey’s abs :)

Victoria: Oh my God, you’re going to be a terrible Maid of Honor.

Taylor: I’M GOING TO BE A MAID OF FUCKING WHAT

Victoria: Are you awake now?

Taylor: IF THIS IS A JOKE I’M GOING TO KILL YOU

Victoria: <kate&_ring.jpg>

Taylor: OH

Taylor: MY

Taylor: GOD

Taylor: I am SCREAMING right now!! You’re getting fucking married!!

Victoria: I know!

Taylor: And you really want me to be your MOH?!

Victoria: I thought that was clear.

Taylor: Dude, there is only one thing that can make this better!

Victoria: Yes, I want to try and get married before Dana.

Taylor: Fucking. SCORE.

Kate: I want to hire you.

Alyssa: Excuse me?
Kate: I want to hire you.

Alyssa: For... what? Public Relations?

Kate: In a manner of speaking.

Alyssa: Kate, what are you talking about?

Kate: I told you already, I want to hire you. I need you to do some work for me.

Alyssa: You know my firm starts our billables at, like, $150 an hour?

Kate: Oh, no. You’re going to do this for free.

Alyssa: I am?

Kate: Actually, this will probably cost you a little bit of money.

Alyssa: You want to hire me. To work for you. And pay for the privilege. Am I getting that right?

Kate: Yes.

Alyssa: Okay, I thought I was very clear when we had that talk about marijuana; it’s cool if you try it, but I insist on being there to keep an eye on you.

Kate: I am not on drugs!

Alyssa: Have you hit your head, then?

Kate: I mean... it did get spun pretty good, recently.

Alyssa: Kate, I’m going to need you to break this down for me. In small words, please.

Kate: How about a picture?

Alyssa: That works, too.

Kate: <ring.jpg>

Alyssa: What the FUCK is that?!

Kate: I believe most people call it a “ring”.

Alyssa: Kate Beverly Marsh, don’t you DARE mess with me!! Are you fucking engaged?!

Kate: Uh huh!!

Alyssa: Holy FUCK!! Her Majesty is finally making an honest woman out of you!!

Kate: Please don’t call her that.

Alyssa: Too late. I like it.

Kate: Aren’t you curious why I’m hiring you?
Alyssa: ... yes. But I’m too nervous to ask. Or guess.

Kate: Well, I never would have met Vicky if you didn’t force me to go to that house party. And your advice really helped a lot, in the beginning. Plus, you know, you are my best friend.

Kate: So if you could help me see this through as my Maid of Honor, I would really appreciate it.

Alyssa: FUCK YES I’ll be your Maid of Honor!!

Victoria: Hey, slowpoke. Have you and Trevor set a wedding date yet?

Dana: Ugh. No.

Victoria: Dude, what is taking you guys so long?

Dana: I don’t know. It just keeps slipping. He’s been spending a lot of money, trying to get a couple of new stores up and running, so the cash just hasn’t been there for the day we want.

Dana: Oh, Courtney says “Hi”.

Victoria: She’s with you? I thought she was in New York this weekend.

Dana: The show she was going to got pushed back. We’re grabbing lunch.

Victoria: Ah. Well, “Hi” back.

Dana: Yea. Anyway. Neither of us are in any particular rush, so we’re just going with the flow.

Dana: Why are you asking? Excited to be my bitch for the day?

Victoria: You mean put on an ugly dress to make you look pretty?

Dana: And I’m gonna make sure your dress is extra ugly :)

Victoria: Well, it would have to be, to compensate for you.

Dana: Ooh, someone’s got jokes.

Victoria: Wanna hear a really funny one?

Dana: What?

Victoria: I’m gonna make sure your dress is uglier.

Dana: What dress?

Victoria: The ones you and Courtney are going to be wearing.

Dana: Why are Courtney and I wearing dresses?

Victoria: Because despite the stereotype, Kate and I are not getting married in suits.

Dana: You and Kate are getting MARRIED?!
Victoria: You know, that thing you and Trevor said you’d do, like, three years ago? Kate and I figured we’d give it a shot.

Dana: OH MY GOPLKJBGF

Dana: YOU BITCH

Dana: YOU TOLD DANA BEFORE YOU TOLD ME

Victoria: ... Court?

Dana: WE AGREED THAT I WAS THE COOL ONE

Victoria: Um... sorry?

Dana: IF YOU TOLD TAYLOR FIRST I SWEAR TO GOD

Victoria: Not only that, she’s the Maid of Honor.

Dana: WHAT THE FUJHBVFC

Dana: Okay, Courtney’s not as mad as she’s letting on. But WTF?!

Victoria: I want you two as bridesmaids!! What the hell are EITHER of you complaining for?!

Dana: Why does TAYLOR get to be the Maid of Honor??

Victoria: Because she’s the reason I met Kate. She dragged me to that party, remember?

Dana: So?!

Victoria: Dude, Taylor and I decided years ago, that we would MOH for each other!

Victoria: I’m not upset that you picked Courtney to be yours!

Dana: Do you really want Blondey McBimbo as your MOH?! Seriously?!

Victoria: Wow, being slighted really brings out your saltiness.

Kate: I’m getting married.

Stella: You’re WHAT?!

Kate: You’re going to be one of my bridesmaids.

Stella: I’m WHAT?!

Kate: Can you please just say “yes”? It’s been a REALLY long day.

Stella: What the FUCK?! You can’t just drop that kind of bombshell without a follow-up!! You’re engaged?! Since when?!

Kate: Vicky proposed last night :)}
Stella: HOLY SHIT

Kate: Yea, I know.

Stella: Uh, why do you sound like this is an inconvenience?

Kate: I’m sorry. Vicky and I have literally spent all day on our phones. She had to field a two-hour Skype call between her three best friends, all of whom wanted the Maid of Honor job.

Stella: Wait. I’m NOT your Maid of Honor?!

Kate: ... please don’t do this.

Stella: Relax. We both know I’m not interested in that level of responsibility.

Kate: Says the structural engineer, with an alarming amount of nonchalance.

Stella: Meh.

Stella: So, who are your other bridesmaids? And your MOH?

Kate: Alyssa is the Maid of Honor. My other bridesmaid will hopefully be Max Caulfield, but I haven’t spoken to her yet.

Stella: Who’s that?

Kate: Vicky went to high school with her. She’s from a family of homophobic zealots, too. We talk a lot.

Stella: Ah. Well, it’ll be interesting to meet them!

Kate: I think you’ll like them both. Vicky and I figure later this year we’ll arrange bridesmaid weekends, so we can hang out and decide on dresses.

Stella: Ooh! Sounds like fun!

Stella: Um... does your family know?

Kate: I doubt it, since my mother unfriended me on Facebook, and my dad doesn’t have an account.

Stella: Were you going to call and tell them?

Kate: I have no interest in speaking to my parents right now.

Kate: I would tell Lynn and Jessica, but I don’t know how I’d get ahold of them.

Stella: I’m sorry.

Kate: It is what it is.

Stella: Is there anything I can do?

Kate: Well, you can say “Yes” to being my bridesmaid.
Stella: Do you think there’s a chance in hell that I WOULDN’T??

Mom: I cannot BELIEVE you!

Victoria: Huh? Why?

Mom: You saw Eli without me!

Mom: We always see him together!

Victoria: Given what I was trying to buy, was it wrong to want a little privacy?

Victoria: And how did you know I even got the ring from Eli?

Mom: Where else would you have gotten it?

Victoria: ... fair enough.

Mom: And you told your father, but not me?!

Victoria: I needed to tell him, so he could call Eli to the house!

Mom: You could have told me! I would have called him down!

Victoria: Yea, but you can’t keep a secret to save your life.

Mom: I can too!

Victoria: How many people knew about the Goldman & Gray deal before Dad announced it?

Mom: That was ONE time!

Victoria: What about when Sean Prescott was getting indicted for embezzlement?

Victoria: When Patty Harrison was sentenced to court-ordered rehab?

Victoria: When Taylor’s mom was diagnosed with cancer?

Mom: I feel like you’re cherry-picking the worst incidents.

Victoria: You told me before Taylor even found out! Do you know how incredibly awkward that was??

Mom: Fine, I confess to being a terrible gossip. But I can keep important secrets!

Victoria: Didn’t Dad have to talk to lawyers after the Goldman & Gray thing, for possible violations of inside trading laws?

Mom: He was cleared!

Victoria: Okay, look, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. But I wanted it to be kept a secret, until it was done. I only told who I needed; Dad so I could get the ring, and Chloe so she could record it.
Mom: ... fine.

Mom: That was a lovely video, by the way.

Victoria: Yea, Chloe did good.

Mom: Now, you know we’ll have to arrange a meeting with Kate’s parents.

Victoria: ... why?

Mom: So we can meet your future in-laws, of course! As lovely as Kate is, I can’t wait to meet her family!

Victoria: That might be tough.

Mom: How so?

Victoria: You know Dad will want to meet them, too. When was the last time his schedule was firm?

Mom: I guess that's true.

Mom: Well, keep it in mind, will you? We’d like to meet before the wedding, if we can.

Victoria: Sure thing, Mom.
Steph & Rachel: The Visit

March 2018. Concurrent with ch 40 & 41 of EtL.

Steph bounced her foot up and down as she sat on the bench outside her apartment. She glanced at her watch, noting the time.

_Damn it, Rachel, we’re supposed to be on our way already._

She sighed as she leaned back, throwing her arms over the bench behind her as she stared at the grey sky; it looked like it was about to rain again. _Least it’s not my fault_, Steph thought. _She must have hit traffic. Still... Chloe already doesn’t like her. We don’t need to get off on the wrong foot by being late._

Steph pulled her phone from her pocket and sent another text.

1. **Steph**: Where are you??

She was just putting her phone away and resuming her skyward stare as a honking noise got her attention.

Rachel zoomed into the lot, parking haphazardly in the closest empty space. “Finally,” Steph muttered as the car turned off, and she watched Rachel scramble to get out. “You’re late!” she called.

“I know, I know,” Rachel yelled back, as she closed the driver’s door behind her. “Do I have time to-”

“No.” Steph gestured towards her car as she unlocked it. “Come on, hurry up.”

Rachel sprinted down the lot and jumped into the passenger seat just as Steph started the car. In ten seconds, they were pulling out of the lot and driving towards the park.

“Sorry,” Rachel said, as she got comfortable. “There was traffic, and I got stuck behind a dickhead in a Hummer. I thought those were illegal in California?”

“More like highly discouraged.” Steph smirked. “Probably some rich asshole who can afford the gas prices because he voted Republican.”

Rachel snorted in amusement. “They don’t execute members of the GOP in the streets down here?”

“Not yet.” Steph took a turn. “The way politics are going, though, it might not be long before we start construction on the gallows.”

“Fair point.” Rachel sighed, as she leaned back in her seat. “Jesus, I’m tired.”

“I bet. What time did you get on the road?”

“Two in the morning.” Rachel rubbed her eyes. “I had, like, six cups of coffee on the way down.” She glanced back at Steph. “So... how have you been?”

“Good,” Steph said with a smile. “Been kicking ass at work. A couple of my designs are gonna be in the new Call of Duty game.”
Rachel looked at her. “For real?”

“Not, like, main characters or anything,” Steph assured her. “I did concept art for some futuristic drones. They liked them, so they’re gonna use them.”

“That’s pretty badass.” Rachel grinned. “I’m never gonna have anything in a video game.”

“No, you’re just saving children from oppressive cults,” Steph said dryly.

“They’re not ALL from First Light.”

“No?”

Rachel rolled her eyes. “I work the whole state, Steph. First Light is only a small piece of it. Our office just sees them more often because we’re the closest.”

“Fair enough.” Steph nodded. “Any fucked-up stories from them lately?”

Rachel sighed. “Oh, the usual. I had to go pick up a girl from the hospital three weeks ago.”

“Really?” Steph looked at her. “What happened?”

“She was...” Rachel closed her eyes and exhaled deeply. “She was being abused. Let’s just leave it at that.”

“... fuck.”

“Yea. She refused to tell us who did it, though.” Rachel shook her head. “She said she was forced into a marriage by her parents. Her statement and her medical workup were enough for us to remove her, and place her in a foster home.”

Steph was silent. “I really hate those fucking cocksuckers,” she muttered. “The girl’s... going to be okay?”

“She has some issues that she’s seeing a kick-ass therapist for. I think she’ll be okay.” Rachel glanced back at Steph. “Her and all the others... you really wouldn’t believe how strong they’ve been about leaving. I wish I had the stones they did.”

They were both silent for a little while. Steph focused on the road, but noticed that Rachel wouldn’t stop playing with the zipper on her jacket. “You okay?”

“I’m pretty nervous,” Rachel admitted.

“I know.” Steph took a turn as she drove into the parking lot. “Look, just relax. Chloe may not like you very much yet, but she does love Max. And Max made her promise to be nice.”

Rachel twirled a lock of her hair in her finger. “I looked her up on Facebook. She’s pretty scary-looking. Like, she’d definitely be the prisoner Red would send to do the dirty work, if a punk needed shanking in the shower.”

Steph rolled her eyes. “You three love that show WAY too much.”

“You don’t love it enough. It’s a good show.”

“Whatever. We’re here.”
“I am so fucking tired.”

Steph shook her head. “Been a long day, hasn’t it?”

“Dude, you have no idea.” Rachel rubbed her face, as Steph pulled into the parking lot. “I’ve been up for almost twenty hours now.”

“Nice.” Steph smirked as she parked the car. “Grab your shit and let’s head up.”

Rachel retrieved a duffle bag from her car, then followed Steph upstairs to her apartment. She stifled a yawn, as Steph unlocked the door.

“Hasn’t changed much,” Rachel observed, as she walked inside and looked around. “Did you paint in here?”

“I had to.” Steph pushed the door behind them without looking. “A pipe in the next unit burst and fucked up my wall. The apartment fixed it, but the paint looked like shit, so I got permission to do it myself.”

Rachel frowned. “You didn’t make them re-do it?”

“They wouldn’t, until I moved out. And they picked a crappy color anyway.” Steph smirked, as she dropped her keys and purse on the counter. “You want a drink?”

“No, I’m good.” Rachel dropped her bag on the floor, extending her arms and stretching.

“You sure?” Steph reached over and held up a bottle of tequila. “Little nightcap?”

“... fuck it.” Rachel grinned. “I’m on vacation.”

“That’s the spirit.” Steph grabbed a couple of glasses from her cabinet and poured a generous amount of liquor in each one. She set the drinks on the corner of her counter as Rachel walked up next to her. “Want to make a toast?”

Rachel took a breath, as she thought for a minute. “To surviving the occasion of meeting Max’s girlfriend?”

Steph snorted. “Works for me.”

Their glasses clinked, and they both tossed the alcohol back. Rachel winced as it burned going down. “Haven’t done that for a while.”

“Well, we’ll be drinking a fair amount of wine tomorrow,” Steph said. “Your liver needs to practice.”

“Mm.” Rachel looked around the apartment again. “Your place is really nice,” she admitted. “A lot more lived-in than it was last time.”

“Last time you were here, I hadn’t finished unpacking,” Steph reminded her.


Steph shrugged. “I do like this city,” she allowed. “It’s not Oregon, though.”

Rachel arched her eyebrows. “You miss home?”
“Sometimes.” Steph sighed. “Every once in a while, I wish I’d found a job in Portland or something.”

They didn’t speak for a few seconds. “Why didn’t you?” Rachel asked quietly. “There must have been work back in Oregon for you.”

“I...” Steph paused. “I hated myself, back home.”

“I get that.”

“No, I...” Steph glanced down at her hands, as she pushed her empty glass to the side. “I hated what I did to Max. And...” she squirmed. “After what I said to you... I just had to go.”

Rachel exhaled slowly. “I told you, it was okay.”

“It really wasn’t.” Steph shook her head. “I never should have said it. At the very least, I should have gone to see you right away and apologized, instead of running away like a coward.”

“If you hadn’t, you never would have found Max,” Rachel reminded her. “Everything worked out in the end.”

Steph looked back up and met her gaze. “I guess so. Still...”

They didn’t speak, falling silent as they stared at each other. The seconds stretched out as they maintained eye contact.

“Your, uh...” Steph swallowed. “Your collar is messed up.”

Rachel finally blinked, trying to look at her shoulder. “It is?”

“Yea. Just...” Steph reached out and tried to fix it. Rachel shuddered, as the inside of her wrist brushed her neck. “It’s-”

Rachel reached up slowly, taking Steph’s hand. She held it for a few seconds, as they made eye contact again.

Their instincts seemed to take over at the same time. They both stepped towards each other, Rachel’s other hand grabbing Steph by the waist as Steph grabbed Rachel’s jacket. Their lips practically slammed together, as they started making out hungrily.

“Fuck,” Steph panted. “Rachel-”

“I know.” Rachel pulled Steph back into her, resuming their kiss. The two of them both moved simultaneously, awkwardly, until they found themselves against the wall. Steph forced Rachel against it, kissing her fiercely as her hands undid the zipper on her jacket and helped her out of it.

As soon as her hands were free, Rachel immediately ran them under Steph’s shirt, feeling the smooth skin as Steph gasped into her mouth. “Where’s your bedroom?” she asked huskily.

Steph reached behind her and twisted the doorknob. She maneuvered Rachel over and pushed them both inside, kicking the door shut behind her.

Steph struggled back to consciousness the next morning.

She had to put effort into prying her eyelids open. The physical exhaustion she felt left her so tired,
she could barely comprehend where she was. Or why it was so dark.

*Oh. Duh.*

With a small smirk, she pulled the blanket from her head, getting a good look at the other side of the bed. Rachel laid on her stomach, facing her, a thin line of drool running down the pillowcase as she slept.

*That’s gross.* Steph couldn’t help but wrinkle her nose. *She is definitely using that pillow tonight, too.*

*... right? Or am I getting ahead of myself?* Steph slowly rubbed her eyes, running her hand down her face as she slowly woke up. *This was probably a one-time thing.*

*And I’ll be damned if I didn’t know how badly I needed it.*

It was too depressing for Steph to try and remember the last time she’d had sex. It wasn’t like her work schedule left much time to date. She was pretty envious, at times, that Max had found a girlfriend and she had not. *Though it’s not like I’ve been looking.*

She smirked, as she looked back over at Rachel, admiring the smooth skin of her bare back as it rose and fell with her breathing. *Damn, that itch felt SO good to scratch.*

Her hand reached out unconsciously, but she stopped just short of Rachel’s skin. Steph’s heart twitched as she watched the other girl sleep, admiring how her hair cascaded around her face.

*I want this.*

...

*She was very clear, Steph.* She slowly took her hand back. *Just... be happy with what you have.*

*Oh, hell.* Steph frowned, as she saw the sun shining through her blinds. *I should probably get up... what time is it? When are Max and Chloe coming by again?*

*And what the fuck is vibrating?* She slowly sat up, as she tried to identify the noise. *That’s not my phone... she glanced at the pile of clothes at the foot of the bed. Is that coming from Rachel’s-*

The unmistakable sound of her front door opening distracted her.

*What the f-*

“Steph? Rachel? Are you guys awake?”

*SHIT!!*

Steph’s heart dropped into her stomach, as she quietly pushed her covers aside. *Oh, fuck, OH FUCK, Max is in my apartment! How did she- OH SHIT I NEVER LOCKED THE GODDAMN DOOR!!*

“Steph? Rachel?”

Rachel started to stir next to her. “Wha-”

Steph clapped a hand over Rachel’s mouth, silencing her. The girl blinked, frowning, as Steph held a finger to her lips. “Where are they?” she heard Max ask from the other side of the door.

Moving quickly, Steph walked behind her door and cracked it, so they couldn’t be seen. “Max?” she
called. “Is that you?”

Rachel twisted upright in bed, now fully awake. Her eyes were wide as she stared at the door in horror, quickly pulling the sheets up to cover herself.

“Oh, geez, Steph, were you still sleeping? You know we have to go soon, right? And where’s Rachel?”

Steph glanced at Rachel, who looked at her anxiously. *Come, on, think of something...*

“I just got out of the shower, Max.” She thought quickly, as she spun her lie. “Rachel said she was going to run to the corner store, for cigarettes. She’ll be back soon.”

The incredulous look Rachel shot her told her what she thought of THAT story.

“Rachel smokes?” Max asked, sounding confused.

“Sometimes, yea.” Steph looked back at the door. “Look, Max, can you, like, wait in the parking lot for me?”

“What? Why?”

*Yea, dumbass, why?*

“Because I left my towels in the dryer, it’s across the apartment, and I don’t want to put on clothes while I’m wet.” Steph actually felt proud about how fast she was coming up with her story. “Please?”

“Oh, I can get—”

“We’ll wait outside then, Steph!” Chloe’s voice threw her off, but Steph supposed that if Max was there, Chloe would be right behind her. “Find us when you’re ready!”

The two of them both held their breath, as they listened to the retreating footsteps. As the door closed, they both sighed in relief.

“Okay, they left,” Steph turned back to Rachel “Jesus, what were you thinking?!”

“I’m sorry!” Rachel threw the covers off and quickly got out of bed. “I was tired! Look... my bad, okay? I didn’t mean to fall asleep!”

“Yeah, your bad!” Steph grabbed her usual sleepwear from the chair in the corner of her bedroom, quickly pulling on the red boxers before struggling into her t-shirt. “Now what do we do?!”

“I don’t know! How the fuck am I supposed to be at the corner store?!” Rachel’s voice took on a high pitch. “Why would you tell them that?!”

“I panicked! I couldn’t think of a good reason you wouldn’t be on the couch! Or why you’d be in my bedroom!”

Rachel took a deep breath, and Steph watched her think for a few seconds. “Okay. I’ll... I’ll leave out the back of your apartment complex. I’ll go to the street on the other side, and act like I was coming back from the store.”

Steph opened the dresser and pulled out the first thing she saw, an extra-large Seahawks shirt. She tossed it at Rachel, so she had something to get her duffle bag in. “You’ll have to buy cigarettes
really quick.”

“I can’t believe you said that, I quit smoking in college…” Rachel pulled the shirt on quickly. “Okay. Know what? I’ll just say they didn’t have my brand.” She shot Steph a glare. “And if Chloe offers me any of hers, Steph, I swear to God, I will kill you.”

“Relax,” Steph assured her as she opened the bedroom door and walked out. “Max is trying to get her to quit, she’s not going to…”

She turned to her kitchen and froze.

*She’s still here.*

Max’s mouth was agape as she stared at Steph silently. The look of shock on her face had to have matched Steph’s own expression.

... *we are so busted.*

“Steph?” She felt Rachel walk out behind her. “What are...” The footsteps stopped, and Steph assumed she was frozen in surprise, too.

Then she saw Chloe, standing behind Max and grinning like an idiot.

*Motherfucker.*

Her face felt like the head of a lit match, as she tried to glare at the bluenette. “You must think you’re so fucking slick,” she snapped.

Chloe immediately threw her head back as she howled with laughter.

“That may be the most mortified I’ve ever been.”

Steph smirked, as she sat next to Rachel on the couch. It was late, almost ten o’clock, and they’d just made their way back from the vineyard after being there all day. “Yea, that was pretty bad,” she admitted.

“And Max.” Rachel sighed, as she rubbed her forehead. “‘How long have you been fucking?’ Oh my God.”

“Jesus, I know.” Steph shook her head. “Some days, I can’t believe she’s the same girl we went to high school with.”


“What?”

Rachel looked away “Nothing.”

“Dude.” Steph raised an eyebrow. “Come on.”

“Fine.” Rachel bit her lip. “It was... the question Max asked us. About needing her permission, to be happy.”

Steph blinked. “... oh.”
“I know she forgave us already.” Rachel met Steph’s gaze. “Do you still feel like a piece of shit?”

“Not as much as I used to.” Steph glanced at the floor. “I told Chloe once, I’m going to hate myself until the day I die for what I did. But where she is now...” she shook her head. “She’s happy. And... I can live with myself.” She looked back at Rachel. “What about you?”

Rachel took a few seconds before answering. “I’m with you, on hating myself,” she said. “I never told you, but... I stole one of my dad’s shaving razors, back then.”

Steph blinked. “You... what?”

“Yea.” She sighed. “I kept in in my nightstand. There were a couple of nights, when I couldn’t sleep and was just disgusted with myself, that I thought about... you know. Using it.”

“Holy Christ.” Steph reached out and grabbed Rachel’s hand. “Why the fuck didn’t you tell me?”

Rachel scoffed. “Because I didn’t want you to tell my parents, and have them put me on a Fifty-One-Fifty.”

“Dude, that is...” Steph worked her mouth, as she searched for words. “Rachel, we were both hurting, back then. But that? That’s fucking serious mental shit.”

“I know.” Rachel nodded. “And if I found out that any of my teenagers were doing anything like that, I’d kill them for not telling me they were that bad off.”

Steph looked her up and down carefully. “You’re not still... you know...”

“I wasn’t back then, really.” Rachel shook her head. “The few times I seriously thought about it, I realized that if I went through with it, then there wouldn’t be anyone left to look for Max.”

Steph raised an eyebrow. “You don’t think I would have kept at it?”

“Whenever I thought about what happened, Steph, I never thought about you as a perpetrator.” Rachel bit her lip. “I was the one that thought up the idea, of getting Max to steal her dad’s emails. I just asked you to go along with it. I kind of figured that you’d eventually try to move on, not stay stuck in the past like me.”

“And yet...” Steph left her sentence hanging, smirking.

“Yea, well.” Rachel returned the smirk. “It still sucked, to hear you say it out loud.”

Steph snorted, as she shook her head. “I’m, uh... I’m really glad we can talk about it without fighting. And I’m still sorry, about what happened.”

“Me too. On both counts.” Rachel glanced at the clock on Steph’s wall. “Can we call it? Getting kind of late.”

“Yea, it is.” Steph hesitated. “Um... where do you, uh, want to...”

“Ah.” A grin came over Rachel’s face. “The awkward question, right?”

Steph’s face reddened, as she searched for the words she wanted to use.

“Tell me something.” Rachel scooted over, and turned on the couch so she was facing Steph. “How inconsistently ARE you getting laid?”
“I...” Steph paused, as Rachel’s hand found its way onto her thigh, and she shuddered. “I’m not, really,” she admitted.

“No?” Rachel’s hand started moving upward slowly, her touch like electricity through Steph’s jeans. “Not really dating, or...”

Steph swallowed. “Work keeps me pretty busy,” she breathed. “I just... haven’t had the time.”

Rachel paused, her hand remaining where it was. “Me either,” she admitted. “It feels like I’m always on call. I’ve tried to date a few times, but... nothing that really clicked.”

“You...” Steph’s voice trailed off as Rachel’s hand slowly slid under her shirt. “... put more effort into it than I have,” she finished quietly. “So, that weekend before we had that argument...”

“Yea.” Rachel nodded. “That was the last time I got laid, before last night.”

Steph bit her lip, as she felt Rachel’s hand toy with the button of her pants.

“Having established that we both have a pretty big itch.” Rachel smirked. “Are you good if we take the opportunity, while I’m here, to fuck each other’s brains out?”

Steph shot to her feet, dragging Rachel towards the bedroom. “I thought you’d never ask.”
Kate sighed, as she looked over the pile of magazines in front of her. And the browser window on the computer. She’d been looking at wedding dresses all evening, taking advantage of her girlfriend being at a study group.

_Fiancé._ Kate smiled, as she glanced at her wedding ring. She loved it, even if she did think the diamond was a little too big. _Not girlfriend. Fiancé._ Don’t need Vicky giving me grief about messing that up again.

_Come on. Focus._ Kate turned back to her computer, scrolling down. _Ooh, that’s pretty... oh, God, pretty expensive, too. I’m not spending six grand on a dress I’m going to wear once, I don’t care what Vicky says._

One of the first disagreements they’d had was about the wedding budget. Kate had offered a suggestion that she believed was very reasonable, especially given the number of friends they wanted to invite.

Victoria had scoffed and immediately multiplied it by a factor of ten. She reminded Kate that her father was paying for everything, and like it or not, his daughter’s wedding was going to be an affair that others would be expected to attend. And that she, with her own desires to work for her family’s business, would be very remiss to slight possible future contacts and clients.

They had argued in circles for over an hour, but at the end, Kate lost. She couldn’t one-up that it was going to be a Chase wedding.

She had, however, gotten a concession; that their wedding dresses be reasonably priced, and not cost a small fortune. Victoria had hemmed and hawed, but after looking online for a while and seeing the options, she agreed to a decent budget.

Kate was slowly coming to regret it.

_A dress that I actually like, that doesn’t cost more than fifteen hundred._ Kate shook her head as she kept searching. _Less than twelve, really, before alterations. Sounded so much easier when I got Vicky to agree to it._

_Okay, no more self-loathing._ Kate squared her shoulders as she went back to her laptop. _You got this, Kate._

She searched for several minutes before her phone vibrated on the table next to her. She looked over to read the text.

_Max:_ Have you looked at Pinterest yet?

“Hm.” Kate picked her phone back up.

_Kate:_ Yea. I liked a couple of them, but they were too... I don’t know. Arts-and-craftsy? I don’t
Max: Dude, it’s your wedding day. You don’t have to apologize for not liking suggestions for your dress.

Kate: I just wish it was easier to pick. I can’t find one that I love that’s on budget.

Max: I’m sure you will. You’ve got plenty of time.

Kate: I know that in my head. Doesn’t feel like it, though.

Max: Has Victoria picked a dress?

Kate: I don’t think so. I’m not sure she’d tell me if she had.

Max: Well, where are you looking now?

Kate: A few different web sites. I’ve found a couple that are close.

Max: Well, let me know if you need any more help!

Kate smiled as she put her phone aside. She has been so awesome, she thought as she went back to her laptop. *She has been so awesome, she thought as she went back to her laptop. Her, and Stella, and Alyssa are amazing. I can’t wait to see them all in July.*

After a few more minutes, Kate’s phone buzzed again. She glanced at the screen, frowning.

Stella: Problem. Big Problem.

Kate: What?

Stella: Your mother knows about the engagement. And is NOT happy.

Kate: How?

Stella: Well, my family knows, and they had your parents over for dinner tonight. My mom asked yours if she was excited to see her daughter getting married.

Kate: Oh, great.

Stella: In my parents’ defense, they don’t really know everything that’s happened between you two.

Kate: I’m not mad at your folks. What did my mom do?

Stella: Initially, she denied it, saying you weren’t engaged. But my dad mentioned that he saw your Facebook status, and that you asked me to be one of your bridesmaids.

Stella: And then he asked what her daughter’s future wife was like.

Stella: It was the closest to a meltdown I’ve ever seen your mother have. She said a lot of very bad things about you, Victoria, AND me. My parents actually asked them to leave.

Kate: Wow.

Stella: Yea. My family is very quickly getting over her.
Kate: How long ago was-

Her phone’s ringtone startled her before she could finish her text. She frowned, not recognizing the number.

Oh, hell.

She sighed, as she answered the call. “Hello?”

“How COULD YOU DO THIS TO ME?!”

“Hi, Mom.” Kate leaned forward in her chair. “Been a few months. I guess you finally figured out that I blocked your number, since I don’t recognize this one.” She paused. “Hey, I haven’t seen any legal paperwork. Am I still disowned?”

“Young lady, don’t you DARE be flippant with me!” Kate could swear that she heard her mother frothing through the phone. “How could you spread these lies to our friends?!”

“I’m not spreading lies to anyone, Mother.” Kate reached over and continued to browse the website she was currently on. “But for the sake of argument, what lies are you referring to?”

She heard her mother take a deep breath. “I know you’re angry,” she started. “I know you don’t like me very much right now because you think I don’t know what’s best for you.” Kate rolled her eyes as she continued looking at wedding dresses.

“But spreading these HIDEOUS rumors about you marrying that... WOMAN,” her mother spit out. “Trying to hurt our family name by continuing this affront to God is going too far. You need to stop this, before you do irreparable damage to our reputation!”

“No.”

“Wha- EXCUSE ME?”

“I said, ‘No’.” Kate clicked on a dress, admiring it in the enlarged photos. Hmm. I do like that neckline. The embroidery, though...

“Young lady, what are-?”

“I’m gay, Mother.” Kate hit the back button on her browser. “Vicky and I love each other. We are going to stand in front of each other on the 4th of July next year in the holiest of matrimony, and live as wives. I’m not sure how much more plainly I can put this for you.”

“This farce will most CERTAINLY not be a holy matrimony in the eyes of God!!” Her mother yelled. “You need to put an end to this silly phase, and come back to the light before it’s too late!!”

Kate frowned. “Too late for what, exactly? I didn’t realize I was on a timetable.”

“You are running out of time to be with Chris!! That... WHORE is swaying him away from you! You need to drop this charade and come back to the light to be with your beloved!”

“That whore? Oh, you must mean Jaime.” Kate scrolled down on the web page some more. “I like her. She’s a sweet girl. Her and Chris are good for each other. Do you think he’ll propose soon?”

“THIS IS NOT A JOKE!!” Kate actually had to move the phone away from her ear, her mother’s scream was so loud. “THAT WHORE IS STEALING YOUR BELOVED FROM YOU!! YOU
“NEED TO DO SOMETHING!!”

“I am, actually.”

“What?!”

“I’m inviting them to the wedding.” Kate shook her head. “Also, Chris and I don’t love each other. Vicky is my beloved.”

“THAT SUCCUBUS IS TWISTING YOU TO THE DARKNESS!!” Her mother shrieked. “THAT JEZEBEL IS GOING TO MAKE YOU BURN IN HELL!!”

Okay, I’m tired of this.

“Mother, I need you to do me a favor.” Kate folded her arms. “I want you to close your mouth for ten seconds and listen very carefully.”

“EXCUSE ME?! How DARE-”

“I said SHUT THE FUCK UP!!”

Kate’s outburst startled her mom into silence. She took the advantage and forged ahead.

“This is not a game. This is not a phase. Vicky and I are getting married next year. Chris has a serious girlfriend who he loves, and I will never be with him. And YOU, Mother, need to pull your head out of your ass and learn to accept that, or our relationship will end.” Kate’s voice was full of steel, as she spoke softly but with force. “So I suggest that you learn some goddamn empathy, get over your fucking homophobia, and accept that fact that your oldest daughter is a card-carrying lesbian.”

“I will NEVER-”

“It wasn’t a request. And I’m blocking this number, too. Have a good night, Mom.”

Her mother was still screaming, as Kate hung up. She quickly thumbed her way through her phone settings as she blocked her mother’s new number, then put her phone down carefully.

Then she slowly exhaled her shoulder slumping as the full weight of her conversation bore down on her.

I can’t believe her. Kate rubbed her arms, suddenly feeling cold. God... why can’t she just be happy for me?

Kate was reluctant to tell her fiancé that, even after everything, she really wanted her mother to come around. Despite how annoying she was, and how much Victoria no doubt hated her, she really wanted her mom to get over her bigotry and accept Kate.

She wasn’t delusional, though. She knew what the odds of that were.

Still.

She frowned, as she noticed the new text notifications on her phone screen.

Stella: I overheard my dad tell my mom something along the lines of ‘she’s getting out of hand’.

Stella: Even my uncle doesn’t want her around for Christmas anymore. I don’t think we’re inviting
them to the party this year, after she clung to Chris and tried to match the two of you up in front of Jaime.

**Stella:** Who, by the way, was seconds away from knocking her the fuck out.

**Stella:** Kate?

**Stella:** Are you there?

Kate quickly typed out a reply.

**Kate:** Sorry. Mom called.

**Stella:** Crap. What did she say?

**Kate:** Just... your family probably has the right idea.

Kate had moved on from wedding dresses and had switched to ideas for the ceremony when she heard the apartment lock turn. She glanced up as her fiancé walked inside. “Hey babe!” she said excitedly.

“Hey.” Victoria walked over and gave her a quick kiss, before dropping her bag on the table. “Find a dress yet?”

Kate’s face fell. “No,” she muttered.

“Mm.” Victoria made her way towards the kitchen, stopping to kick off her shoes. “You know, we can raise the-”

“I’ll find one,” Kate interrupted. “I just want one that’s perfect. I found a bunch of ideas, so I’m making progress.”

“Okay.” Her fiancé smiled, as she pulled a bottle of water from the fridge. “What are you doing now? Classwork?”

Kate turned her laptop. “Looking at wedding ideas on Pinterest,” she answered. “What do you think of these paper lanterns?”

Victoria glanced over. “They look nice. I don’t like them for the wedding, though.”

“Me either, I just thought they were pretty,” Kate turned the laptop back. “How was your study group?”

“It was good.” Victoria smiled as she took a seat. “We mostly talked about the Constitution, and how the Founding Fathers had terrible grammar.”

Kate raised an eyebrow. “They did?”

“Turns out, they made a bunch of mistakes when they were writing it. Finding and writing about them was kind of interesting.” Victoria opened the bottle. “Oh, and I had a nice chat with your mother.”

It took a couple of seconds for Kate to register the last sentence, before her head whipped around. “You WHAT?!?”
Victoria took a sip of water. “Yea. She called, while I was in the library.”

“She...” Kate blinked. “Wait, hang on. How did she get your number?”

“That is a good question, and one that I would also like an answer to.” Victoria cocked her head. “I’m guessing she didn’t get it from you?”

“No!”

“Well, I’m out of ideas.”

“Oh my God.” Kate leaned forward. “What did she say?”

“Well, a lot, and I didn’t get it all.” Victoria shook her head. “I didn’t know who it was, at first, so I didn’t answer it until she called me for the fourth time. When I did pick up, she asked if I was Victoria. After I said it was, she started screaming at me, and called me a succubus, and a harlot, and...” she frowned. “By the way, what’s a Jezebel?”

Kate slowly dragged her hands down her face. “She’s a woman from the bible. The wife of Ahab, who persuaded him to abandon his worship of God.”

“Ah. Makes sense now.” Victoria smirked. “Apparently I’m also a conniving bitch who’s twisted you away from God’s light. And the word ‘whore’ was thrown in there a few times.”

Kate bit her lip. “I am so sorry, Vicky.”

“Nah.” Her fiancé grinned. “Her call made my day.”

“Excuse me?” Kate furrowed her brow in confusion. “How?”

“Well, your mother was on a tangent for a couple of minutes. Her breathing capacity is very impressive, by the way.” Victoria’s grin got wider. “When she finally did stop, I told her she was going to have to say it all over again, on account of me being too distracted in my ecstasy because your tongue was so far up my snatch I was afraid that it was going to get stuck.”

Kate’s eyes widened, as she stared at Victoria in horror. “No, you didn’t.”

“Yes, I did. She sputtered for a few seconds, and I asked her to hang on, because you were doing a new move where you put two fingers inside of me while you shoved your pinky into my asshole, and I was trying to decide if I liked it or not.”

“Oh my God.” Kate’s face flushed as she looked at Victoria with her mouth agape. “Please tell me you’re kidding.”

“And THEN,” Victoria continued, “I told her about how when you were finished, I was going to handcuff you to the bed, break out a strap-on, and fuck you like Chris never could, until you started screaming Satanic prayers while squirting your sex juices all over my eight-inch silicon c-”

“Oh, GOD.” Kate dropped her head onto the table. “Vicky, I really need you to tell me this isn’t true.”

Victoria snickered. “You should have seen the faces on the others.”

Kate’s head jerked back up. “Others?”

“My study group.”
“You...” Kate blinked. “No. Oh, God, no. Vicky, please, tell me they didn’t hear you say those terrible things to my mother.”

“I made their day, Kate.” Victoria smiled widely. “You should have heard them laugh when I finally hung up. All the studying we did, the long hours spent in that library...” Victoria waved her hand. “So, totally, worth it.”

Kate’s head fell back on the table. Her face felt like it was on fire. “I can never, ever, meet your friends.”

“That’s too bad, because after that phone call, they really want to meet you.”
“Are you sure?
“Yes.”
“Really?”
“One hundred percent.”
“And there’s NOTHING I can do to change your mind?”

Victoria fixed Taylor with a glare, as they sat opposite each other in plush chairs. “There is absolutely no chance that I will want to go to a strip club,” she said calmly. “It will not happen. I will refuse to enter. And if you do try to drag me inside, I will fire your ass and make one of THEM my Maid of Honor.”

Courtney’s head poked out from behind the curtain, as Victoria gestured towards her and Dana.
“You’ll do what now?”

“It’s hypothetical, Court.” Victoria gave her a look. “Go back to trying on your dress.”

The dark-haired girl pouted, but pulled her head back into the changing area.

“Dude, you are no fun.” Taylor crossed her arms. “Maybe the REST of us would like to hit one up. Did you think about that?”

Victoria raised an eyebrow. “Are you bi now?”

“Eh.” Taylor shrugged. “College experimentation has it’s perks.”

“Well, I know Courtney won’t care for it.” Victoria looked up in thought. “Chloe’s pretty into Max, so she’s out. And Dana’s probably a ‘no’, too.”

“Hmm.” Taylor turned to the dressing area. “Hey, Dana!”

“What?”

“Do you like girls this week?”

Dana’s head poked through the curtain next to Courtney’s, and her eyes narrowed. “What the fuck does THAT mean?”

Taylor smirked. “Just curious about your sexual ambiguity level, and how it’s fluctuated since the Junior Prom.”

“I- okay, no.” Dana pulled back into the curtains. “I’m not doing this.”

“So...” Taylor shot Victoria a mischievous look. “Does that mean we shouldn’t try and get ahold of Juliet?”
“I WAS DRUNK!!” Dana yelled from her changing room.

“So was I,” Taylor shot back. “I still didn’t get to third base with the school’s hottest reporter.”

“SHUT UP!!”

Victoria couldn’t help but snicker. “I can’t believe how embarrassed she still is about that.”

“Right?” Taylor reached over and picked up her champagne flute, taking a sip. “I mean, who amongst us has not gotten hammered and copped a feel with a pretty girl?”

“Me.” Courtney pulled the curtain back and walked out in a shimmering gold dress, that hugged her body well and looked absolutely stunning. “Then again, my flag is firmly planted in Camp Hetero.”

“Damn, Court.” Taylor was taken aback, as she looked Courtney up and down. “Are you taking a date? Or looking for a sugar daddy?”

Courtney smirked, as she admired herself in the mirror. “Yea, this is a good one,” she allowed. “What do you think, Victoria?”

“I think there will be a bunch of old, rich, divorced men who will want to dance with you,” Victoria said with a smirk. “If you WERE looking for a sugar daddy...”

“Oh, come on.” Courtney paused, then glanced back at her. “How rich?”

Taylor snorted. “And I’M the slut.”

“It really does look good.” Victoria picked up her own champagne flute and downed the rest of it. “You found a winner with that one.”

Dana pushed her curtain aside. She was wearing a gold dress similar to Courtney’s, but it wasn’t nearly as flattering, and the shine was duller. “Shit,” she said, looking at their friend. “You sure you want us looking that good, Victoria? We’re supposed to support you, not steal the show.”

“Unless any of YOU plan on getting in front of the alter, I’m not going to worry about it.” Victoria put down her empty glass. “It’s not too expensive, is it?”

Courtney checked the price tag on the dress. “Not for my credit card.”

“Let me see.” Dana walked over to glance at the tag. “Oh, wow.”

Victoria winced. “Is it too much?”

“No. I’ll just...” Dana sighed. “I’ll use Trevor’s card.”

“Will he be okay with that?”

She smirked. “He will be when I finish with him.”

Taylor shook her head as she looked back at Victoria. “Is that the one or not?”

Victoria considered the dress again. “If you three are okay with it, I am.”

“Sold.” Taylor rocked back in her chair, before she pushed herself upright. “Let’s go eat fried food and get drunk.”
Victoria wrinkled her nose. “I don’t want to.”


She looked at the tiny glass full of vodka with a grimace. “I haven’t done a shot since I met Kate.”

“All the more reason.” Dana grinned, as she held up her glass. “Do it, or you’re a pussy.”

Victoria glared at her, but ultimately sighed and took the glass. “To peer pressure,” she said half-heartedly as she lifted the drink.

“That’s the spirit!”

The four of them quickly downed their shots, slamming the glasses on the table. “Ugh!” Victoria grunted. “Why did I ever think this was cool?”

“Because you’re a basic bitch?” Courtney offered.

“Yea?” Victoria looked at her with a smirk. “How many pairs of Lululemon leggings do you own?”

Courtney winced. “Too many to make an appropriate comeback,” she admitted. “But they’re SO comfy!”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Victoria reached out and took a fry from the plate in front of them, examining it before she popped it into her mouth. “This is ruining my diet, you know.”

“Oh?” Taylor held up her phone. “Should I call Kate and ask her if you need to go on a diet? I think we’d all enjoy hearing what she has to say.”

Victoria shot her a look. “You’re bluffing.”

“How do you figure?”

She leaned forward. “Taylor, if you can tell me what the area code of Kate’s phone number is, right now, I’ll pay for your drinks for the rest of the night.”

“Um...” Taylor’s face fell, as she glanced at her phone. “Fuck.”

“That’s what I thought.” Victoria smiled smugly. “She won’t answer anyway. She’s getting a jump-start on her thesis.”

Taylor blinked. “Her what?”

“Her thesis,” Victoria repeated. “The eighty-page research paper you’re required to write in order to receive your Master’s degree.”

“Excuse me?” A look of horror came over Taylor’s face. “Eighty fucking pages?!”

“Not including her bibliography.” Victoria shook her head. “She’s been working on it all week, and she’s still barely into the first few pages.”

“Holy fuck.” Taylor slumped in her chair, as she placed a hand over her heart. “I am SO glad I didn’t go for a Master’s.”

Dana and Courtney both snorted. “Yea, like you would have been accepted into a graduate program,” Courtney snickered.
Taylor shot her a glare. “My GPA was three-point-nine-six, bitch.”

Dana did a double-take. “It was?”

“Yes.” Taylor smiled smugly. “And the reality of how complicated Art History actually IS would make your brain melt.”

Victoria couldn’t help but grin, at Courtney and Dana’s expressions. *Everyone thinks she’s an airhead, until they try to dismiss her.* “How is your job at the gallery going?” she asked.

“Oh, it’s a lot of fun.” Taylor picked up her cocktail and took a generous sip. “I love it when these pretentious pricks calling themselves artists try to get me to sell their work, giving prices like they’re the next Rembrandt. It takes all my effort not to tell them that their pathetic attempts at edgy Postmodernism caricatures look more like rejected Cold War propaganda posters than masterpieces.”

Victoria snorted. “There must be some good points.”

“A few. We had this guy come in with a collection he inherited from his grandfather last week.” She closed her eyes and sighed, smiling as she spoke dreamily. “The first painting he showed me was piece by Edgar Degas. One of the FOUNDERS of Impressionism. I didn’t even know there were any of his works outside of museums. When I saw it, I almost orgasmed in front of him.” Her eyes opened, and she looked back at Victoria. “I mean, yea, he might have been racist as hell, but he was still an amazing painter.”

Dana and Courtney were still staring at Taylor with unblinking eyes. “It’s like I don’t even know you,” Courtney said quietly.

“Yea. I get that a lot.” Taylor turned back to Victoria. “So. How is everything going with the Delusional One?”

“Well.” Victoria leaned back in her chair. “Kate is still adamant that I not hire a hitman. Other than that, I have nothing to report.”

Dana shook her head, getting over her amazement. “Has she tried to call you since April?”

“No, I think I successfully scared her off.” Victoria sighed. “I really don’t want that bitch at the wedding.”

“Please tell us you’ve tried to talk Kate out of it,” Courtney implored. “I can only imagine the drama this psycho would cause if she showed up.”

“I have. So has Alyssa, and Stella, and Max, and her sister Lynn.” Victoria glanced at them. “I’m pretty sure even Kate knows it’s a bad idea.”

“So... why?”

Victoria shook her head. “She still wants her dad to walk her down the aisle,” she said simply.

The girls fell silent, as they looked at each other.

“Okay.”

Victoria looked at Taylor, puzzled. “Okay... what?”

“Just okay.” Taylor looked at the others. “This is happening. We can’t change it, so we have to try and control it.”
“Control it?” Victoria frowned. “How?”

“You aren’t allowed to ask.” Taylor looked at her with a serious expression. “All we need from you is permission to do whatever it takes to make sure this crazy bitch does not ruin your wedding day.”

Victoria raised an eyebrow. “Seriously?”

“Yes.” Taylor leaned forward. “You can’t know specifics. If we do this, and it backfires, you have to throw us under the bus and tell Kate that your crazy friends went too far, and you had nothing to do with anything.” She looked at Dana and Courtney. “We’ll take care of the rest.”

Looking at the others, Victoria saw serious expressions on Courtney and Dana’s faces as well. They stared at her, eyes full of resolve as they waited for her answer.

“... you guys are seriously the best fucking friends I could ever ask for.”

Taylor grinned. “Is that a ‘yes’?”

“You have carte blanche.” Victoria smiled smugly. “Whatever it takes. I don’t care if you have to slit her throat in front of her children.”

“Damn.” Dana leaned back. “That’s cold.”

“Kate’s mother tried to ruin her education. And she called me a whore.” Victoria looked them all in the eye, her smile widening sweetly. “As far as I’m concerned, that bitch is on borrowed time.”

Stella: It has been requested that I pass a message to you.

Kate: From who?

Stella: Uncle Gerry.

Kate: About?

Stella: It’s official. Given your mother’s comments about me, her obsession with Chris marrying you, and her behavior last year, your parents are no longer invited to the Xmas party.

Stella: Chris was actually the one who moved the decision along. He told his dad that he wouldn’t let your mom disrespect Jaime again, and that if she was coming, they were not.

Kate: Wow. Well, I can’t say I’m surprised.

Kate: What does that have to do with me?

Stella: My uncle wanted to make sure you knew that you were still welcome. And your little sisters. You three have a permanent invite to this and any future Xmas parties.

Stella: He knows you probably won’t come back anytime soon, and he knows Lynn and Jessica are still a little young to be anywhere without your parents. But he wants you to know that they still love you, no matter what. And he does not give a single fuck who you plan on marrying.

Kate: ... please tell him thank you. And that it means the world to me, that he’d say that.

Kate: It’s nice to actually hear some support out of someone from his generation.
Stella: I will.

Stella: Oh, I almost forgot. He said the invitation is extended to your fiancée, too. And he said that you’d better make plans to introduce her to them at some point.

Kate: I promise, I will bring her someday.

Victoria: I didn’t like them.

Courtney: God damn it, come on! I worked hard to pick those out! You looked for ten minutes!

Victoria: Jesus, I’m sorry. I know you’re busting your ass. I just didn’t feel any of them.

Courtney: Bad enough that you’ve got, like, the world’s shittiest budget for a wedding dress. You have to be picky about it too?

Victoria: Kate picked a nice dress on this budget!

Courtney: Yes, she did. So why can’t YOU?!

Victoria: I don’t know! Why do you think I asked for your help?

Courtney: Begged. You BEGGED for my help.

Victoria: Courtney, I swear to God...

Courtney: Fine. Tell me why you didn’t like the first dress.

Victoria: It was... I don’t know, I just didn’t like any of it.

Courtney: Did you like that it was white?

Victoria: I mean, yea?

Courtney: Then you didn’t hate all of it. Give me specifics. Details. Gut feelings. Stuff I can actually WORK WITH.

Victoria: Okay, I didn’t like that the bridal belt was so flashy.

Courtney: Good. This is what I want. Solid feedback.

Courtney: Now, tell me about dress number two.

Victoria: ... I didn't like that the bridal belt was so plain.

Courtney: It won’t be, after I fucking strangle you with it.

Kate: Hey. How are you feeling?

Max: Like crap.

Kate: I’m so sorry.
Max: Thanks.
Kate: Is there anything we can do?
Max: No. I just have to learn to suck it up, and live with the fact that my dad’s a really good lawyer.
Kate: It was suggested I show you the flowers we picked for the wedding, but if now’s not a good time...
Max: I would DEFINITELY like to see what you guys picked. I need a distraction.
Kate: <flowers.jpg>
Max: Wow! Those are amazing!
Kate: Yea?
Max: Totally! Is that what we’re carrying down the aisle?
Kate: No, you guys will be carrying bouquets of yellow roses. Vicky’s wedding party will all have white roses.
Max: Oh, like the opposite of our dresses? That sounds awesome!
Max: Where are those flowers going to be, then? Centerpieces?
Kate: Yes. We’re still trying to decide if we want flowers lining the aisle or not, so we may be getting more.
Max: Which ones are you using for the bouquet toss?
Kate: We’re not doing one.
Max: Really? Isn’t that a tradition?
Kate: Vicky thinks it’s a little crass, and to be honest, I’m not a huge fan of it, either.
Kate: Besides, with two brides, I think we’d each have to do one, and that would just be weird.
Max: Really?
Kate: Well, Vicky said the alternate is for one of us to do a garter toss.
Kate: And that’s DEFINITELY not happening.

Victoria: Dude.
Dana: What?
Victoria: How the hell is this taking you so long?
Dana: Christ, you sound like Courtney. And my mother.
Victoria: We decided on a caterer, a band, AND officiant in the same week.

Victoria: Do you two even have a firm date?

Dana: Yes!

Victoria: ... well?

Dana: Sometime next year.

Victoria: That’s NOT a firm date.

Dana: Look, the big thing is we can’t decide on a budget.

Victoria: Isn’t Trevor rich or something?

Dana: He makes good money, but he re-invests a LOT back into his business.

Dana: And stuff keeps popping up. We had money set aside last year, but then the city decided that they didn’t like the location of one of the dispensaries, so they tried to force him to move it.

Victoria: Really? Why?

Dana: Someone brought a building two blocks over and turned it into a preschool.

Victoria: ... wasn’t Trevor there first?

Dana: It took a team of lawyers several weeks to remind the city of that fact. And they weren’t cheap. When the dust cleared, we were back to square one.

Victoria: Wow.

Dana: Yea. Marijuana might be a legit business, but that doesn’t mean people like it.

Victoria: In any event, I'll DEFINITELY be married before you at this rate.

Dana: Oh? So you finally picked a wedding dress?

Victoria: SHUT UP

Unknown: It’s my birthday!!

Kate: If this isn’t Lynn, then it’s a really weird message to get at random.

Unknown: “Happy Birthday to my favorite little sister!” “Aww, thank you, Kate! It’s so nice to talk to you!”

Unknown: Someone besides Dad and Jessica acknowledging it would be nice.

<CONTACT INFO UPDATED>

Kate: Mom didn’t say anything?
Lynn: No, she did, after Dad said it during breakfast. As an afterthought.

Lynn: Pretty sure she forgot.

Kate: I’m sure she didn’t forget.

Lynn: She thought the iPhone Dad handed me was a Galaxy. Which means she had no part in getting it.

Lynn: And I watched her do math in her head, and tick off fingers. She was trying to remember if I was old enough to have gotten a cell phone.

Kate: ... I’m sorry.

Lynn: I don’t care anymore.

Kate: Well, I’m also sorry that I haven’t gotten you anything yet. I know Mom is watching the mail.

Kate: Do you have an email address now?

Lynn: Yea, I had to set one up for the phone. It’s lynn.marsh@icloud.com

Kate: Perfect. I’m going to send you a gift certificate. What web site do you want it to?

Lynn: I have no idea.

Kate: Know what? Let me ask Max’s girlfriend. She’s better with this than I am. One second.

Kate: She says to check out thinkgeek.com

Lynn: ... really?

Kate: Apparently, it’s “cool stuff for nerds”.

Lynn: Wow. Getting it from all sides. Best birthday ever.

Kate: Oh, don’t do that. She meant it in a complimentary way.

Lynn: Fine. I’ll check it out.

...

Lynn: She was right.

Kate: What? The website?

Lynn: They have a tea infuser that looks like the Apollo command module.

Lynn: And astronaut boot slippers.

Lynn: I want them. Please.

Kate: So it was a good call?
Taylor: Okay, I need to start by saying I am DEFINITELY still going to be your Maid of Honor.

Victoria: And now I’m worried. Why?

Taylor: I got offered a year-long job in Washington D.C.

Victoria: You did?! How?!

Taylor: During a show at our gallery, I spent about an hour chatting with one of the patrons about some of the artists on display. We wound up getting into a somewhat-heated debate on how much impact Eugene Delacroix actually had on the progression of Romanticism.

Victoria: Well, yes, of course, why wouldn’t you?

Taylor: Oh, shut up. Turns out, the guy is one of the senior curators at the Smithsonian. He reached back out to me last week, asking if I would be interested in a 12-month fellowship.

Victoria: That’s awesome! You said yes, right?

Taylor: I mean, it didn’t really feel like I could say no. Most people ask the Smithsonian for work, not the other way around.

Taylor: It has the potential to become a permanent position if I impress the right people. I let him know that I needed the weekend of your wedding off, and he was totally cool with it.

Victoria: Congrats!

Victoria: And you are totally going to rub this in Courtney and Dana’s faces. Bet neither of them have ever been head-hunted.

Taylor: I don’t know if this counts as being head-hunted. But fuck it, why not.

Dana: I have a plan for controlling the Delusional One.

Alyssa: Let’s hear it.

Taylor: All ears.

Dana: So, Trevor knows a couple of guys in LA. Big dudes who moonlight as bouncers at major nightclubs.

Dana: He offered to give us their contact info. We can sit her homophobic ass next to one of them. And if she starts to spout off some shit, they can handle it.

Stella: Handle it how?

Dana: ... however they feel is best?

Stella: Okay, we don’t really need to get someone else for that. If all we want is a scary-looking dude to keep her in check, we can sit Eric next to her.
Max: Your boyfriend? Is he scary-looking?

Stella: He was with me when we last saw Kate’s mother at the Xmas party. She took one look at him and practically leapt to the other side of the room.

Stella: I actually heard her asking a couple of people why they let him in.

Alyssa: Was that because he’s scary-looking, or because he’s a young, tattooed, African-American male?

Stella: ... a fair question.

Taylor: Although not really an important one. Her reasons for being terrified of him don’t matter.

Courtney: Hang on. Before we decide that the primary way of keeping this bitch under control is the threat of violence, let’s consider something.

Courtney: Nobody here is under any illusions that she will NOT try to cause drama. Which means that we will have to step in eventually. Do we really want to do that with a method that’s physical? That might make everything worse.

Max: That’s all true. Plus, I assume Eric will want to do something else, like use the bathroom or dance with Stella at some point.

Dana: We can still get one of Trevor’s friends.

Alyssa: Unless any of them are women, we’ll have the same bathroom problem. She’s determined enough that she’ll slip them eventually.

Dana: Dammit.

Dana: Sorry. I thought I had something.

Taylor: It’s not nothing. Having someone on her during the ceremony, when we’ll all be up front and away from her, is probably a good idea.

Alyssa: And the reception?

Taylor: That part needs more thought.

Max: I got it.

Stella: What?

Max: We split into two teams.

Max: First one keeps giving her wine, to make her use the bathroom.

Max: Second team lies in wait. Once she’s out of sight of the party, we hit her on the back of the head with a potato in a sock. Then we drag her into a closet and let her sleep off a possible brain bleed, while we party and get drunk.

Taylor: ... damn, Max. I knew you had it in you.
Alyssa: I see no flaws with this plan.

Courtney: Seriously? How about “Where the fuck are we going to get a potato?”

Stella: We can always bring one with us.

Dana: I am not putting a potato in my purse.

Max: GODDAMNIT

Max: THAT WASN’T ME

Max: MY GIRLFRIEND STOLE MY PHONE

Taylor: Chloe has some good ideas. Give her your phone back.
April 2019. Concurrent with ch 53 of EtL.

“I still don’t get it.”

“It’s REALLY not that hard, Brooke.”

She shot Emily a dirty look. “You saying that over and over isn’t helping.”

“First, Outer, Inner, Last,” Emily said patiently. She tapped a different part of the mathematical formula as she emphasized each word. “You’re not trying to find an overall number, you’re just trying to simplify the formula. It’s not going to be an easy answer, but it’s not hard to do.”

Brooke sighed, as she rubbed her forehead. “How about I pay you five bucks, and you do it for me?”

“Putting aside the fact that you don’t HAVE five bucks, you won’t learn anything that way.” Emily pushed the notebook towards her. “Here, look at this first one.”

Brooke glanced at the two sets of parentheses, each one containing a mix of letters and numbers. “Emily, this really might as well be a foreign language.”

“Look, remember FOIL.” Emily tapped the first math problem again: (2x+5)(4x+3).“Multiply the first part of each set.”

“So...” Brooke frowned. “2x times 4x is... 8x?”

“8x SQUARED,” Emily corrected. “You’re not just multiplying the numbers, but the letters, too. X times X is X squared. Now, the outer parts.”

“Ugh. 2x times 3... 6x squared?”

“No, just 6x. There’s no X to multiply next to the three.”

Brooke’s head dropped to the table with an audible THUMP. “I’m never going to figure this out.”

“Look, you have 8x squared and 6x. Look at the Inner.” Emily grabbed Brooke’s shoulder and shook it. “Come on.”

“Fine.” Brooke picked her head back up. “5 times 4x is... 20x?”

“That’s right. Now do the Last.”

Brooke bit her lip. “5 times 3. That’s easy, fifteen.”

“Good. So, what do you have?”

“8x squared, 6x, 20x, and... 15?”
“Now you combine them all.” Emily wrote down the solution on the notebook for Brooke to see; 
$8x^2 + 26x + 15$. “There’s your answer.”

“Wait, seriously?” Brooke glanced up at her friend. “The whole point of this is to turn one formula into a different formula? How does that help me in real life? When the hell will I ever use this?”

“To pass your Algebra class.” Emily couldn’t keep the smirk off her face. “Now, do the next one. And this time, I’m not helping you.”

Brooke scrunched her nose, but set at the next problem on her homework assignment. After a couple of minutes, she wrote out the answer she’d come up with. “Well?”

“Close.” Emily shook her head. “Eight times six is forty-eight, not forty-six.”

“Damn it.” Brooke erased part of her answer and corrected it. “Okay, but that was pretty good, right?”

“Yea, you had the concept down.” Emily grinned. “That next problem has a minus sign, though, instead of a plus sign. I can’t wait to see how bad you screw THAT up.”

“You’re a terrible tutor,” Brooke groaned.

Jane chose that moment to walk into the living room, where they were doing their homework on the coffee table. “How much longer on your homework, girls?”

“If Brooke can’t figure this out, maybe an hour.”

Brooke dug an elbow into Emily’s ribs. “Bitch.”

“Language,” Jane said distractedly, as she walked into the laundry room. “I need you guys to stop for a few minutes. Emily, is the floor in your room clean?”

“Oh, mostly.” Emily frowned. “Why?”

“I need you to clear it up.” Jane walked back, carrying a new set of sheets under her arm. “Brooke, I’m very sorry, but we need you to give up the bed in your room.”


Jane stopped in front of them, and they could see her taking a few minutes to get her thoughts together. “Miss Amber is bringing another girl over tonight,” she finally said.

Emily and Brooke both looked at each other in surprise. “Is it another runaway from First Light?” Emily asked.

“Yes.” Jane held the sheets out to Brooke. “Again, Brooke, we need you to give up your bed for her. I know it’s not fair, and you were there first, but she needs it. Will you please change the sheets, so she has clean ones?”

“Uh... yea, sure.” Brooke took the sheets. “Where am I sleeping?”

“I’m about to set up the air mattress for you.” Jane winced. “I know it’s not ideal. But this is a special case. You may be in Emily’s room for a while.”

Brooke and Emily glanced at each other again, as they stood and headed upstairs. “What do you think she means by ‘special case’?” Brooke asked Emily, as they walked down the hallway.
“I don’t know.” Emily shook her head. “This is really weird. I don’t even know why another girl would be brought here; Jane and Pete only have the two bedrooms.”

Brooke frowned. “So... what? Are we doing a roommate thing?”

“Sounds like it. For now, anyway.”

Moving quickly, Brooke stripped her bed and put the new sheets on it before she gathered a few things to bring to Emily’s room. Jane had just finished setting up the air mattress when she got there, as Emily shoved a few things under her bed. “Will I still be able to go back in my room when the new girl gets here?”

“Yes.” Jane nodded, as Brooke placed her stuff down on the air mattress. “Again, Brooke, I’m sorry.”

“If this becomes a long-term thing, we can take turns between the bed and the air mattress,” Emily offered.

“Might take you up on that.”

Once everything was ready, they went back to the living room. They both had trouble concentrating on their homework, though. They alternated between schoolwork and watching the sun go down.

“How much notice did you get that I was coming?” Brooke asked quietly.

“Less than this.” Emily checked her phone. “It’s been almost three hours now. Miss Amber called Jane about ninety minutes before you got here.”

“What do you think the hold-up is?” Brooke looked back at the door. “We’re not that far away from the CPS office.”

“Maybe she’s still at the doctor’s office,” Emily offered. “How long were you there for?”

“Thirty minutes.” Brooke looked back at her friend. “You?”

“I didn’t see the CPS doc. Miss Amber picked me up at the ER.” Emily leaned back into the couch. “Maybe she was abused or something. Or they’re taking a really long statement.”

“I don’t...” Brooke’s voice trailed off, as she watched a pair of headlights sweep across the front window. “She’s here.”

Emily sat up. “JANE!!” she yelled towards the kitchen.

“I see them, I see them.” Their foster mother quickly took a pot off the stove, setting it on a hot pad before she came back to the living room. “The pasta is ready. Will you girls put out five bowls and silverware? Miss Amber will be joining us for dinner.”

Brooke frowned as they stood up. “Where’s Pete?”

“He’s at a friend’s house. He’ll be back late tonight.”

They exchanged glances, as Brooke and Emily went into the kitchen. “This is really weird,” Brooke said quietly, as she got bowls from the cupboard. “Right?”

“It’s... definitely different,” Emily agreed, as she retrieved silverware and started setting the table.
“Then again, I’ve only done this once.”

“Right.” Brooke glanced at her. “So what do we do?”

“Follow Jane and Miss Amber’s leads, I guess.” Emily finished with the table, then put on some oven mitts. “Come on, help me with the pot.”

Brooke picked up and moved the hot pad, as Emily transported the pasta to the table. They just finished setting it down as the door opened, and they heard quiet conversation from the entryway. Jane brought Miss Amber into the kitchen a few moments later.

Walking with Miss Amber was a teenage girl with dark hair that flowed to her shoulders. She almost hugged the social worker’s shadow. Unlike Brooke, she hadn’t come in a dress; she was wearing grey sweatpants and a large long-sleeved shirt, an outfit that clearly didn’t belong to her. And other than a brown paper bag, she didn’t appear to have any belongings.

What really struck Brooke, though, was her eyes. The girl’s gaze shifted carefully around the room, as she took everything in, including her and Emily. And they were rimmed with red, as were her nostrils.

*She’s been crying*, Brooke realized, as Miss Amber placed an arm around the girl’s shoulders and gently guided her into the kitchen.

“Girls, this is Regina,” Miss Amber said in a far more careful tone than Brooke was used to hearing. “Regina, this is Emily and Brooke. They live here with Jane, too.”


“Nice to meet you.” Emily followed suit, smiling and waving.

“Hi.” They had to strain to hear Regina’s reply; her voice was very quiet, as she scooted closer to Miss Amber.

“We just finished dinner,” Jane mentioned. “I’m sure you two are hungry?”

“I’m always hungry for your spaghetti.” Miss Amber smiled, as she squeezed Regina’s shoulder comfortingly. “You’ll like it, Regina. Jane’s cooking is absolutely phenomenal.”

Regina nodded quickly, not saying anything as she let Miss Amber bring her to a chair. Emily and Brooke exchanged quick glances, as they sat down. Brooke kept one eye on Regina as she served herself some pasta from the pot. *She’s not making eye contact with anyone. Was I this bad when I got here?*

Emily took the tongs from Brooke and made her own bowl. Then she turned to Regina, next to her, and extended the tongs. “Here you go.”

Regina looked at Emily carefully, before she accepted them. “... thank you.”

“So.” Miss Amber leaned forward, looking at Brooke and Emily. “How have you two been doing? How’s school going?”

Emily grinned, as she stuck her fork into her bowl. “Brooke is going to fail Algebra.”

“Am not!” Brooke shot Emily a look. “And if I do, it’s because I have a terrible tutor.”

Her friend shrugged. “You get what you pay for.”
“ARE you going to fail Algebra, Brooke?” Miss Amber raised an eyebrow. “We both know you’re smarter than that.”

“No,” Brooke rolled her eyes as she took the can of parmesan cheese and poured some into her bowl. “I was just having problems with tonight’s homework. I already finished.”

“Because I helped.” Emily smirked, as she bit into her pasta and wiggled her eyebrows.

Brooke looked at her, before turning back to Miss Amber. “Did she tell you about skipping out of History?”

Emily choked, as Miss Amber looked at her disapprovingly. “No, she did not. I thought we were over this behavior, Emily.”

“You little-” Emily narrowed her eyes at Brooke, before she turned back to Miss Amber. “I did NOT skip. Mister Harrison gave me a pass to the computer lab, but he forgot to sign it. When the school officer asked me for it in the hall, and saw it without a signature, he busted me for cutting class. It was fixed the next day.”

Miss Amber looked at Jane, who nodded.

“You didn’t see that the pass had been signed before you left the class?” Miss Amber asked.

“I didn’t think to look.” Emily glared at Brooke. “Snitch.”

Brooke smirked back, sparing a quick glance at Regina. The girl hadn’t acknowledged the conversation, or smiled; she’d focused on her food, picking at it.

Something’s not right.

Regina didn’t speak for the rest of the meal. After they finished eating, Brooke and Emily were asked to leave while Miss Amber and Jane talked with Regina in quiet tones.

“I don’t like this,” Emily whispered as they sat on the couch. “Something’s wrong with her.”

“Yea. She is, like, seriously shell-shocked.” Brooke glanced back towards the kitchen, making sure they weren’t heard. “I mean, I know I wasn’t this bad. Were you?”

“It took me a few days to open up, but I definitely spoke more than three words when I got here.” Emily bit her lip. “I don’t know what to do. We’re out of the loop on something, that’s for sure.”

Brooke nodded. “So... we just wait for her to relax and open up?”

“I guess so, for now.” Emily shrugged. “Can’t do much else.”

Miss Amber came out of the kitchen half an hour later. She made a beeline for Emily and Brooke, as the two of them looked up from their phones, and sat down slowly on the coffee table across from them.

“I need you two to do something for me,” Miss Amber said quietly.

“What?” Brooke asked.

“I need you guys to be Regina’s friends. Without asking her why she’s here.” Miss Amber glanced back towards the kitchen. “I’m leaving in a few minutes. Jane’s getting her something to sleep in. I
want to make sure you guys do NOT pry into why she’s here, and not with First Light.”

“Uh... okay.” Emily frowned. “Is she alright?”

“No. She’s not.” Miss Amber leaned forward. “Like I said, I need you girls to be Regina’s friends. She really needs a couple of good ones right now.”

Brooke and Emily glanced at each other. “Yea, sure,” Brooke agreed.

“Good. One last thing.” Miss Amber looked between the both of them. “I know Regina isn’t saying much right now. She hasn’t said much to us, either. I’ve gotten a little more out of her, but not by a wide margin.”

“How did you guys get her?” Emily asked.

“She said something to a mandatory reporter. I’ll leave it at that.” Miss Amber paused. “What I’m getting at, is that we have suspicions about what she went through. If she tells you two ANYTHING that I should know, you need to call me immediately.”

Brooke’s heart rate rose, as she nodded. Emily did the same.

Regina didn’t speak for the rest of the night.

Emily and Brooke made a couple of attempts, to get her to talk; they asked her if she needed anything, or if she wanted to use one of their phones. She shook her head, remaining quiet, as she entered Brooke’s room and closed the door.

“Will you hear her through the wall?” Brooke asked Emily, as they got into bed. “If she’s having problems, I mean.”

“I’ve heard you tossing and turning, so probably.” Emily nodded.

Neither of them heard anything, though. Both girls listened carefully, until they fell asleep, but no movement came from Regina’s room.

It wasn’t until early in the morning that Brooke heard it, about fifteen minutes before their alarm was to go off. The noise came through the crack at the bottom of the door, near her head, and roused her.

What is that? Brooke frowned, as she sat up slowly and put on her glasses. It sounds like someone’s...

Oh.

She got up and opened the bedroom door, the sound much clearer as she entered the hallway. Regina was visible through the open door of the bathroom, hunched over the toilet and breathing heavily.

Don’t sympathy puke, don’t sympathy puke...

“Regina?” she asked quietly, as she approached the bathroom. The other girl jerked her head up, looking guilty as she saw Brooke approaching. “Are you okay?”

“Yea.” She wiped her mouth and reached over, flushing the toilet. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine. Are you sick?” Brooke looked her up and down carefully; other than some sweating, she didn’t look ill. “Do you need me to get Jane?”
Regina shook her head as she stood on shaky legs. She turned to move past Brooke, to go back to her room.

“Wait.” Regina paused, as Brooke opened the medicine cabinet. She produced a bottle of mouthwash and held it out. “Here. You don’t need to go back to bed with... you know, residue or whatever in your mouth.”

Regina blinked and nodded, taking the bottle. She quickly poured some into her mouth, swishing it around and spitting it back into the sink.

“Thank you,” she murmured, as she turned and left.

Chapter End Notes

Big time jump, as you guys may have noticed.

So. I didn't really write anything for the Kate/Victoria or Steph/Rachel storylines over the end of 2018. If this fic was going chronologically, the last half of that year would have been taken up by Brooke's story; even in EtL, nothing really happened in that time (aside from Vanessa's trial, anyway).

Are all three stories caught up? Not yet. But they're close. They'll all be caught up within a few chapters. But in the meantime, I didn't want anyone to forget about the OTHER rebellious teenager I've been writing about. I may not have written about her for the past 20 chapters, but Brooke's story is far from over; I just wanted to catch everything up.

I'm sorry, I hope this isn't too confusing. I'm trying, but with a story like this, it's difficult to keep everything straight.
“She threw up this morning.”

Emily blurted it out to Brooke as they sat on the back porch of Jane and Pete’s house. It was Sunday, a few days after Regina had arrived, and they’d decided to go out for some fresh air.

Brooke looked over at Emily. “She did?”

“Yes. I heard it through the door, while you were asleep. It was about seven or so.”

“Huh.” Brooke looked back towards the trees that dominated their view. “That’s... three mornings now, that she’s done that.”

Emily blinked. “Wait, this isn’t the first time?”

“She did it her first night, too.” Brooke bit her lip. “And I heard her do it again, the next day I figured she was just nervous. Or maybe she’s coming down with something.”

“Do you...” Emily trailed off. “No. Never mind.”

“What?” Brooke looked back at her. “What is it?”

“I just...” Emily hesitated. “It’s not morning sickness. Right? A worried look was on her face. “It’s not.”

Brooke blinked, as she turned back towards the backyard. The thought hadn’t occurred to her. “...fuck,” she muttered. “Miss Amber did say she was a special case.”

“Oh, man.” Emily looked back inside the house. Regina had spent most of her time in Brooke’s room since she’d arrived, only coming down for meals. Miss Amber had come back to the house the previous day, to sit and speak with her some more, but Emily and Brooke had been excluded from that conversation. “No. It’s... she’s too...”

“What? Young?” Brooke leaned forward in her chair, sighing. “No, she’s not. She’s our age. Girls younger than her have kids all the time. Shit, MTV made a series out of them.”

“Shit,” Emily muttered. “You know what else? She’s been eating toast with peanut butter for breakfast every morning. When my mom was pregnant with my baby brother, she did the same thing.”

“Oh... hell.” Brooke glanced back at Emily and met her gaze. “Do you think she knows?”

“I don’t...” Emily hesitated. “Maybe? If she’s in the first trimester, she might not have a clue. But I don’t know why Miss Amber would tell us she’s a special case, if she didn’t know already.”

They fell silent, looking between each other and the house.

“What do we do?” Emily asked quietly. “We can’t ask Miss Amber. You know she won’t tell us, and neither will Jane. Do we just ask Regina directly?”

Brooke was shaking her head before Emily could finish her sentence. “No way. You hear what Miss Amber said. We can’t ask her why she’s not with First Light anymore.”
“Then...” Emily slumped, as she rubbed her forehead. “I don’t know what to do.”

Neither of them moved for several seconds. Brooke finally sighed and pulled out her phone. “Hang on.”

“What are you doing?”

Brooke started typing out a text. “Asking someone who gives good advice.”

Ten minutes later, Brooke and Emily stood a few feet away from Regina’s door.

“Ready?” Emily asked quietly.

Brooke took a deep breath, in and out. “Sure,” she agreed carefully. “Let’s do this. Before we chicken out.”

They walked over to Regina’s room, where the teenager had been since lunch, and knocked. “Regina?” Emily asked.

There was no response, though they both heard her shifting on the bed.

“Regina, can Brooke and I come in?” Emily glanced back at Brooke. “We just want a couple of minutes.”

Nothing came from the other side of the door, except for the sound of movement. After a few seconds, they both heard the door unlock. Emily turned the knob, and they pushed their way inside.

Regina was sitting on the bed, her hands on her knees. She had a very nervous look on her face as the two girls walked inside, Brooke closing the door behind them. And she didn’t say anything; she just alternated her gaze between the two of them and the floor.

“How...” Emily paused. “Um. Sorry. I was gonna ask how you were doing. But I realized that’s kind of a dumb question.”

Regina didn’t reply, as she looked between them cautiously.

“I’m really bad at this,” Emily sighed, looking at Brooke.

“Yea, me too.” Brooke bit her lip. “Regina, we just wanted to say... we kind of know where you’re coming from. And... what you’re going through. I mean, sort of.” Brooke hesitated. “I’m not sure if that’s right.”

“We didn’t have an easy time either,” Emily continued. “When we left First Light, it was really hard. For both of us. And... we don’t know what you had to go through. Before you left.” She paused. “But whatever it was, I’m sure it wasn’t easy.”

“I think what we really want to say is, we kind of know what you’re going through,” Brooke clarified. “Maybe not specifics, but we know how difficult it can be. And we want you to know... you don’t have to do it alone.” She glanced back at Emily. “We want to help.”

Emily nodded. “I know you don’t really know us. And you have no reason to trust us,” she said. “But we’re more or less in this together. Brooke and I kind of lean on each other, to help us through our shit. And... if you want, we’re here for you, too,” she added. “We’ll listen to whatever you have to say. No matter what.”
Regina seemed to absorb what they said. After a few seconds, she looked at the floor, biting her lip.

“I...” she stopped, swallowing as she looked back at Brooke. “I’m sorry I took your room.”

“I don’t care.” Brooke smirked. “It’s technically Jane and Pete’s, not mine.”

“Still.” Regina started picking at her thumbs nervously. “Um... Miss Amber says I’m getting registered for Blackwell.”

“Yea, we figured.” Emily nodded. “It’s a nice school. You’ll like it.”

“Miss Amber said that, too.”

“You’re sixteen, right?” Brooke asked. “You’ll be going into tenth grade?”

Regina nodded. “They said I have a bunch of work I have to do beforehand, though. I’ve, uh... been out of school for a while.”

“Oh.” Brooke paused. “You were home-schooled?”

“Not really.” Regina looked back at the floor, clearly not wanting to elaborate. Brooke glanced back at Emily, unsure of what to say.

“Hey, Brooke and I were going to watch a movie,” Emily said. “You’ve been up here for a while. Do you maybe want to come downstairs, and watch it with us?”

“We’ve got popcorn,” Brooke added. “And the white cheddar powder that makes it really good.”

Regina looked back up at them and slowly nodded. “That sounds nice,” she agreed.

“Totally.” Emily held her hand out. “Come on.”

She looked a little hesitant, but Regina took Emily’s hand and let herself get pulled upright. “What movie are we watching?” she asked quietly.

“Well, Brooke hasn’t gotten to watching any of the Marvel movies yet.” Emily shot her a smirk. “Pete has all of them, so I think we should start with the first Iron Man and go from there.”

Brooke rolled her eyes. “They’re on my list.”

“Yea, well, the Avengers: Endgame movie comes out in a couple of weeks, so we don’t have a lot of time to get you caught up.” Emily led the way out of the bedroom. “Trust me, Regina, you’ll like this one.”

Brooke and Emily both kept an eye on Regina, as the movie progressed.

She seemed to be improving, but the progress was incremental at most. Brooke saw the corner of her mouth twitch a few times, during the funny parts of the movie. And she did seem to pay close attention.

“That was pretty good,” she allowed as the credits rolled. “Are we going to watch the next one?”

“In a minute.” Emily smirked. “The after-credit scenes are the best parts of these movies.”

“There are scenes after the credits?” Regina looked over at her. “Why?”
“To tease the next movies.”

Brooke rolled her eyes. “We HAVE the next movies, Emily.”

“You still need to watch the scene for the full effect.”

Brooke gestured to the remote in her hand. “Then why don’t you, I don’t know, FAST FORWARD??” she emphasized.

Regina snorted in amusement, surprising both of them. She composed herself in a couple of seconds. “Sorry.”

“Yea, yea.” Emily hit the button, zooming towards the end of the credits. “Everyone’s a comedian.”

*Progress.* Brooke smiled at Regina, who gave her a small smile in return. *We are making progress.*
April 2019. Concurrent with ch. 52 of EtL.

Victoria had almost completely quit smoking.

She’d gotten Kate to agree to incremental cutbacks; first it was one a day, then one a week, then one every two weeks. Victoria was now at one cigarette per month, and Kate had gotten a promise from her that she would have the habit kicked completely by the wedding.

It wasn’t easy. Victoria learned quickly that she had to save those cigarettes, for when she really needed them. She’d actually been stockpiling them, because she knew that some drama was going to come up with Kate’s mother eventually, and she was going to need the coping mechanism.

She was smoking now, though, sitting on the bench in front of Kate’s academic building as she waited for her fiancé to come out. And the cigarette was entirely of Kate’s doing, not her mother’s.

Kate had been working non-stop on her thesis for months, before she finally submitted it to the review committee. Victoria hadn’t been able to follow the subject what she’d asked Kate about it; all she’d gotten was that it was a theoretical method of teaching children that would help them retain more knowledge. Kate had poured her heart and soul into it, and it was now time for her to defend her work to a panel of professors in her chosen field.

Victoria puffed on her cigarette, tasting the smoke as she tried to calm her jitters. I cannot believe that I’m as nervous as she is, she thought, amused. Then again, I want her classes to be over as much as she does. We are getting married in a few months.

Christ, I can’t believe it’s almost here. Victoria smirked. And I can’t believe Kate’s about to finish with her degree.

She took one last drag and crushed the cigarette out. Retrieving a pack of gum from her purse, she popped a piece into her mouth and chewed to get rid of the smell before she checked her watch.

Jeez, it’s been almost two hours now.

Her phone jingled with a new text. She answered it, grateful for the distraction.

Alyssa: I just got a box from Courtney. Your dress is here.

“Yes!” Victoria pumped her fist quickly. It had taken months for Courtney to finally find a dress Victoria loved, and as soon as she’d agreed, Courtney had snatched it and put it in the mail. She smiled widely as she sent her reply.

Victoria: Awesome! Thanks for holding it for me.

Alyssa: No prob. When are you taking it to get altered?

Victoria: I’ll try to do it something this week, after my classes. Are there any days that you won’t be able to give it to me?

Alyssa: If you want it this week, you need to get it by Wednesday. I’ll be out of town from Thursday to Saturday.
Victoria: Got it. I’ll get back with you once I make the appointment.

Another checkmark on the list. Victoria smiled as she put her phone away, checking her watch. Ugh. Babe, you really need to hurry up.

Victoria pulled her phone back out after a few minutes, pulling up a game to kill time. She spent several minutes trying to solve a logic puzzle, totally absorbed as she ignored the world.

So when Kate plopped down next to her, she practically jumped out of her skin. Her phone actually slipped from her hands, and she juggled it desperately before finally getting a grip on it.

“Jesus!” she gasped, trying to calm down as she looked at her fiancée. “Come on, babe, you don’t have to...”

Kate wasn’t paying attention. Her eyes were on the ground, a look of dejection on her face.

“What?” Victoria crammed her phone back in her purse as she turned to face her. “Kate, what’s wrong? Tell me what happened.”

“I...” Kate looked at her, and Victoria’s gut clenched at the look in her eyes. “Vicky, they asked so many questions, and I didn’t have the answers for all of them...”

“Ah, shit.” Victoria wrapped her in a tight hug. “It’s okay, Kate. It’s not the end of the world.”

“And that one board member...” Kate sniffed. “He was all over my thesis, and he said... just...”

Victoria tightened her grip. “Fuck him,” she stated. “Kate, fuck those assholes. They don’t have a clue what they’re talking about.”

“He’s the superintendent for the district,” Kate said quietly. “And he said...” she sniffed again. “He said my thesis was one of the most brilliant things he’s ever read.”

Victoria blinked, slowly pulling back and looking Kate in the eyes. She started scowling, as a grin came over her fiancé’s face. “... you little sneak.”

Kate burst out laughing, as Victoria pushed her away. Her scowl didn’t let up as she watched Kate giggle for several seconds. “You should have seen the look on your face!” she cackled.

“Oh, ha, ha, you’re so funny.” Victoria folded her arms. “We’ll see if I ever comfort you again.”

“But you were so quick to!” Kate objected. “That was so sweet!”

Victoria grunted in response. “So, did you pass your defense?”

“Yep.” Kate smiled. “They did ask a bunch of questions, but they seemed to like my answers. The superintendent said his office would be reaching out with a job offer.”

“Really?”

“Oh huh.” Kate nodded. “He said they’re overhauling their primary education program, and he thinks I could contribute. And they have a few openings coming up at elementary schools nearby. He wants me to accept one of them.”

“Awesome.” Victoria nodded. “I’m very happy for you.”

Kate tilted her head. “Are you still mad?”
“Yes.”

“Oh, Vicky.” Kate reached over and took her hand. “I loooove youuu.”

“Ugh.” Victoria rolled her eyes. “You’re not as cute as you think you are.”

Kate batted her eyelashes. “Really?”

“No. Come on.” Victoria stood, pulling Kate upright.

“Where are we going?”

“I’m taking you out to celebrate. Lord only knows why.”

“Yay!” Kate wrapped her in a hug. “Is it because you love me?”

Victoria sighed. “Yes.”

“And you want to marry me?”

“Yes.”

“So you’ll forgive me?”

“Eventually.” Victoria squeezed Kate back. “Don’t worry. You’re gonna make it up to me later.”

Kate looked up at her. “I am?”

“Yes.” Victoria grinned. “You are.”

“How is it?” Kate asked a few days later.

Victoria took a bite of her pasta. “Really, really good,” she said.

Kate’s face brightened from the kitchen, as she dished out her own bowl of shrimp pasta. “As good as your mother’s?”

“It’s...” Victoria hesitated. “Comparable.”

Kate’s smile turned into a frown. “What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing,” Victoria replied immediately. “It tastes phenomenal, Kate. It’s just... different.” She shrugged. “It’s not better than my mother’s. But it’s not worse, either.”

“So... I’m at your mom’s level.” Kate clarified, as she sat down next to Victoria.

Victoria nodded, as she took another bite. “Did you do anything different?”

Kate winced. “I, uh, couldn’t find any smoked paprika at the grocery store,” she admitted. “I had to use the regular stuff. And I didn’t add as much garlic as she does.” She took her own bite, savoring the taste before she swallowed. “You’re right, it is different.”

“Still REALLY good,” Victoria emphasized, as she scooped more into her mouth.

“Thank you.” Kate had another forkful, then froze. “Wait, what time is it?”
Victoria looked at her watch. “Five-thirty.”

“What day is today?”

“The eleventh. Why?”

“The caterers were supposed to call me this morning.” Kate set her fork down and pulled out her phone. Victoria watched her bring up the app she was using to track all the wedding info. “Oh, shoot. They were actually supposed to call yesterday.”

Victoria raised her eyebrows. “They must have forgotten.”

“I guess so.” Kate shrugged. “I better call them quick.”

“Now?” Victoria frowned. “We’re eating.”

“It’s five-thirty,” Kate reminded her as she worked her phone. “Their business hours might already be up. I don’t want to lose them because we were late with the second payment.”

“We already gave them a two-thousand-dollar deposit,” Victoria reminded her. “We’re not going to lose it for being a couple of days late.”

“Still.” Kate put her phone to her ear. Victoria shrugged, returning to her dinner as the call connected. “Yes, I’m looking for Amy, from scheduling?”

She paused.

“Oh, I didn’t know she’d left. This is Kate Marsh. How are you, Dennis?”

Another brief pause.

“I’m good, thank you. We have you guys contracted for the fourth of July, and I just realized we were supposed to make the second payment a couple of days ago.” Kate winced. “I’m sorry we’re a little late. Can I go ahead and make it now? Our password for the account is ‘Red Robin’.”

Victoria stood, walking over to the counter to get her purse and retrieve her credit card.

“Um... no, that’s not right.” Kate frowned. “It’s a wedding, not a trade conference. No. No, it should be under my name. Or maybe my fiancée’s? Victoria Chase?”

Victoria set her purse down on the table. “Is something wrong?” she asked quietly.

“I don’t...” Kate’s voice trailed off, as she listened. “Vicky, would you pass me my tablet?”

Kate accepted her iPad, opening it and bringing the wedding app back up. “No, that’s definitely wrong,” she said quickly. “We arranged this with Amy almost four months ago... yes, I’m sure it was the fourth of July. I have a reservation number right here, are you ready?”

“Put it on speaker,” Victoria said.

Kate complied, as she read out the number. “Let me run this quickly,” the man on the other end of the line said. “Okay, I see it. The Chase-Marsh wedding, for the fourth of July... oh. Oh, my.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Miss, this contract has been cancelled.”
Kate and Victoria looked at each other in stunned silence.

“EXCUSE me?!” Victoria finally yelled.

“Oh, I’m sorry, who—”

“This is Victoria Chase,” she said sharply. “And what the fuck do you mean, the contract was cancelled?!”

“I just have a note here, ma’am,” the man replied. “That contract was cancelled about six weeks ago.”

“By WHO?!” Victoria yelled. She saw Kate lean back in her chair, staring at her phone in shock and unable to speak. “I didn’t cancel it! My fiancé didn’t cancel it! And I can’t think who else would have the authority to do so!”

“Ma’am, please don’t yell at—”

“You will have MUCH bigger problems than my temper if you don’t answer me,” Victoria interrupted in a low voice. “Tell me, right now, who gave you permission to cancel our contract after we gave you a deposit of two thousand dollars and had you put a password on our reservation.”

“I...” the man’s voice trailed off. “It wasn’t me that took the call, ma’am. But according to the notes, your mother called to cancel on your behalf.”

“The fuck she d-”

Victoria stopped. She slowly turned her gaze to Kate, as her fiancé’s eyes went wide.

“Whose mother?” she asked quietly.

“Miss Marsh,” he said.

Victoria worked her mouth like a fish. Kate leaned forward, putting her elbows on the table as she placed her hands over her mouth.

“We put a password on that contract,” Victoria growled.

“Yes, ma’am, Red Robin. Miss Marsh’s mother had it.” He paused. “She told the person who took the call that the wedding was off, and she’d been asked to contact all the vendors on her daughter’s behalf to cancel the contracts.”

Victoria clenched her hands into fists, her knuckles turning white.

“Listen to me very fucking carefully,” she said, her voice full of iron as she leaned over the phone on the table. “That woman had no authority to cancel a contract that her name was not on. If you care about your job, you will reinstate that contract, right now.”

“I... I’m sorry, ma’am, we can’t.”

“The FUCK you can’t!” Victoria yelled. “You had fucking BETTER!”

“Ma’am, that date and time has already been sold and paid in full,” the man said meekly. “We don’t have the personnel to cater a second event.”

Victoria could practically feel her face turning purple.
“I am so sorry, ma’am.” He hesitated. “I can talk to my supervisor, and we can ensure that you receive a full ref-”

“KEEP IT!!”

Kate jumped, startled, as Victoria screamed towards the phone.

“KEEP ALL OF IT!” Victoria shouted. “You’re going to FUCKING NEED IT! Tell your FUCKING supervisor that if he knows what’s FUCKING good for him, he’ll start saving for legal fees right FUCKING now, because he’s about to get FUCKED!!”

She reached over and jabbed her finger on the screen to end the call. She was starting to hyperventilate, her face red with anger.

“I’m going to murder your mother,” she fumed. “I’m going to drive down to San Diego and make her bite down on the curb in front of her house, and stomp the back of her-”

“I’m sorry.”

Victoria barely heard her, she was so quiet. She paused mid-rant and looked at Kate noticing the tears that were streaming down her cheeks. “I’m sorry, Vicky,” she gasped, “I’m so sor-”

“Stop.” Victoria quickly ran around the table, wrapping Kate in a bone-crushing hug. “Don’t you dare apologize for your mother.”

“She...” Kate sniffled. “She cancelled the caterers, Vicky.”

“We’ll get new ones,” Victoria assured her. “They’re not the only catering company in Los Angeles. We’ll get a new one.” She rubbed Kate’s back. “And then, when the lawyers are done with the old one, we’ll put them into so much debt, their children will be working for us.”

Kate took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “I’m so sorry.”

“I don’t want to hear it.” Victoria kissed the top of her head softly. “It’s going to be okay.”

Kate nodded slowly, letting Victoria hold her for a few minutes. Then she stiffened in her arms. “He said contracts.”

Victoria looked down. “Huh?”

“He said contracts.” Kate looked up at her with wide eyes. “Plural.”

They didn’t move for several seconds.

“Let me see that app.” Victoria spun the tablet around to face her.

“Vicky-”

“I’ll call the bartenders.” She took out her phone and started dialing. “Alyssa hooked you up with the camera people, right? Call her and make sure we’re still on, Kate. Right now.”

Forty minutes later, Alyssa was pounding on the apartment door with one hand while she held a phone to her ear with the other.

“I appreciate it, Reggie,” she said. “Yea. No, I get it, and I think they will to. Just, you know, next
time...” she paused. “Right. Thanks.”

She sighed with relief, before pounding on the door again. *Photographer is good, she thought gratefully. Fucking sucks about the goddamn videographer, but we’ll find another one. It shouldn’t be too hard, not in Los Angeles...*

Kate opened the door, and Alyssa almost did a double-take. Her friend looked like she’d been through a war zone; her face was pale, hands were shaking, and she was trembling. *Shit, she’s barely holding it together.*

“Kate.” Alyssa immediately swept her up into a hug. “It’s gonna be alright.”

“She had all my passwords,” Kate said hollowly.

Alyssa frowned. “How?”

“I...” her lips trembled, as she looked at the phone in her hands. “I think she got into my account on the wedding app.”

Looking down, Alyssa saw the white and blue app open on her phone. “She did?”

“I checked my login information,” Kate said quietly. “It says I logged in from San Diego.” She sniffled. “I haven’t been home in years.”

“Shit.” Alyssa let go of Kate and stepped back.

“We-” Kate swallowed. “We lost the bartenders.”

“We’ll get you new ones,” Alyssa assured Kate as she ushered her back inside, closing the door behind them.

“We lost the florist, too. And the officiate.” Kate blinked, and Alyssa could see the moisture starting to gather at the corners of her eyes. “And the band we really liked was re-booked for a wedding in Anaheim.”

“They’re replaceable,” Alyssa stated. “All the contractors are. We’ll get better ones.”

“What about...” Kate’s voice broke, as she sniffled.

“The photographer is still available,” Alyssa told her. “Videographer isn’t. But Hollywood is literally right down the road, Kate. It won’t be hard to find someone with a video camera.” She paused. “Where’s Victoria?”

“On the balcony.” Kate looked behind her. Alyssa followed her look, and she saw Victoria gesturing while snapping into the phone. “She’s talking to the venue.” She swallowed, hard. “I think we lost our spot.”

*Oh, fuck.* Alyssa’s gut twisted. “Has she talked to Taylor?”

“She texted her already.” Kate sniffled again. “Taylor’s trying to track down another caterer while we-

“I DON’T FUCKING CARE!!”

They both jumped, startled, as Victoria screamed out on the balcony.
"I DON'T GIVE A FUCK WHAT THAT FUCKING CUNT TOLD YOU!!" she yelled. "WAS HER NAME ON THE GODDAMN CONTRACT?!"

“Oh, God.” Alyssa turned back, watching as Kate reached backwards, desperately grabbing for something to hold on to as her face went white. “Oh, God.”

“It’s gonna be okay.” Alyssa grabbed Kate’s shoulder, guiding her backwards until she was sitting on the arm of the couch. “Kate, look at me. Everything is gonna be-”

“I'M GOING TO FUCKING OWN YOU AND YOUR CHILDREN!!” Alyssa glanced back outside, watching Victoria shriek into the phone; the blonde girl had truly lost it, her eyes wide as she screamed. “I'M GOING TO BULLDOZE YOUR ENTIRE FUCKING PROPERTY AND BUILD A MONUMENT TO YOUR FUCKING STUPIDITY!! WHEN MY LAWYERS ARE DONE WITH YOU, YOU'RE GOING TO BE MY PERSONAL FUCKING SOCK PUPPET!!"

Kate started hyperventilating, and her eyes squeezed shut as tears started flowing.

Alyssa looked around and spotted a bowl full of decorative pebbles. She reached over, grabbed a handful, and threw it at the glass windows. The noise got Victoria’s attention, and she looked to see the state her fiancée was in. She immediately hung up the phone and rushed back inside.

“It’s okay, babe.” Victoria immediately grabbed Kate in a hug, pulling her into her chest as Kate gasped for air. “Everything is fine.”

“Did...” Kate paused, snorting. “Did we lose the venue?”

Victoria squeezed her eyes shut. “… yea.”

A sob exploded from Kate’s mouth, and she buried her face into Victoria’s shirt. “I’m sorry!” she bawled. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, Vicky, I’m so sorry!”

“It’s.” Victoria paused, swallowing hard. “It's not your fault, Kate. It's not your fault.”

Her words had no effect. Kate blubbered into her shirt, over and over, about how sorry she was while tears leaked down Victoria’s cheeks.

She practically jumped, when Alyssa put her hand on her shoulder. “Take Kate into the bedroom,” she said gently.

“Huh?” Victoria sniffed, opening her eyes and looking at Alyssa. “What-”

“Go take care of your fiancé,” Alyssa ordered. “Let me make calls. We’ll see what we can do.”

Victoria blinked rapidly, trying to clear the tears from her eyes. “We?”

Alyssa pointed towards the other end of the apartment. “Go.”

“... okay.”
Taylor answered Alyssa’s call in less than one ring. When her video feed came up, she was alert and had a phone to her ear.

“Nope. Got it. Fuck you, too.” She ended her call, as she turned to the laptop. “That was the third caterer I called,” she reported. “They’re all booked.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Alyssa shook her head. “We lost the venue.”

“What?!” Taylor’s mouth dropped in horror. “We lost the fucking VENUE?!”

“Yea. We don’t have shit, except for a photographer.” Alyssa sat at the table, rubbing her forehead. “That fucking cunt cancelled everything. My friend was the only one who was still free.”

“We’re three months out!” Taylor protested. “How the fuck can they all be-”

“It’s the Fourth of July, remember?”

“... shit.” Taylor slumped backwards. “Now what?”

Alyssa pulled her phone from her pocket. “Now we do what we promised.”

“What does-” Taylor frowned. “Wait. What are we doing?”

“Saving this wedding,” Alyssa said simply, as she typed out a text.

“Are you serious?!” Taylor leaned forward. “We’re starting from scratch, Alyssa. You just said it; we don’t have shit, except for a photographer. And unless HE can pull a venue out of his ass...”

Alyssa stopped, looking into the camera. “Do you have any better ideas?”

Taylor hesitated. “All I can think of is pushing the date back,” she admitted.

“And let that bitch win? Fuck that.” Alyssa finished her text message and hit send. “Put your game face on.”

Taylor’s phone beeped a few seconds later, and she looked at it with a smirk. “Little dramatic, don’t you think?”

“Not dramatic enough,” Alyssa retorted. “It’s about to be a long night.”

“I’ll say.” Taylor sighed. “You know Dana’s been planning her wedding for years, right?”

“I was led to understand that that’s mostly her fault,” Alyssa countered.

Taylor smirked again. “You’re not entirely wrong.”

Alyssa’s computer beeped, and a new video feed opened up. She answered quickly, and Dana’s face popped up onto the screen. “Speak of the devil,” she said distractedly, looking at her phone; she saw that Max and Stella had also seen it, but Courtney had not.

“Um... hey?” Dana frowned. “What’s with the text?”

“Tell you when everyone’s here.” Alyssa kept working her phone. “Courtney’s not responding.”
“Try a Facebook message,” Taylor suggested. “She always answers those right away.”

Alyssa nodded. “On it.”

Her laptop rang again, and she answered the second call. Max’s face popped up onto the screen, looking as confused as Dana. “Max, good.”

“What’s going on?” Max asked. “What... are you at Kate and Victoria’s?”

“Yea. In a minute. We’re waiting for the others.” Alyssa finished her Facebook message, sending it just as another screen popped up. She answered the third call, and Stella’s face popped up next to Max’s. “Perfect. Just waiting for Courtney.”

“Alyssa?” Stella asked. “What’s happening?”

“Not yet.” Alyssa kept her eyes on her phone, finally seeing a checkmark below her message. “Finally. Courtney just saw it.”

“Isn’t she in New York this weekend?” Dana asked.

“Yea,” Taylor replied. “This is important, though.”

Max leaned forward. “You know what’s going on?”

“Victoria texted me when Kate called Alyssa.” Taylor crossed her arms. “We’ve got a serious fuckin’ problem.”

A fourth window popped up, and Alyssa answered Courtney’s call. “Guys? What are we doing?”

“Waiting for everyone to get here.” Alyssa dropped her phone on the table, and leaned towards the laptop as she prepared to deliver the bad news.

“I hate her.”

Victoria held Kate closely, letting her fiancée lean her head against her chest as she sniffled. She’d finished crying a little bit ago, and the wet spot on Victoria’s shirt was finally starting to dry.

“I hate her so much,” Kate mumbled quietly. “If I ever see her again, I’m going to punch her in the face.”

“I know.” Victoria kissed the top of her head, quickly snorting back mucus. “Me too.”

“I’m so sorry, Vicky.”

Victoria shook her head. “I don’t know how many more times I have to say it.”

Kate sniffled. “I should have made a new email. Or used a different app. Or... something.”

“It’s not your fault.”

Kate buried her face deeper into Victoria’s shirt. “We lost everything,” she whimpered. “There won’t be anyplace available for that date, Vicky. That was why we reserved the venue nine months early, remember?”

“It’s going to be fine.” Victoria squeezed her again. “We’ll fix it.”
“How?” Kate turned, looking up at her fiancée. “We told everyone we were getting married on the Fourth. At that venue. Our invitations were sent out already. And now...” Her lips trembled, as she swallowed. “We’re gonna have to call everyone back and tell them that the wedding’s been cancelled. And we lost all the money you-”

“I don’t give a shit about the money,” Victoria muttered. “Or calling people.”

“We’ll have to call all of your family’s guests, too,” Kate said quietly. “I’m so sorry.”

Victoria shook her head. “I don’t care about them. Or telling people what happened.” She kissed the top of Kate’s head again. “And this wedding is not cancelled.”

“Vicky-”

“I will take you to Vegas and bring you to a drive-through chapel if I have to,” Victoria told her. “I don’t give a damn about the rest of it.” She paused. “We didn’t lose everything. You’re the only person I need there. I am marrying you one way or another, and your fucking mother is not going to stop me.”

Kate sniffed deeply. “I am so sorry,” she sobbed, her voice breaking.

“Don’t.” Victoria took a deep breath. “Our bridesmaids are out there right now, in the other room, doing everything they can to fix it.”

“It was perfect,” Kate cried. “It was all perfect.”

“Whatever we do will be perfect.” Victoria sniffled. “It will be perfect again. Whatever we come up with, or our friends come up with, it’ll be perfect. I promise.”

Victoria squeezed Kate tightly, as she cried into her shirt some more.

The knocking on the door startled both of them. They turned as Alyssa slowly twisted the knob and pushed the door open.

“We need you guys,” she said gently, as she walked towards the bed. “You have a decision to make.”

Kate blinked, as she looked up at her Maid of Honor. “What?”

“Come on.” Alyssa held her hand out. “I’ll show you.”

Kate let herself get pulled up, away from Victoria as she quickly wiped her eyes. Victoria followed as Alyssa led them back into the kitchen, and sat Kate down in front of the laptop. Their other five bridesmaids were all watching them intently.

“Max, tell them what you’ve got,” Alyssa asked.

They watched as Max took a deep breath. “My bosses, Jake and Penny, may have found a venue for you guys. In San Francisco.”

“San Francisco?” Kate brought her hand up, wiping her nose Victoria heard a hint of hope in her fiancé’s voice. “And... it’s available?”

“Um... sort of.” They watched Max mess with her phone. “Alyssa, pull up the email I just sent you. It’s a hotel, it’s still under construction, so they haven’t started taking any reservations yet. It wasn’t supposed to be finished by the fourth. But my boss said that it would be for a party that your dad was
gonna be at, Victoria.” She grimaced. “Sorry he had to name drop.”

Victoria snorted, wiping tears from her eyes. “He’s not wrong. So... what did they say?”

“They said if Derek Chase was going to be there, they’d make sure the rooftop was ready by the beginning of July. I sent the design photos to Alyssa.”

Kate and Victoria looked over as Alyssa brought up the pictures on her phone, handing it to them.

_Holy shit._

Their original venue had been a country club, with an enormous banquet hall and outside ceremonial area. But the rooftop they saw on Alyssa’s phone was amazing. Victoria couldn’t believe the concept photos. The water feature, the view of the Golden Gate Bridge, the illustration of a rooftop party...

_It’s fucking incredible._

“It’s-” Kate paused to snort back mucus. “It’s perfect...”

Victoria nodded, as Kate started crying into her arm. With the hand holding the phone, she rubbed her eyes into her arm to dry them. “We can get it, right? I don’t care if it’s in Los Angeles or not.”

“They said it’ll probably be expensive,” Max cautioned.

“I’ll call my dad.” Victoria sniffed. “I’ll ask him. You said Penny found it?”

Max nodded.

“I haven’t told him yet, what happened... I wanted to...”

“Okay, Victoria, go call your family.” Alyssa took her phone back, leaving Victoria to deal with Kate as she turned back to the laptop. “Everyone else, focus. We’re not done yet.”

---

A few minutes later, the two girls were both sitting on their bed as Victoria called her father.

“Will he be awake?” Kate asked wetly, looking at her watch. “It’s almost ten o’clock at night.”

“He’s in Berlin this week,” Victoria pointed out, as she put her phone on speaker. “It’s seven in the morning for him. He’ll be awake.”

They listened as the call connected. _“Hello?”_

“Hey Kimiko,” Victoria said weakly.

_“Hey, Victoria... are you okay?”_

“No. I’m not okay.” She paused. “Can I talk to my dad?”

_“Your father’s in a meeting, Victoria. Is it something that can wait?”_


_“... hang on.”_

The call fell silent. “Will he answer?” Kate asked quietly.
“I think so.” Victoria sniffed again, rubbing her nose. “He always told us that we could pull him away from work in an emergency.”

The phone clicked after a couple of minutes. “Victoria?” her father asked. “Is everything all right?”

“Hi, Dad.” Victoria paused. “I, uh... I need your help.”

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s the wedding,” she said. “Um... there was a-”

“Wait.”

Victoria stopped and looked over at Kate. “Can I tell him?” she asked quietly. “Please?”

“Kate?” He father sounded surprised. “Are you okay? You don’t sound very good.”

“No, I...” Kate hesitated. “Mister Chase, I am so sorry.”

“I told you to call me Derek, sweetheart... but why are you sorry?”

“You asked me about my family, over the holidays,” Kate said. She stopped to wipe her eyes. “I know I told you that they were excited for the wedding, but... I lied.”

“You lied? About what?”

Kate’s lip trembled. “My mother doesn’t accept that I’m gay,” she said. “She’s been trying to force me away from Vicky for a couple of years, ever since she found out we were together.”

“Oh.” Derek paused. “Oh, Kate, that’s terrible.”

“She...” Kate squeezed her eyes shut, and Victoria watched her wilt in embarrassment. “I’m so sorry, Derek. She found all of our vendor information, for the wedding. And she called all of our contractors. She pretended to be working on my behalf, and...” Kate’s voice failed, as she swallowed, trying to speak.

“Her fucking mother cancelled all of the contracts,” Victoria finished quietly.

“... excuse me?”

“She cancelled everything, Dad.” Victoria sniffed. “We lost the caterers, the band, the flowers, the officiant... and the venue. It’s all gone.”

There was silence on the other end of the line for several seconds. “It’s... everything? Are... are you FUCKING kidding me?!”

Kate flinched at Derek’s language. Victoria reached over and took her hand, squeezing tightly.

“What kind of fucking sociopathic NUTHOUSE thinks she can just piss all over MY DAUGHTER’S...” Victoria could practically hear the steam coming from her father’s ears. “When I get ahold of our fucking lawyers, they’re going to make that bitch wish she’d never been-”

“It’s not Kate’s fault, Dad,” Victoria said emphatically. “She-”

“What? No. Of course it isn’t.” She heard her dad take a deep breath. “That goddamn... okay. Okay, we can fix this. That... BITCH is not going to ruin your girls’ wedding day.”
“Dad—”

“Let me make some phone calls, and I’ll—”

“We found a new venue,” Victoria interrupted.

“You did?” Derek sounded shocked. “So quickly? And on such short notice?”

“It’s...” Victoria paused, collecting her thoughts. “Do you remember the referral you gave me, for that restaurant a couple of years ago? The one owned by Penny Seymour?”

“Yes, of course. Her parents run the Ruby Room, down in Pike Place Market.”

Victoria nodded. “Her and her business partner, Jake Franklin, found a rooftop venue in San Francisco,” she explained. “It’s... God, Dad, it’s perfect.” She looked at Kate and smiled. “We both want it.”

“Okay. What do you need from me?”

“It’s still under construction,” Victoria explained carefully. “They said if we want it, they can get it ready by the fourth. But it’s...” she hesitated. “They said it’s going to cost us. A lot.”

“Kimiko!” they heard him call. “Kimiko, I need the contact information for Penny Seymour. Right now, please.”

“Dad—”

“Don’t worry, sweetheart. I’ll take care of it.” He paused. “What about the other contractors? Catering, alcohol?”

“We’re still working on that.”

“Okay.” He exhaled. “Use the credit card. Don’t worry about the cost. Get whatever you need. I’ll take care of the venue.”

Victoria sniffled. She could feel her eyes getting wet, as she tried not to let her voice catch. “Thank you, Dad.”

“Don’t worry about it. Is Kate still there?”

Kate squirmed. “Yes,” she said in a small voice.

“Kate, sweetie, this is not your fault,” Derek assured her. “I know that. And I’m so sorry you have to deal with this.”

“I...” Kate wasn’t sure what to say. “Derek, I’m sorry. I never meant for—”

“It’s okay, sweetie.” Derek’s voice was soothing, as he spoke to her. “Your mother is not going to interfere anymore.”

“I’m still so sorry,” Kate said dejectedly. “I didn’t mean to cost you... I was—”

“Kate, you didn’t do anything. You have nothing to be sorry for.” There was a rustling in the background. “Thank you, Kimiko. Sweetheart, you have been nothing but a blessing ever since you came into Victoria’s life. And I cannot imagine a better woman for my daughter to marry. I’m sorry you have family that treats you like this, but I am going to make it better.”
Kate’s lips trembled, and she sniffed deeply, swallowing as she tried not to cry. “… thank you,” she managed to push out quietly.

“You’re welcome. Now, I’m going reach out to Penny and make sure you girls get that rooftop. I’ll call you two back in a little bit.”

**Penny:** Okay, Mr. Chase, we have a number.

**Derek:** What is it?

**Penny:** For the rooftop, lobby, and a couple of floors being ready for the wedding in three months, it will cost about $110,000.

**Derek:** Does that price include a guarantee of service?

**Penny:** It does. My business partner, Jake, is on the phone with them right now. They’ll use the money to double the number of contractors, and work around the clock if they have to.

**Derek:** Construction is not really my forte. Is that a realistic figure?

**Penny:** It seems to be, though I wouldn’t be surprised if it was padded by ten to fifteen percent. To be expected, if you want that kind of guarantee on such a short timetable; the contractors will inflate their budgets, to deal with potential delays.

**Penny:** And the project manager knows we’re talking to you. He’s going to make sure all his bases are covered, to avoid your bad side.

**Derek:** You know this project manager?

**Penny:** I don’t, but Jake does. He’s worked with him before, and he asked me to assure you that the man is very competent. If he says it will be done, then it will be done.

**Derek:** Very well. I’ll accept the terms.

**Derek:** My assistant will be in contact with you shortly. She’ll handle the payment, and the contract.

**Penny:** Alright. We’ll make it happen.

**Derek:** On a personal level, Penny… thank you for your work on this. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate you and Jake coming through for my daughter.

**Penny:** It wasn’t a problem, Mr. Chase. We’re happy to help.

**Derek:** It still means a lot to us.

**Derek:** My assistant will be putting a 10% negotiation fee in the contract, for your and Jake’s services rendered.

**Penny:** That’s very generous, sir. Thank you.

**Derek:** No, Penny, thank you.
Kimiko: Hey. How are you doing?

Victoria: Better, after a night’s sleep.

Victoria: I didn’t pull my dad out of anything important, did I?

Kimiko: Just a meeting with Angela Merkel’s people.

Victoria: ... you’re joking, right?

Kimiko: Meh. They asked to meet us, not the other way around.

Kimiko: Anyway. I wanted to let you know we’ve signed a deal with the hotel people. The rooftop lounge will be ready by the 4th.

Victoria: Thank you so much.

Kimiko: Of course. Also, to avoid a repeat issue, your father asked me to arrange all the contracts for you and Kate. They’ll be in our name, not yours.

Victoria: ... that’s probably a good idea.

Kimiko: Anyway, I wanted to talk about the invitations. I think you guys should send out new ones, letting everyone know the venue shift.

Victoria: Yea, we should.

Victoria: God, this is so fucking humiliating.

Kimiko: You don’t have to tell people what happened. And quite frankly, you shouldn’t. Last thing anyone wants is for people to know that someone effectively cancelled a Chase wedding with a few phone calls and some social engineering.

Victoria: Is this coming from you or my dad?

Kimiko: Little of both.

Kimiko: Look, it’s still your wedding, and you’re in charge. All I’m offering is suggestions; you guys can do whatever you want.

Victoria: No, you aren’t wrong. I just feel bad. We already lost a bunch of money because we weren’t as careful as we should have been.

Kimiko: If it helps, the lawyers are already working on it. We’ll get that money back and then some, for breach of contracts.

Victoria: I wish we could take that bitch for all she’s worth.

Kimiko: We could, if you want.

Kimiko: At the very least, we’d bankrupt her with legal fees. Just say the word.

Victoria: Don’t tempt me. Nothing would make me happier than to see her begging for change at a highway on-ramp.
Victoria: But she’s married, and Kate has two other sisters living in that house. We don’t want them on the streets because their mother’s a cunt.

Kimiko: Fair enough. So. Invitations?

Victoria: Yea, okay.

Kimiko: We’ll tell people that the venue has shifted due to unforeseen circumstances. Anyone that has problems making it can talk to us for help, and we’ll tally those costs for the lawsuits.

Victoria: Wait. Are YOU doing the invitations?

Kimiko: I’m offering to.

Victoria: You must have more important stuff to do for my father.

Kimiko: Not anymore. He told me that until you two sign the marriage license, your wedding is my top priority. Everything else has been delegated.

Victoria: Shit. I’m sorry.


Victoria: I know what you do day-to-day. You can’t tell me this isn’t a demotion.

Kimiko: He was very clear that he wanted me specifically handling this. Because he trusted me more than anyone else on his staff, and he knows I won’t screw it up. I’m not taking it as a demotion.

Kimiko: Besides, you’re my friend, even if your dad is my boss. I’m happy to help in any way I can.

Victoria: ... thank you. That means a lot.

Kimiko: You’re welcome. Now, if you like, I can put together a new invitation for you and Kate to approve. Unless you’d rather do it yourself?

Victoria: Not really. I’m sorry. I just don’t have anything in me right now, mentally, to do it.

Kimiko: I understand. You’ll have something by the end of the day.

Mary: How are you doing, sweetie?

Kate: I’m fine, Mary. And I am SO sorry.

Mary: Don’t be. It’s not your fault.

Mary: And I’m sorry that your mother is like this.

Kate: ... thank you.

Mary: Is this why you and Victoria always danced around introducing us?

Kate: Yes. I’m sorry we led you on.
Mary: Sweetie, with a parent like that, I don’t blame you.

Mary: I know my husband told you that we still love you. I just wanted to make sure you knew we were serious. I could not be more thrilled to have my daughter marry a girl like you.

Kate: ... that means so much to me, Mary.

Kate: I’m still sorry you and your husband have to pay for what she did.

Mary: Kate, the money is nothing compared to what your and Victoria’s happiness means to us.

Mary: Besides, if you knew how much my husband spent on his last car, you wouldn’t feel the least bit bad about it.

Kate: Really? What did he get?

Mary: How much do you know about cars?

Kate: Not as much as I should. I know most of the expensive names, though.

Mary: Do you know what a McLaren Spider is?

Kate: No. What is it?

Mary: A toy for a man who has far more money than sense.

Courtney: So... we feel like real assholes about this. But we don’t have a choice.

Victoria: What?

Taylor: Your invitations said we could ask for assistance, if we were having financial difficulty adjusting our plans?

Victoria: Of course. What’s wrong?

Taylor: Well, we were going to split a hotel room in LA. But the deposit we paid was non-refundable, to secure the price we got for that weekend. We can’t get it back. And rooms in San Francisco are even more expensive.

Courtney: We can’t change our plane tickets, either. We’re flying into LA whether we like it or not.

Victoria: Yea. We figured this might happen.

Victoria: How much do you guys need?

Taylor: We can spring for bus tickets. But the hotel room is over what we can afford, even with a split.

Victoria: Okay. Let me get ahold of my father’s assistant. I’ll be right back.

...
Victoria: There you guys go. Problem solved.

Taylor: ... holy shit, Victoria.

Courtney: Dude, we were just going to stay at a Motel 6 or something!

Victoria: The fuck you were. My bridesmaid and MOH aren’t staying someplace that charges by the hour.

Taylor: Did you rent us a car too??

Victoria: You’re not taking the bus, either. I assume you two are okay with a road trip?

Courtney: Yea, of course! Still! That is a LOT of money!

Victoria: Dude, I’m not paying for it.

Taylor: You’re not? Because it feels like you just did.

Victoria: Remember the venue that broke their contract? They’re literally paying through the nose to stay off our bad side and out of court.

Victoria: We’re just gonna send them the bill.

Courtney: ... I feel less bad now.

Lynn: Kate, I am SO sorry.

Kate: Don’t. It is not your fault.

Lynn: Stella asked me to help watch Mom, too. I should have known she’d try something.

Kate: Keeping an eye on her is not your responsibility. It shouldn’t be Stella’s, either. Our mother should have the wherewithal to act like a decent human being without her own child watching her.

Lynn: I really, really want to punch her in her smug fucking face.

Kate: You don’t need an assault on your record before you go to Cal Tech, Lynn.

Lynn: ... you’re not going to give me grief about swearing?

Kate: After this week? You’ve got a free pass when it comes to Mom.

Lynn: I’m still sorry. I honestly can’t leave fast enough. I don’t even want to be in the same house as her anymore.

Kate: You’re almost graduated, Lynn. Just a couple more months.

Kate: Hey, how would you like to spend the summer with me and Victoria?

Lynn: In Los Angeles?

Kate: You’re coming up here for college in a few months anyway. And we have a free guest room.
Lynn: I don’t think Mom would be cool with it.

Kate: You’re 18. And you’ll have graduated high school. You can do whatever you want, and our mother will have to live with it.

Lynn: I don’t have any way of getting up there with my stuff.

Kate: If only one of our close family friends was coming up here for a special event in June. With a boyfriend who drives a pickup truck.

Lynn: ... do you think Stella would be okay with that?

Kate: I don’t think she’d have a problem with it.

Lynn: And Victoria?

Kate: She’s literally sitting next to me, reading over my shoulder. It was her idea.

Lynn: ... I’d love to.

Kate: Great! I’ll call Stella, and make sure she’s on board.

Lynn: Man. Mom is going to flip, when she finds out I’m gone.

Kate: You know, that’s probably why Vicky suggested it.
Regina improved slowly, over the next few weeks.

She was behaving almost normally by the time school ended. Even though she had to take summer classes, to catch up, she still had a positive attitude.

Neither Brooke nor Emily ever asked about the possibility of her being pregnant. And the early-morning puking stopped a few days after they spoke to her. Regina never mentioned it again, or why she hadn’t been feeling well. Emily did confide in Brooke that she thought Regina was putting on weight, though.

Brooke wound up focusing less on Regina, and more on her upcoming appointment with the psychologist. When the day finally came, Jane drove her to the appointment, leaving Emily and Regina behind with Pete.

“I can’t believe they’re making her see a psychologist,” Regina remarked quietly. “That seems... I don’t know. I can’t imagine forcing someone to get evaluated.”

“Yea.” Emily glanced back at the door. Jane and Brooke had been gone for three hours by that point. Her and Regina were in the living room, watching TV while using their phones; Miss Amber had given Regina an older Samsung model a week after her arrival. “She’s pretty salty about it.”

“I’m sure.” Regina leaned back in her chair, and Emily forced herself not to look at her stomach; she really did think Regina was putting on weight, though she refused to acknowledge it. “They won’t agree with Elder Caulfield, right? There’s no way anyone would diagnose Brooke as a pathological liar.”

Emily shook her head. “No way. I’ve seen her try. Brooke couldn’t lie her way out of a wet paper bag.”

Regina raised an eyebrow. “Really? She’s that bad?”

“Totally. A couple of months ago, Jane asked us to help her do a deep-clean of the kitchen. And Brooke told her that she had to finish her English essay.” Emily smirked. “The essay that she’d finished typing on Jane’s computer that morning.”

“Oh, jeez.”

“Yea. She got to do the oven AND the fridge.” Emily shook her head. “Brooke is too good of a person to be a liar, pathological or otherwise.”

“Okay.” Regina sighed, as she looked back at the schoolwork on the coffee table. “Any chance you want to do my history assignment for me?”

“Not even if you paid me. How much more do you have to do?”

Regina scanned the papers in front of her. “That, plus I have to read a few chapters for English, and I have to learn a lot of really boring stuff about triangles.”
“Trigonometry isn’t boring.” Emily rolled her eyes. “And it’s important, if you want to work in a STEM field.”

“STEM?” Regina looked confused.


Regina hummed. “Is that what you want to do?”

“I mean... math is one of the few things I’m actually good at,” Emily allowed. “Maybe. I’m not sure yet. What do you want to do?”

“I...” Regina’s voice faded, as she blinked. The girl looked lost, as she tried to come up with an answer and failed. “I never thought about it.”

“Never?” Emily frowned. “At all?”

Regina shook her head, slowly looking back at her schoolwork silently.

*Fuck. She’s going all catatonic again.*

“How long do you have, before you need to turn all that stuff in?” Emily asked quickly, trying to draw her back out. “It doesn’t all have to be done today, right?”

“I have until next Friday to turn it all in,” she answered, looking back at her. “It’s more or less at my own pace.”

“Well, I think you’ve done enough for one afternoon.” Emily reached over and grabbed the TV remote. “You want to watch something? Jane has a bunch of sappy shows on the DVR.”

“Hmm.” Regina smiled. “That does sound like more fun than homework.”

Emily selected one of Jane’s medical dramas, and both girls settled into the couch to watch it. But they only got about ten minutes into it, before a car engine drew their attention outside. “Is that Jane and Brooke?” Regina asked.

“Sounds like it.” Emily paused the show, glancing out the window. “Looks like they’re pulling into the garage.”

They both stared at the door, waiting for Brooke and Jane to enter. But it stayed closed. Emily furrowed her brows, wondering what was taking so long, when they first heard it.

“What’s that?” Regina frowned, as they both stood from the couch.

“I have no idea.” Emily strained her hearing, to try and listen.

*Thump... thump... thump...*

Confused, the two girls made their way to the garage door. They pushed it open, absorbing the scene in front of them.

The most prominent feature of the garage was the stand-up punching bag Pete kept in the middle of his work area, on the other side of where Jane usually parked. The girls heard him sometimes, early in the morning, as he went at it with a pair of boxing gloves for his work out. He was staying away from it, though, near his workbench, while Jane stood near the grill of her car. Both of them were
avoiding the source of the noise.

Brooke was standing in front of the punching bag. And a baseball bat was in her hands. A look of rage was on her face as she swung the bat, over and over, into the side of the bag as hard as she could.

*Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump...*

Jane noticed the girls and silently put her hand up, wordlessly telling them to stay back as Brooke wailed away on the standing bag.

When she finally started to slow down, Brooke lowered the bat and lifted one foot, lashing out and kicking the bag onto its side. Then she raised the bat again and started beating it into the floor, raining blows down on the bright red padding. She grunted with every swing, as she tried to hit the bag harder and harder.

Brooke finally swung too hard. The bat slipped from her hands as it hit the bag, bouncing across the floor. She didn’t bother to retrieve it; instead, she lifted her leg and delivered several kicks with her sneakers. When she finally stopped, she stood over the punching bag, her breathing ragged as she glared at it with eyes that were practically on fire.

Emily spoke up after a few seconds. “So, how was the psych eval?”

Brooke’s head whipped around, and Emily physically recoiled. Her smirk withered under her friend’s glare. “How the FUCK do you think?!” Brooke snarled.

“Brooke,” Jane started. “Sweetie, calm d-”

“I AM CALM!!” Brooke walked over to retrieve the bat, then immediately resumed swinging it into the punching bag. “FUCK-”

*Thump.*

“That mother FUCKING-”

*Thump.*

“Piece of SHIT-”

*T hump.*

“ARROGANT-”

*Thump.*

“Son of a WHORE-”

*Thump.*

“COCKSUCKER!!”

The last blow she delivered to the punching bag set her off-balance, as she fell over backwards. She landed in a seated position, and the bat slipped back out of her hands to roll across the floor towards Pete. Brooke made no move to go after it as she struggled to catch her breath. She gasped for several seconds, while nobody spoke.
“I need to change,” Brooke finally muttered, as she looked down at herself. “I still smell like that asshole’s office.”

Jane, very uncharacteristically, didn’t rebuke her for cursing as Brooke stood and stalked back inside. Regina and Emily both moved over, giving her space as she entered the house.

Pete sighed, as he bent over to retrieve the bat. “What happened at the psychologist’s?”

“I don’t know.” Jane shook her head. “She was nervous when she went into the office, but when she came out, she was just angry. She didn’t speak for the entire drive home.”

Emily frowned. “You didn’t go in with her?”

“No.” Jane sighed. “They wouldn’t let me. She probably just needs some time to cool off. We’ll give her some space.”

Emily and Regina went back to the couch, but neither of them could really focus. They listened to Brooke stomp around upstairs, take a shower, then stomp back to her room. The sound of the door slamming reverberated through the house.

Regina looked very uncomfortable, as she glanced at Emily. “What do we do?”

“I don’t know.” Emily glanced at the stairs. “I’ve never seen her like this before.” She bit her lip. “We should probably see if she’s okay.”

Both girls stood and climbed the stairs, trying not to make too much noise as they approached the door to the room Brooke was sharing with Emily. They exchanged a final look before Emily gently knocked on the door.

No answer.

“Brooke?” Emily knocked again.

“... yea.”

Emily opened the door and led the way inside, as Brooke sat up on the bed. She was quickly wiping the tears from her eyes, trying to hide it from them.

“Are you okay?” Regina asked, shutting the door behind them. “Was it that bad?”

“I...” Brooke sighed, as she wiped her eyes again. “Sorry I yelled. Before.”

“It’s fine.” Emily sat on the bed next to her. “What happened?”

Brooke took a breath, exhaling slowly. “That guy was just a fucking asshole.”

Emily blinked. “What do you mean?”

“He...” Brooke shook her head. “I walked in, and he was so... fucking condescending. Like I wasn’t worth his time or something. And he started asking me all these questions, about what led me to rebel against my family, and when I tried to tell him about the arranged marriage, he refused to hear it.”

She wiped her eyes again and continued. “Then he asked what had made me put the red dye in my hair. And I told him, I was just trying a new style. And he asked about the ‘delinquents’ I was hanging out with and getting influenced by.”
Emily raised an eyebrow. “I’m a delinquent now?”

“I didn’t tell him who you were,” Brooke said. “The way he was pushing me to tell him about who I was hanging out with weirded me out, so I didn’t answer. And he went on this bullshit tangent, about how refusing to answer was indicative of disrespecting his authority, or something stupid.”

“Wow,” Regina commented.

“Yea. He was a real son of a bitch.” Brooke shook her head. “I just stopped talking, after about ten minutes. He kept throwing these really dumb questions at me. And once he figured out that I was done with him, he did this... stupid fucking sneer. And said that it sounds like if I’m not lying, I’m not talking.”

Emily did a double-take. “Are you serious?”

“Yea. He spent the rest of the forty-five minutes writing shit I couldn’t see, and then told me I could go.” Brooke tightened her fists. “I’m pretty sure he just whipped up a report agreeing with my grandfather and Ryan Caulfield.”

Regina and Emily didn’t say anything, for a few minutes. “It sounds like you need to tell Miss Amber and your lawyer what happened,” Emily finally said.

“I will.” Brooke sighed. “I was just... you know, I didn’t want to talk to them when I was mad.” She smirked. “I already had one panic attack in front of them. I don’t want to do it again.”

Rachel: What the fuck?!

Megan: I know.

Rachel: I’m not a psychologist, but if what Brooke said is true, this guy needs to have his license yanked.

Rachel: I’ve never even heard of him. Doctor Ericson, she said?

Megan: I have. He’s a shrink-for-hire.

Rachel: Aren’t they all?

Megan: No. Guys like these are whores. For the right money, they’ll say whatever the lawyers want them to on the stand.

Rachel: Then how the fuck is he allowed to testify?!

Megan: Because he has pretty impressive credentials. And the sessions between him and his patients are confidential, so I can’t ask specific questions about what happened between him and Brooke.

Megan: And Ryan Caulfield knows that.

Rachel: I’m going to go Pulp Fiction on his ass if I get half an opportunity.

Megan: I probably wouldn’t try very hard to stop you.

Rachel: Now what? Tell me we can do something.
Megan: “We” don’t do anything, Rachel. You need to stay in your lane on this, and not get involved.

Rachel: Megan...

Megan: Don’t start. You know Ryan would RELISH the opportunity to take you apart on the stand for sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong. Especially with all the problems you and your father cause him.

Rachel: ...

Rachel: Fine. Tell me YOU can do something about this.

Megan: Yes. I’ve been going over some strategies with the other lawyers in my firm. I think I’ve got something solid.

Rachel: You’re not going to tell me?

Megan: You’re not my client.

Rachel: Then what can I do?

Megan: Be there for Brooke. And the rest of your teenagers.

Rachel: Are you sure?

Megan: I’ve GOT this, Rachel.

Joey: Holy shit, have I got some info for you.

Brooke: All ears.

Joey: What was your address, back in AB?

Brooke: 2318 Yellowstone Drive.

Joey: And your grandparent’s?

Brooke: 9844 David Circle.

Joey: Both of those mortgage payments were being made by Abel Industries.

Brooke: Are you kidding me?

Joey: Nope. I’ll send you the list of the other addresses, but my bet is that the other seven houses all belong to First Light Elders, Pastors, and their children.

Brooke: Holy shit.

Brooke: Hey, there was another thing I noticed, too, about the payments. There are three other businesses that pay Abel Industries for “services rendered”. But all the payments add up to $9,950.

Joey: It’s not all at once?
Brooke: No. It’s anywhere between two and five payments each month, but it always adds up to exactly $9,950. I don’t know if that’s significant or not.

Joey: It is. Anything more than $10K gets flagged by banking regulators. And there are programs that specifically watch for sums that slide in just under the $10K mark, which is why those payments are broken up.

Joey: What businesses are they?

Brooke: Premier Solutions, Hastings Industries, and Goldman Holdings.

Brooke: I Googled them, but there’s nothing out there. Just like Abel.

Joey: Do you want my amateur assessment?

Brooke: Yes. Please.

Joey: All of those business are shell corporations. I bet if we request info from public records, there won’t be anything in Oregon about them; they’ll be from out-of-state, or overseas in a tax haven.

Joey: I think you just found proof of First Light’s money laundering.

Brooke: ... fucking sweet.

Joey: This is serous shit, Brooke. This is white-collar crime. Very rich executives get jail time for this sort of thing.

Brooke: And there’s no legitimate reason for this stuff?

Joey: For corporations that don’t exist to move money back and forth while deliberately hiding from federal regulators and making mortgage payments on private residences?

Joey: At the very least, First Light would have to answer some uncomfortable questions.

Brooke: Dude, I owe you so much. You might have just saved my ass.

Joey: You’re welcome. If we see you again, you can pay me back by buying lunch.

Brooke: Sold.
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Victoria watched with a smile as Kate kept her gaze on the road below them, her foot tapping impatiently on the floor. “Anxious, are we?”

“Maybe a little,” Kate admitted. “I’m just looking forward to seeing her.”

“I know.” Victoria looked back at the road as she leaned on the balcony railing next to her fiancée. “I wonder how clean of a getaway she made?”

Kate shrugged. “Stella said they were fine. And that they didn’t even see my mom.”

“Good for them.” Victoria nodded. “I wonder how long it’s going to take your mother to figure out she’s gone.”

“Probably a few days,” Kate sighed. “I really hate that she doesn’t pay a lot of attention to my sisters. I’m not unconvinced that that’s why Jessica has an anxiety disorder.”

“If it makes you feel any better, there are far greater reasons to hate your mother.”

“That’s not…” Kate’s voice trailed off. “There she is!”

Victoria turned back to the parking lot as a blue pickup truck pulled in. She quickly pushed herself off the railing, following Kate out of the apartment and into the elevator.

By the time they exited the lobby, Eric had parked the car. Lynn was just getting out as she spotted them. “Kate!” she exclaimed, dropping her suitcase.

They collided, Kate wrapping her sister in a tight hug. “It is SO good to see you again,” she said, gripping the back of Lynn’s shirt. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too.” Lynn let go, stepping back. “Thank you so much for this.”

“Of course.” Kate smiled. “I can’t tell you how happy I am to see you.”

“Me too.” Victoria laid a hand on Kate’s shoulder, smiling at Lynn. “How are you doing?”

“Good.” Lynn bit her lip, squirming as she looked at her. “I’m so sorry, Victoria.”

The blonde waived her hand dismissively. “That wasn’t your fault, Lynn. Seriously, don’t worry about it.”

Lynn shook her head. “I said I would-”

“HEY!!”

The three of them turned to see Stella carrying two garbage bags full of clothes, as Eric struggled to lift a box from the back of his truck. “As heartwarming as this is, can we bring everything inside first?” she called. “Your sister packed a lot of shit!”
They managed to get everything in one trip, though the building manager had them use the freight elevator. They all dragged several garbage bags, Lynn’s suitcase, and three boxes into the guest room.

“Okay, what’s IN here?” Eric asked, dropping the last heavy box on the floor. “It feels like rocks.”

“It’s my PC. And PLEASE be careful,” Lynn begged. “I have models on it that I can’t replace.”

Victoria frowned, as she set a pair of garbage bags on the floor. “Models?”

“Computer models,” Lynn clarified. “I was in the honors physics class, and in my free time I came up with a few atmospheric escape launch models for rockets. My teacher specifically mentioned them in the recommendation letter he wrote me, and a couple of people at Cal Tech want to see what I came up with. They took a really long time to make, and I don’t want to start over.”

“Then why haven’t you backed them up?”

Lynn sighed. “My mother wouldn’t buy me the external hard drive I need. A couple of them are almost a hundred gigs.”

Kate set down another box on the floor next to Eric. “Well, in any case, that’s all of it. Come on, let’s get something to drink.”

They all filed into the kitchen, and Kate passed out bottles of water. “Did you get everything from your room?” Victoria asked as she opened hers. “Didn’t leave anything behind?”

“Nothing I thought would be worth it.” Lynn shrugged. “Some clothes I don’t wear, a few odds and ends I didn’t feel like bringing with me, that sort of thing.”

“And Mom has no idea?” Kate asked.

Lynn shook her head. “Her and Dad don’t really come into my room anymore, so they didn’t know I was packing everything up.”

“We got everything late last night,” Stella added. “While your parents were visiting a neighbor. We were in and out in less than twenty minutes.”

“I told Mom that I was staying at my friend Michelle’s house,” Lynn finished. “And that I would be there for a few days while her parents were out of town, hence the suitcase. Dad didn’t question it, and Mom didn’t care.”


Kate whacked her on the shoulder. “Our parent’s house was not a jail,” she scolded.

“It kind of felt like it,” Lynn said quietly. “I’ve been so eager to leave, I couldn’t stand it.” She looked back at Victoria. “I really am sorry that I didn’t know what my mom was doing.”

“Lynn.” Victoria leaned forward. “That is not your fault. Or Stella’s, or anybody else’s. You can stop beating yourself up over it.”

“I still feel bad.” Lynn sighed. “I’m sure you guys lost a bunch of money.”

“Not really.” Victoria smirked. “My family’s lawyers are pit bulls. We’ve already gotten all of it back and then some.”
Kate blinked, looking at her. “You did?”

“Breach of fiduciary duty, breach of contract, emotional distress... combine that with a lack of desire to get on my family’s bad side, and those guys were VERY willing to settle.” Victoria stood and walked towards the hallway, still speaking. “Nobody will go out of business. But they’ve all learned a very painful lesson in contract law.”

“I’m... glad to hear it.” Lynn nodded. “Still.”

“Seriously, Lynn, don’t worry about it.” Victoria disappeared into another room, returning after a few seconds with a grey box and some cables. “Here.”

Lynn frowned. “What’s this?” she asked, taking it.

“An old external drive I used before I got a Time Machine.” Victoria sat back down. “I haven’t needed it in years. You can have it to back up your stuff.”


“No problem.” Victoria smiled. “Definitely get those models backed up. Last thing you need before you go to Cal Tech is to lose all your stuff.”

Stella leaned forward. “What time are we leaving tomorrow?” she asked. “It’s not too early, is it?”

“That’s up to your guys,” Kate assured them. “It’s about a six-hour drive to San Francisco, and the bachelorette parties aren’t for a couple of days after we get there. It’s pretty much at everyone’s own pace.”

“Dana’s already there,” Victoria added. “Her and Trevor flew out today, so they could do some sightseeing before the wedding. Alyssa’s driving up tomorrow, too. And Courtney and Taylor will follow her when their planes land.”

“And, of course, Max is already there,” Kate finished. “Her and Chloe are excited to have you, Lynn.”

“Yea, Max told me.” Lynn nodded. “Thanks for asking her to put up with me. It was hard enough to save for the dress.”

“Right.” Kate looked at Victoria, the two girls trading glances before turning back to Lynn. “So. About that.”

Lynn looked confused. “What? Did it not come in?”

“No, it did,” Victoria said quickly. “It looks very nice. Green is a good color on you.”

“It’s...” Kate hesitated. “I was hoping that you wouldn’t have a problem changing it. To silver.”


Kate took a deep breath. “Look, Lynn. Dad was supposed to walk me down the aisle. He’s obviously not coming. Literally nobody from our side of the family is going to be there for me.” She paused. “Except you. I mean, you literally ran away from home to be here. I can’t tell you what that means to me.”

“Well.” Lynn squirmed. “With a mom like ours, it wasn’t a hard sell.”
“Nevertheless,” Kate forged ahead. “Lynn, you’re the only family I’ll have there. And... I would really love it, if you would walk me down the aisle.”

Lynn blinked, looking at Kate in astonishment. “... really?”

“Yea.” Kate nodded. “Please.”

“Of c-” Lynn stood. “Kate! I would love to!”

Kate smiled. “Really?”

Lynn walked around the table and threw her arms around Kate. “Dude, this is going to be so cool!” she exclaimed. “I get to walk my sister down the aisle? And stick a big middle finger to Mom? How awesome is that?”

Victoria, Stella, and Eric snorted in amusement. Kate just rolled her eyes and chuckled. “Not really the motivation I thought you’d have, but that works.”

“Kate, I am so down for this.” Lynn paused. “Um... does it have to be a silver dress? Only because I have, like, no money.”

“Lynn, we’re not going to have you change outfits four days before the ceremony AND force you to pay for it,” Victoria assured her. “We’ve got the dress. And we still have the receipt for the green one, so you can send it back and get a refund.”

“Then I can pay you back,” Lynn said as her and Kate separated. “Once the refund comes through.”

“Meh.” Victoria shrugged. “We’ll take it out of the extra money we got from the contract settlements. Think of it as your mother paying for it.”

A grin slowly came over Lynn’s face. “I kind of want to argue.”

“But you won’t.”

“Telling my mother that her actions paid for the dress I wore to Kate’s wedding is a powerful incentive to be selfish.”

“Oh, that’s photogenic.”

Courtney stopped walked and looked over at Lynn. “What?”

“Check that out.” Lynn bent over and picked up a twelve-inch long piece of plastic wrap. “How close to the wire did these guys cut it, do you think, that we’re the ones picking up their trash?”

“Probably last night.” Courtney smirked, as she picked up another scrap of trash. “I opened one of the empty rooms downstairs, and there was a shitload of tools and building supplies squirreled away inside. They’re definitely not done here.”

“Yea.” Lynn looked around the rooftop, noting the view of the Golden Gate Bridge. “Still. It looks amazing.”

“Sure does.” Courtney admired the scenery for a second. “I wouldn’t mind getting married someplace like this.”

Lynn looked back at her. “You’re engaged?”
“No. I don’t even have a boyfriend.” Courtney shook her head. “Not a lot of eligible heterosexual men in my line of work, unfortunately. But when I do find the right guy, getting hitched on a rooftop like this wouldn’t suck.”

“Can’t argue with that.”

They both ambled back towards the others slowly, Courtney picking up a small scrap of wood as they walked. “Where the hell did you find that?” they heard Dana ask Chloe as they approached.

“Sitting on top of one of the chairs.” Chloe looked behind them, a grin on her face. “Which Taylor and Alyssa walked right past.”

“We were staring at the ground!” Taylor protested.

“Whatever. Roof is clean.” Courtney turned and emptied her hands into the water feature that ran the width of the rooftop. “It’s time to get changed. The ceremony is in two hours.”

I can’t believe it’s almost time. Lynn was beyond ecstatic, ever since she’d been asked to walk Kate down the aisle. She was hardly used to being the center of any kind of attention, and while she knew her part in the wedding was small, it was definitely important. She’d barely let on to Kate and Victoria how honored she’d been that they asked.

And I get to wear a kick-ass dress. She was just as excited for that. The day they’d arrived, before Max and Chloe had picked her up from the hotel, Victoria and Kate had taken her to one of the most upscale stores she’d ever been in. As soon as they’d arrived, the owner had taken them into the back and started plucking dresses off the rack. Lynn didn’t know much about fashion, but she definitely recognized some of the names she’d heard tossed around. How many eighteen-year-olds can say they had a Vera Wang altered for them?

Hmm. I wonder if Victoria and Kate will let me keep it?

A ringing phone distracted her, and she realized that it was coming from her pocket. Still thinking about the dress she was going to wear, she answered it without looking. “Hello?”

“Lynn! Where are you?!”

Oh. Great. Lynn stopped walking, a feeling of exasperation coming over her. Victoria’s right. My mother has shit for timing.

“Hi, Mom.”

The other stopped, turning to look at her with curious faces, while her mother continued speaking. “Don’t you ‘Hi Mom’ me, young lady!” she snapped. “We’re here right now, and Mister Samson and his wife are saying they haven’t seen you in weeks! Did you LIE about where you were staying?!”

Lynn felt herself getting a little light-headed, and she pinched her upper nostril as she tried to remain calm. She watched Stella edge closer to her, as she collected her thoughts. “Seriously, Mom? You drove all the way to Michelle’s just to check on me?”

“We did after she refused to put you on the phone!”

“Michelle lives, like, forty-five minutes away!”

“Which is why I’m upset!” Her mother yelled. “Your father and I saw your room! Where are your

“Because you are the CHILD, and I am the PARENT, and I DEMAND to know where you are!!”

Stella shook her head. “Dude, forget her,” she said, speaking low enough that Lynn’s mother couldn’t hear. “You’re an adult. Tell her to buzz off.”

I am an adult. Lynn took a slow breath, trying to ignore everyone staring at her. I am an adult. I’m going to college in a few months. I have moved out of my mother’s house, and I am not under her thumb. A small smile played over her face. She spent the first eighteen years of my life ignoring me. She can do it some more.

“You know what, Stella? You’re right,” she said boldly. “I am an adult. I don’t have to account for myself twenty-four/seven.”

“Stella?!” Her mother’s voice took on a high pitch. “You’re with STELLA?!”

“Yea, I’m with Stella.”

“Are you in Los Angeles?!”

No need for her to know the truth. “Uh huh.”

“And you’re with Stella Hill?!”

“Yes.”

“Lynn Amelia Marsh.” Her mother’s voice took on a dangerously low tone. “The next words out of your mouth had better be ‘no’ if you know what’s good for you. Are you at that... AFFRON’T of a wedding your confused sister and that WHORE are throwing themselves?!”

Lynn took a deep breath. No turning back now.

“Of course I’m at Kate’s wedding,” she shot back. “Unlike you, I was invited.”

“How DARE YOU!!” Her mother’s screech was so loud, Lynn actually had to move the phone away from her ear. “HOW DARE YOU MOCK GOD AND YOUR FAMILY!! THAT BITCH HAS ALREADY TWISTED YOUR SISTER FROM THE LIGHT!! SHE WILL NOT TAKE YOU WITH HER!! I WILL NOT ALLOW THAT FUCKING CUNT TO TAKE YOU AWAY FROM US!!”

Oh, now she cares. Lynn felt her irritation rise. Where was this before?

“Mother, if you’re not going to keep a civil tongue, I’m hanging up on you,” she snapped, a little more sneer in her voice than she intended.

“DON’T YOU EVEN FUCKING THINK ABOUT IT!!” Her mother shrieked. “I AM THE ADULT HERE! NOT YOU! YOU WILL DO WHAT I FUCKING SAY AND RETURN HOME RIGHT NOW!!”

Lynn shook her head, as her mother kept ranting. “Look, Mom, we’re actually kind of busy, so unless you have something important to-”

The volume of the call suddenly decreased, catching Lynn by surprise. A much calmer voice came over the line. “Lynn? Sweetie?”
“Hey, Dad.” Lynn let out a slow breath. “How are things back home?”

“Lynn, we’ve been very worried about you,” her father said. He was using the calming tone he usually did when her mother went off the rails, and he started trying to smooth everything over.

Lynn never told him how much she hated it.

“Your mother went to see if you had any laundry, and we saw that you’d packed everything up,” he continued. “All of your clothes and your computer were gone. We thought something bad had happened.”

“I’m sorry you were worried for me. But I’m fine,” Lynn said through tight lips. “I’m with Kate. Stella drove me to her wedding.”

“So I gathered. You know your mother is very upset right now, Lynn. She made it very clear that she-”

“Well, Dad, quite frankly, I don’t care,” Lynn interrupted, as she folded her arms. “I was leaving for Caltech in a couple of months anyway. I just decided to spend them with my sister. You remember Kate, right? Your oldest daughter? About five-five, dark blonde hair, hazel eyes…”

“Please don’t be condescending, Lynn. Of course I remember Kate.”

“Yea, you say that,” Lynn shot back. “But it’s been so long since you saw or mentioned her that I was worried you’d forgotten.”

The other girls shifted, all of them looking at her with wide eyes.

“Lynn, your mother made it very clear that she did not approve of this wedding,” he father said. “I know you don’t agree with her, but she is still your mother. She has the best interests of her children at heart, including Kate.”

Does he really believe his own bullshit? Lynn wondered absently.

“You know, Dad, you could try telling that to people who weren’t actually there when Mom had her mental breakdown last Christmas. They’d probably believe you,” she retorted, shaking her head.

“I really do think it might be best if you come home, Lynn. Your mother is very angry with you, and I’m not pleased with your behavior either.”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that.” Lynn smirked. “It certainly sounds like you’re taking it better than she is, though.”

“Sweetie, this is not amusing.”

He’s right. And this is also pointless.

“Look, Dad,” she said as she glanced at her watch. “I’d love to keep doing this, but we actually do have to go. The ceremony is starting in two hours, and I have to get ready.”

“Lynn, I-”

“Kate asked me the other day if I would walk her down the aisle,” she continued, ignoring him. “I’m sure she would have loved to ask you, though, if you had ever sacked up to Mom.”

“Lynn!”
“By the way, tell her next time she wants to cancel a wedding, she’s gonna have to try harder.”

“Cancel a- Lynn, what are you ta-”

She didn’t bother to hear him out, taking the phone from her ear and ending the call. Then, knowing her mother’s fondness for speed-dialing, she turned the phone off before she stuck it back into her pocket.

“... holy shit,” Courtney breathed, her eyes wide.

Dana, by contrast, had a huge grin on her face as she held a hand up for a high-five. “Dude! That was the most gangster thing I have ever seen!”

Lynn returned the high five, trying to ignore the fact that her heart was pounding. *Holy shit.*

“Are you okay?” Stella asked

“I, uh, kinda feel like I just ran a marathon,” Lynn clasped her hands together, to hide the fact that they were shaking. “Like, oh my God, I just did that.”

“Speaking as someone who was there, you’re handling it a lot better than your sister did when SHE told your family off.” Chloe shot her a smirk

“Yea, at least you didn’t destroy your phone,” Max added. “We’re a lot higher up than she was, too.”

_Huh. I should hear that story._

“Okay, everyone, enough excitement.” Stella laid a hand on Lynn’s shoulder. “We’ve got hair, makeup, and dresses to put on.”

---

*It’s here.*

Kate tried to keep her heart from leaping out of her chest, as she stared at herself in the mirror. The hotel had set up bridal suites for her and Victoria, on opposite sides of the building. She could hear her bridesmaids next door, talking and laughing as they all got ready, while she studied her reflection.

They’d hired a professional cosmetologist, who’d finished Kate’s hair and makeup a few minutes before. He hadn’t put very much on, but it was a lot for her, since she barely wore any at all. As hard as she tried, she couldn’t find a single flaw.

_It’s perfect._

*I’m marrying Vicky.* Her heart rate went up, and she smiled just thinking about it. _I’m going to be her wife. Everything I’ve been through with my mother has been worth it._

_This day is going to be perfect._

A soft knock interrupted her, and she turned as the door opened. Lynn slipped inside quickly, closing the door behind her before she looked at Kate and froze.

“Holy shit,” she breathed. “You look amazing, Kate.”

“I really wish you’d stop swearing.” Even rebuking her, Kate couldn’t keep the smile from her face.
“I’ll make an effort.”

Lynn tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, and Kate took a second to look her over. Her hair and makeup was also done, and she looked stunning. “You might have to fend off some dance requests,” she said, amused. “You look so pretty.”

“I saw the other guests. Some of them are old enough to be our dad. I’m good.” Lynn walked over and laid a hand on Kate’s shoulder. “Nervous?”

“More like anxious.” Kate looked back at the mirror. “We’ve been planning this for eighteen months. Even if we did have to start over, back in April. I just can’t believe it’s finally here.”


“Don’t.” Kate stood, turning to face her sister. “That was our mother’s fault, not yours. You don’t have anything to apologize for.”

“Still.” Lynn glanced at the floor. “You know... Chloe asked me something a couple of days ago, when I was eating dinner with her and Max.”

“Oh?” Kate cocked her head. “What?”

Lynn looked back at her. “She wanted my honest opinion. About what I thought, with you marrying a girl.”

“Ahh.” Kate sighed. “I love Chloe, I really do. But it would be nice if she developed a filter.” She paused. “What did you say?”

“I said that I did think it was a little weird.” Lynn winced, as she met Kate’s eyes. “I told her, whenever I imagined us growing up, I always thought about the three of us finding nice husbands and having lots of kids. You being gay and marrying a girl...” she took a few seconds to search for the right words. “I guess it threw me a little, when you told us before Christmas that year.”

Kate nodded. “That’s fair,” she assured her, placing a hand on her sister’s shoulder. “And I know what I’m doing isn’t really what we were brought up to think of as ‘conventional’. It’s okay if you’re not entirely comfortable with it.”

“That’s the thing, I want to be,” Lynn said. “Victoria’s... well, she’s pretty amazing. Even if she is a little intimidating.” She smirked. “And she must love you a lot, if she stuck around after getting a taste of Mom’s crazy.”

A snort escaped Kate’s nostrils, as she smiled in amusement.

“I told Chloe... and I wanted to make sure you knew, too... that I didn’t love you any less.” Lynn sniffed. “I’m so happy to be here, Kate.”

Kate lips trembled, and she sniffed quickly, trying to keep tears from ruining her makeup. “I love you too, Lynn,” she said quietly, embracing her sister. “I can’t tell you how much you being here means to me.”

Neither of them spoke for several seconds.

“I’m not dancing with any of those old geezers,” Lynn said quietly.

“You don’t have to.”
“Probably going to be mostly hanging out with Chris and Jaime.”

“That’s okay.”

“And drinking lots of wine.”

“... don’t get caught.”
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“Brooke? Brooke!”

She came out of her sleep to Emily shaking her arm fiercely, as the blonde called her name. “Uh? Wuh?”

“Brooke!” Emily knelt on the floor next to the inflatable mattress, her voice low as she whispered. “Wake up!”

“What?” Brooke blinked, as she slowly came back to consciousness. “Emily? What’s...” she looked up and saw the alarm clock; a little after two in the morning. “Are you fucking kidding-”

“Shh!” Emily squeezed Brooke’s shoulder, cutting her off. “Listen!”

Brooke fell silent. After a couple of seconds, she heard it; crying, and rustling, from the wall beside them. “Is that Regina?” Brooke asked quietly.

“Yea. Come on.”

Emily helped her to her feet, and the two of them quickly headed towards Regina’s room. Brooke didn’t bother to knock, as she opened the door and turned on the bedside lamp.

Regina was crying into her pillow, her eyes still closed; she was clearly having a nightmare, as she shifted in bed. Emily immediately sat next to her on the bed, grabbing her forearm. “Regina?” she called, as she shook her gently.

“No... no...” Regina continued to sob, as she tried to squirm. “Please...”

“Shit.” Brooke leaned over next to Emily, grabbing Regina’s shoulder. “Regina, wake up. You gotta wake up.”

“No!” Regina gasped, as her eyes shot open. She immediately kicked away from Brooke and Emily as she retreated towards the corner, where her bed met the wall. “Nonono-”

“Regina!” Emily and Brooke held out their outstretched hands in calming gestures, as the blonde teenager spoke. “It’s just us!”

Regina blinked several times as she trembled, fighting her way back to consciousness. “E-Emily?” she stammered out after a few seconds.

“You had a nightmare,” Brooke said soothingly. “It’s okay, Regina, you’re all right.”

“I- I-” Regina gasped for breath, as she flicked her gaze between Emily and Brooke. “I was-”

“You don’t have to tell us what it was,” Emily said quietly, as she extended her hand. “Hey. Come here.”

Regina slowly took the outstretched hand, and let herself be pulled out of the corner. Brooke and Emily sat on either side of her as she hyperventilated. “Just breathe,” Brooke encouraged, placing a
comforting hand on Regina’s back. “It’s all right.”

They sat like that for several minutes, Regina slowing getting her breathing back under control. Brooke and Emily watched her quietly, as she kept her gaze on the opposite wall.

“Thank you,” she finally muttered.

“You’re welcome.” Emily paused. “I’ve never heard you have a nightmare before. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“It...” Regina sniffled. “... yea. I, uh... I haven’t had one that bad before.”

Emily nodded, glancing at her lap. “I get them too, sometimes.”

Regina looked at her. “You do?”

Emily bit her lip. “I was married, before I ran away,” she admitted quietly. “My... no, he’s not my husband. He wasn’t very gentle.”

Regina looked back at her lap. “I’m sorry.”

“Thanks. It’s...” Emily paused, then shrugged. “It’s just something I deal with.”

“WE deal with,” Brooke reminded her. Regina turned towards her, as she continued. “I told you. And we meant what we said,” she added, as she met Regina’s eyes. “We’re in this together. We’re here for each other, no matter what.”

Brooke watched Regina avert her gaze. She could have sworn Regina’s eyes got moist, though she wiped them quickly as she sniffled.

“I’m pregnant,” she blurted out.

Emily and Brooke traded glances over Regina’s bowed head.

After a few seconds, they both scooted closer. Brooke put her hand back on Regina’s shoulder, as Emily took the girl’s hand and gripped tightly.

“Regina, I am so sorry,” Emily whispered.

Regina sniffed, not offering a reply.

“It’s okay,” Brooke repeated. “Regina, everything’s gonna be okay.”

“Is that why you left?” Emily asked. “Because you...”

Regina shook her head.

“Was it your husband?” Emily pressed. Brooke glanced at her and shook her head, but Emily ignored her. “Did he not-”

“It’s not my husband’s,” Regina said quietly.

Emily blinked. “It’s not?”

Regina’s lips trembled, and she sniffed deeply. Tears started leaking from her eyes, as she looked at Emily. “It’s his dad’s,” she whispered.
Brooke and Emily both did a double-take, but didn’t get a chance to reply as Regina slowly started to collapse. Emily barely managed to catch her, as the teenager started sobbing into her lap.

Three hours later, the girls sat silently. They alternated between looking at each other and off into distant space, as Regina laid with her head in Emily’s lap; her eyes had closed the hour prior, and she appeared to be asleep again.

But not before she’d told Brooke and Emily everything about why she’d run away from her home. And begging them to keep it quiet.

As the sun was just thinking about coming over the horizon, Emily finally moved for the first time in hours. Brooke looked over and watched silently as Emily gently shifted Regina’s head from her lap to the pillow. They quickly drew the blanket back over her before they returned to their own room.

Brooke didn’t go back to the air mattress. Her and Emily both sat on the bed, and resumed staring off into space as they leaned against the wall.

“What do we do?” Emily asked, her voice a bare whisper.

“I...” Brooke blinked, as she slowly turned her head to look at Emily. “I have no idea.”

Emily rubbed her nose on the back of her hand. “The motherfucker,” she muttered. “He... and his fucking son...”

“Yea.” Brooke drew her knees up, hugging them to her chest. “Yea.”

“We gotta...” Emily paused. “No. We can’t.”

“You heard what Miss Amber said,” Brooke whispered. “We have to.”

“She told us to be Regina’s friends,” Emily countered quietly. “And Regina begged us not to tell.”

Brooke shook her head and didn’t respond.

“I don’t know what to do.” The back of Emily’s head thumped against the wall. “This is beyond fucked up.”

Brooke looked her up and down. “Are you okay?” she asked. “I know this... it’s close to home.”

“No,” Emily sighed, as she closed her eyes. “But I don’t want to talk about it.”

Neither of them moved for several minutes.

Finally, Brooke got to her feet and crossed the room, unplugging her phone from the charging cable. “What are you doing?” Emily asked.

“I’m texting Max.” Brooke sat back down and unlocked her phone. “I wanna know what she thinks.”

Emily looked at the clock on the nightstand. “Brooke, it’s five in the morning.”

“Yea.” Brooke nodded as she sent the text.

Brooke: Regina is pregnant. She told us.
“She’ll see it eventually.” Brooke sighed, as she dropped the phone back in her lap. “It’s Sunday. We’ll deal with it when she responds in the morning.”

All three girls looked like train wrecks the next day.

“Are you guys okay?” Jane asked, concerned, when she saw them the next morning. “You three look like you didn’t get much sleep.”

Regina didn’t answer, as she sat down at the table and stared morosely at the wall. “There, uh, was a really loud owl outside our windows last night,” Emily lied. “It woke us up at, like, one AM, and wouldn’t shut up.”

“Really?” Jane frowned. “We don’t see a lot of owls around here.”

“Guess one was due,” Brooke said with a shrug. “We’ll be fine, Jane.”

“If you say so.” Jane looked over them one more time, before she turned back to the stove. “We’ll have eggs in a few minutes.”

Regina didn’t acknowledge anyone until her breakfast was put in front of her. All three of the girls picked at their food, taking longer than normal to eat it.

“Are you feeling better?” Brooke asked Regina, when Jane walked out to wake Pete.

“... a little,” Regina mumbled. “Sorry I woke you guys.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Emily smiled. “Like we said, we’re here for you.”

“Thanks.” Regina looked back at both of them. “You guys... won’t tell Miss Amber, right?”

Brooke felt her phone vibrate in her pocket. “Of course not,” she said, as she slowly stood. “I, uh, have to use the bathroom. Be right back.”

“Well?”

Emily bit her lip, as she glanced towards the stairs. Regina had gone up to shower and change, and Brooke took the opportunity to show her the text conversation between her and Max. “... she does make a valid point,” she allowed quietly. “But I still don’t know about this.”

“What’s our other option?” Brooke leaned back. “If we don’t tell anyone, and that cocksucker does it again, it’s on us.”

“I know, I... fuck.” Emily sighed. “God damn it.”

“Yea.” Brooke looked back at the phone in her hands. “I don’t want to do this either. But I don’t think we have a choice.”

“She’s going to hate us.” Emily planted her elbows on her knees as she leaned over, staring at the ground. “And she’ll never speak to us again. She begged us not to tell anyone, Brooke.”

Brooke bit her lip, as her friend's statement weighed on her mind. “This isn’t something we can keep a secret,” she finally said. “Do we at least agree on that?”

Emily nodded.
“All right.” Brooke tapped out another text. “Send Miss Amber a message, then.”

The blonde looked back up at her. “Why do I have to do it?”

“Because I just told Max you would.”

Emily: Brooke and I need to talk to you.

Miss Amber: What about?

Emily: Regina.

Miss Amber: Okay. I can be at your foster house in an hour.

Emily: Not here. Someplace Regina can’t see us talking to you.

Miss Amber: Did she tell you something important?

Emily: Yes. And she begged us not to tell you.

Emily: We CANNOT do this at the house.

Miss Amber: How bad is it?

Emily: Really, really bad.

Miss Amber: Tell me now.

Emily: I don’t think that’s a good idea.

Miss Amber: Does Regina have access to your phone?

Emily: No.

Miss Amber: Then please tell me. You can delete the messages afterwards, if it’ll make you feel better. But we need to know what happened.

Emily: ...

Emily: Regina was raped. By her husband’s dad.

Miss Amber: Find some privacy and call me. Right now.
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“THE LEVEL OF DISRESPECT YOU HAVE SHOWN US IS ABSOLUTELY ATROCIous!!”

Lynn winced, as she watched the phone on the kitchen table. She’d set up her mother’s voicemail to play on the speakerphone, and listened morosely.

“I DON’T KNOW WHAT YOU THINK GIVES YOU THE RIGHT TO THROW THIS FAMILY’S BELIEFS TO THE WIND AND PISS ALL OVER GOD’S WILL!!” her mother continued to shriek.

“I WILL NOT HAVE THIS!! IF YOU INSIST ON TURNING YOURSELF AWAY FROM THE LIGHT, THEN YOU WILL NOT BE ANY DAUGHTER OF MINE!! I AM.”

Alyssa’s hand reached over and tapped the phone, ending the message. The silence was practically deafening. “How many did she leave?” she asked quietly.

“There are nine more after that one.” Lynn sighed, as she dragged her hand down her face. “Like I told Max, I don’t think I can go back to San Diego anymore.”

“Here.” Alyssa pulled the cork off the wine bottle and poured some more into Lynn’s glass. “Keep drinking.”

Lynn smirked. “Will it make me feel better?”

“No. That’s a myth that alcoholics tell themselves.” Alyssa smirked back. “It’s just really good wine.”

“Can’t argue.” Lynn lifted the glass to her lips, taking a generous sip. “Thanks again, for coming over. And bringing the wine.”

“Any reason to day-drink is a good one.” Alyssa topped off her glass as well, setting the bottle back down. “So, when do classes start?”

“In two months. I can move into my dorm in six weeks.”

Alyssa nodded. “Looking forward to it?”

“Yes and no.” Lynn looked around the apartment. “I mean, I know it won’t be nearly as fancy as this place. And I’ll have a roommate, to boot. But actually having a place to call my own will be nice.”

“Eh. Dorm living isn’t so bad.” Alyssa shrugged. “That’s how I met your sister.”

“Yea, true.” Lynn sighed. “Still.”

Alyssa studied her, a worried look on her face. “What are you thinking about?”

“I don’t know.” Lynn took another sip from her glass. “I’ve read a bunch of stories, about parents giving their kids the boot. And kids who refuse to speak to their families. I just... never figured it
would happen to me."

“You’ve still got Kate,” Alyssa reminded her. “And Victoria. She’s your sister-in-law now. Family by marriage counts.”

“Even if I feel like I’m walking on eggshells when I talk to her?”

Alyssa snickered though she quickly regained her composure. “I thought something similar about Victoria, when I first met her. You can’t not, you know, when you see how she lives. The apartment, the car, the clothes...”

“Yea,” Lynn agreed, looking around the apartment again. “I’m actually really nervous to touch anything in here. It all looks expensive as hell.”

“I know. But, dude.” Alyssa leaned forward. “Once you get to know her? Victoria is seriously down-to-earth. Yea, she’s got access to something like a billion dollars in cash, but she doesn’t flaunt it like the rich kids of Instagram, and doesn’t really spend that much of it on material stuff.” She gestured around the apartment. “Shit, she didn’t even buy any of this. Her parents did.”

“Really?”

“Kate told me about it. Her dad owns the building, and he used to keep this place as a residence for when he came down, but he told her to use it when she got accepted into UCLA.” Alyssa nodded. “So yes, she got a pretty good head-start in life, but she knows it. And she’s intent on making sure she does something to earn it.”

Lynn considered Alyssa’s words. “I never thought about it like that,” she admitted.

“Yea. Her Royal Highness is cool.” Alyssa looked over at the TV. “So... we’re gonna watch that, right? I mean, I’ve never seen a state-of-the-art TV in that size.”

“It’s not really ‘state-of-the-art’,” Lynn told her. “It isn’t 4K.”

“Is it still high-def?”

“I mean, yea.”

“Then who cares? Let’s put a movie on.” Alyssa grinned. “Preferably something that shows Ryan Reynolds’ abs.”

Kate stifled a yawn into her hand, as the elevator opened onto their floor. “I am so tired,” she moaned.

“I told you to get some sleep on the plane,” Victoria said. “We’re almost home. Then you can take a nap.”

“But I’m hungry, too,” Kate muttered, as she dragged her luggage behind her. They slowly made their way down the hall towards their apartment. “We missed dinner.”

“It’s only seven o’clock. It’s not that late.” Victoria stopped in front of the door, and they heard the TV from the other side. “Sounds like Lynn’s still awake. If she hasn’t eaten yet, maybe we can order some pizza.”

“Nuh-uh.” Kate shook her head. “That restaurant ruined it for me. I’ll never have pizza that good ever again.”
Victoria rolled her eyes, as she fumbled with the keys. “You’ll live.”

She finally got the door open, but froze immediately, blocking Kate from walking in behind her. A devious grin came over her face as she held up a finger to her lips, silently telling Kate to be quiet as she crept into the apartment. Kate slowly followed, confused, until she took in the scene in front of her.

The TV was on, but the volume was low. Lynn was on the couch, nestled into the cushions, under a blanket with a bowl of popcorn in her lap. And she was asleep, snoring lightly as Victoria snuck up on her.

When the blonde girl was close enough, she reached out and grabbed Lynn’s shoulder. “GIMME ALL YOUR CASH!!” she screamed, as loud as she could.

Lynn’s reaction was immediate. Her eyes shot open and her entire body jolted as she shrieked. The bowl of popcorn went flying straight up, spinning and throwing the kernels every which way. Lynn recoiled all the way across the couch, retreating into the far side and hyperventilating while Victoria laughed hysterically.

“What the fuck?!” Lynn yelled, grabbing the throw pillow behind her and pitching it at Victoria. The decorative cushion bounced off Victoria’s head as the blonde fell backwards onto the floor, crushing several of the kernels beneath her as she howled with laughter. “I thought you were a robber! I almost had a heart attack!!”

Kate couldn’t stop laughing, as she closed the apartment door behind her. “Oh my God, Lynn! Are you okay?”

“No!!” Lynn threw another pillow at Victoria, who was laughing so hard tears were rolling down her cheeks. “What is WRONG with you?!”

“You... should... have... seen... your... face!” Victoria managed to gasp out. “That was so FUCKING funny!!”

“Arrgh!” Lynn grabbed a handful of popcorn from the couch and threw it at Victoria, the kernels bouncing onto the floor. She looked around, taking in the mess. “You two are SO cleaning all of this up!”

They all calmed down after a few minutes, and Victoria volunteered to sweep up the popcorn by herself. Kate put their luggage in their bedroom, then came back out, looking at Lynn with a frown as she closed the fridge. “Where did you get that?”

“Alyssa bought me a twelve-pack.” Lynn twisted off the bottle cap of her beer, glaring at her sister. “And after your little ‘we’re home’ prank, I don’t want to hear one single word about it.”

Kate folded her arms. “Lynn, you’re not-”

“Oh, let your sister have a beer.” Victoria walked over with a full dustpan, dumping popcorn into the trash. “She’s an adult, she can be responsible.”

“It’s against the law, Vicky!”

“It’s a stupid law anyway.” Victoria went back to sweeping the popcorn. “Besides, we did almost send her into cardiac arrest.”
“No we didn’t!” Kate exclaimed. “You did!”

Victoria smiled at her. “We’re married now, babe. Everything is ‘we’.”

“Thank you, Victoria.” Lynn smirked at her sister, as she took another sip of beer. “How was Europe? Did you guys have fun?”

Kate sighed, conceding defeat as she sat down. “It was amazing,” she said. “I took SO many pictures. I’m not even sure how many countries we visited.”

“Eleven,” Victoria reminded her. “You’re a worldly traveler now.”

Lynn smirked. “Which countries did you guys go to?”

“Oh, God, let me try to remember.” Kate glanced up. “England, Ireland, Portugal, Poland, France, Germany, Spain... Italy... uh, Switzerland...” she frowned. “Shoot.”

“The Netherlands and Belgium,” Victoria finished. “But you were close.”

“Wow.” Lynn looked impressed. “How much did you guys move around?”

“We were on a train or airplane every couple of days.” Kate rubbed her face. “It was kind of exhausting, to be honest.”

Victoria came back, dumping another load of popcorn into the trash before setting the broom aside. “Yea, it was,” she agreed, as she sat down. “I’ve been to Europe before, but I didn’t move around that quickly. Have you eaten dinner yet?”

Lynn shook her head. “I was going to throw something in the microwave, but I fell asleep. I’ve been through most of your fridge and pantry.” She winced. “Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. That’s why we filled them up before we left.” Victoria glanced at her phone. “How about we get some Chinese delivery? I really don’t have the energy to cook anything.”

“Sounds good to me.” Lynn paused. “By the way, some packages came for you about a week after you left.”

“Oh, they did?”

“Yea.” Lynn nodded at the counter. “I put them over there.”

Victoria nodded, getting up and grabbing the two cardboard boxes to bring back to the table. “This one’s actually for you,” she explained, setting the big one down and pushing it towards her. “We ordered it right after the wedding.”

“For... me?” Lynn looked at the box. “Really?”

“Well.” Victoria glanced back at Kate. “We wanted to get you something, to let you know how much it meant to have you there for us during... you know. Everything.”

“Plus, we realized that we never got you anything for graduating high school,” Kate added. “But we really wanted to make sure you knew how much we appreciate you, Lynn.”

“Having you at the wedding meant a lot to us,” Victoria said. “And we know what it probably cost you, with your family. We figured this was the least we could do.”
Lynn blinked, looking at the box. “You really didn’t have to,” she objected. “I was happy to do it, and you know I wasn’t a big fan of our mother to begin with.”

“How many messages did she leave you?” Kate asked.

“... a dozen or so,” Lynn admitted. “I only listened to a couple of them. Figured the rest were more of the same.”

“Either way, it’s yours. We already paid for it, we’re not taking it back, and it’s something you could actually use for Cal Tech.” Victoria pushed the box closer. “Now open it, so we can see the look on your face.”

Lynn looked back at the box. After a few seconds, she tore the tape off and started pulling apart the cardboard, finally getting the flaps open.

The shocked expression that crossed her face made both Victoria and Kate smile.

“Oh my God!” Lynn reached inside, pulling out a grey box. “A laptop?! Seriously?!”

“You’re welcome,” Kate chortled.

“There is no way I can take this!” Lynn put the box down and pushed it back towards them. “This is way too expensive!”

Kate reached out and pushed it back. “It’s a gift, Lynn. Please keep it.”

“Guys-”

“You’re not going to be taking notes in class with a desktop PC,” Victoria interrupted. “Notebooks and pencils don’t cut it at Cal Tech. You need a good computer that you can carry with you, that will support your launch models or whatever, and you won’t afford one like this with a part-time job.”

She grinned. “I will take it as a personal insult if you don’t accept our gift. Do you really want to insult your new sister-in-law?”

They could see the torn emotions on Lynn’s face as she processed Victoria’s statement. After several seconds, she slowly pulled the box back. “Thank you,” she murmured. “I... this really means a lot to me.”

“Oh, don’t act like you’re not excited to set up a new computer,” Kate told her. “Go ahead, tear it open.”

Lynn gave her a look, smirking. “You think you know me so well,” she said, before turning to the box and ripping it open.

“And this one’s for you.” Victoria handed the smaller cardboard box to Kate. “It’s from Kimiko, though, not me, and it’s not as much fun as a laptop.”

Kate frowned as she took the box. It was about the length and width of a legal pad, but close to an inch thick. “Kimiko? Your dad’s assistant? Why is she sending me stuff?”

“Because my dad asked her to.” Victoria shrugged, as Kate opened the package. “You’re part of the family now, Kate. There’s a few things that come with that.”

“Okay...” Kate frowned, as she slid out a stack of papers and a small wooden box. She picked that up and opened it. “What’s... Vicky? What is this?”
“It’s a credit card,” Victoria said, like it wasn’t obvious.

Kate lifted the black card from the box. “Why is your dad giving me a credit card?”

“Uh, so that you can use it.” Victoria smirked. “Duh.”

Lynn glanced over, and her eyes widened. “Holy crap, is that a Centurion Card?”

Victoria looked at her, surprised. “You know about them? Not a lot of people do.”

“I read about them in a novel a few years ago.”

Kate looked at her sister. “What’s a Centurion Card?”

“An American Express card for the super-rich.” Lynn stood to walk around and look over Kate’s shoulder. “Wow. Is it made of metal?”

“Titanium.” Victoria nodded. “My parents and I all have them. They link to one of our discretionary accounts that our financial guys manage. Whatever we buy gets paid off immediately.”

Kate glanced back at her. “And I have one... why, exactly?”

“Because you’re my wife.” Victoria gave her a look. “You’re a member of the Chase family now. If you need to buy something, you shouldn’t have to go without just because you’re a little short of cash. Hence, your new card.”

“I...” Kate looked between the card and her wife. “Vicky, I’m not sure how comfortable I am, having a direct line to your family’s money.”

“OUR family’s money,” Victoria corrected.

Kate frowned as she looked back at the card. “There’s, like, a spending limit on this thing, right?”

“No. But the accountant will call you to validate anything over twenty grand or so.” Victoria reached over and spread out the paperwork beneath it. “Anyway, Kate, you’ll have to sign these, too.”

“Twenty-” Kate looked at the card in horror, slowly putting it down on the table. “Wait, what is all this paperwork?”

“Uh, let’s see...” Victoria flipped her fingers through it. “Health insurance, life insurance, a couple of powers of attorney for the accountants, another couple for the lawyers, kidnapping insurance, account access authorization for the bank, another form for the accountant, a-”

“Excuse me?”

Victoria looked back up at her wife, who was staring at her with wide eyes. “What?”

“Did you just... gloss over the whole ‘kidnapping insurance’ thing?!”

“... no.” Victoria sighed. “I was just really hoping you wouldn’t catch it.”

“Why in the WORLD would I need-”

“Because your wife’s father is worth literal tons of cash.” Victoria sat back in her chair. “I’m sorry, Kate, but there is a chance, albeit a very SLIM chance, that we could be the targets of bad people intent on extorting my family for their money. You, me, and my mother are insured for several
million dollars against kidnapping."

Kate blinked several times as she stared at Victoria, not speaking.

“...babe?” Victoria looked at her carefully. “Please say something.”

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to say.” Kate bent over the table, running her hands through her
hair. “I mean, Jesus, Vicky. This is a lot. I haven’t even started my job yet. I’m still paying off my car
and student loans. Now you’re telling me that I have a card that grants me unlimited wealth, and I
need to be insured against kidnapping?”

“Um... if it helps, you don’t have any more student loans,” Victoria offered. “Or a car loan.”

“Yes I-” Kate stopped, slowly looking back up. “…what did you do?”

Victoria bit her lip and averted her eyes. “Nothing. I just... told my dad about them.”

“What did HE do?”

“Paid them in full.”

“VICKY!!” Kate’s face flushed. “I told you before, I don’t want you just BUYING me out of my
obligations!! OR your family!!”

“OUR family,” Victoria corrected.

“That is NOT-”

“My dad’s trying to make sure you know that he loves you!”

Kate froze, staring at Victoria with an open mouth. “This is NOT how things are done in our world, Kate!” Victoria continued quickly. “All of my dad’s friends had their children’s wives and husbands sign pre-nups before their weddings! And none of
them EVER got a card with the kind of monetary access you have! There is a legal and financial
playbook that people with our level of wealth are supposed to follow when a child gets married, and
my dad tossed the whole thing in the garbage because he LOVES you!!”

“I...” Kate stared at Victoria, as she ran through her spiel. “Vicky-”

“Seriously, Kate, I can only IMAGINE the heart attacks my father’s lawyer and accountant are
having right now.” Victoria exhaled slowly. “I know you don’t see it, because you haven’t been in
our world very long. But my dad is making a grand gesture so that it’s clear to everyone that he loves
you, and you have his complete and unflappable approval. PLEASE let him do his thing.”

Kate slouched backwards in her chair, as she considered Victoria’s words. Beside them, Lynn
looked back and forth between the two of them silently.

“...fine.” Kate sighed, as she slowly got up. “Can you please order the takeout?”

“Where are you going?”

“I just need to go splash some water on my face.” Kate turned and walked towards their bathroom
quietly, the door closing behind her.

“...crap,” Victoria muttered, as she leaned forward onto the table, staring at the paperwork in front of
“You know our parents never gave us an allowance, right?”

Victoria looked at Lynn. “Huh?”

“My dad was the only one who worked,” Lynn continued. “My mom stayed at home and took care of the two of us, and Jessica. My dad makes a good bit of money as a therapist, but it’s not big bucks, especially with three kids. We were expected to help out around the house because we needed to.” She shrugged. “We never got an allowance for our chores.”

“Really?” Victoria frowned. “How did you guys earn spending money?”

“Babysitting, usually. Kate also cleaned our older neighbor’s houses, and cooked meals for them. I mostly tutored other kids in school.” Lynn glanced back at the bathroom. “We had to earn all of our money. Other than Christmas or birthday presents, we didn’t really get anything handed to us.”

“I’m not just trying to give her money,” Victoria pointed out.

“No, you’re just giving her a super-exclusive Amex card with unlimited funds.” Lynn smirked. “I know you’re used to all of it, but... it’s a little disconcerting.” She glanced at her now-open laptop box. “I cannot thank you enough for this, but it is seriously the most expensive gift I’ve ever gotten, and I’m still having heart palpitations.”

Victoria sighed. “So... am I a bad wife?”

“No.” Lynn shook her head emphatically. “It just would have been better if you didn’t spring it all on her at once.”

Victoria glanced at her. “... you’re probably right.”

“You guys really do all that stuff you mentioned?” Lynn asked. “Make people sign pre-nups, don’t give them access to cash, all that?”

“One of my friends growing up had a grandfather who’s worth almost as much as my dad,” Victoria started. “He’s big in oil, though I don’t know exactly what he does. Her mother is his daughter, and her father married into the family. Her dad STILL doesn’t have access to any of that money, and they’re celebrating their thirtieth anniversary next year.”

Lynn whistled. “So, this is a big thing, what your dad did.”

“Unheard of,” Victoria clarified. “But you should have seen him, after your mother cancelled the wedding on us. He was absolutely furious, and the first thing he did was make sure Kate knew that he still loved her.”


“Yea. I was really scared for a minute.” Victoria glanced at her phone. “I guess I should order the food. You have any preference?”

“Depends. It’s on you, right?”

“Nobody likes a smartass, Lynn.”

“I’m sorry.”
Kate picked her head up, as Victoria curled up behind her in bed later that night. “Hm?”

“For springing everything on you. And not telling you what my dad was doing.” Victoria hugged Kate tighter. “I should have said something.”

“It... would have been nice,” Kate admitted quietly.

“I just want to take care of you,” Victoria admitted. “I don’t like it when you owe people money. I hated watching you struggle to pay for college, when we were dating. Having you free of debt is just... a huge weight off my shoulders.”

Kate rolled over silently, so she was looking at her wife. “I know. But, Vicky, you know this kind of money... I’m not comfortable with it. I’m scared to even put that card in my purse.”

“So your sister told me.” Victoria smirked. “She was very polite, when she said I was an idiot.”

“I’m sure she was.” Kate bit her lip. “Vicky... you know I’d love you, even if you were completely broke, right?”

“... I’d hope so.”

“Well, I would.” Kate scooted closer. “And I really, really hope your parents know that, too.”

“If they didn’t think so, Kate, you wouldn’t have that card.”

“Good.” Kate sighed. “Do I REALLY need kidnapping insurance?”

“Afraid so, babe.”

“... fine. You can help me with the paperwork tomorrow.”

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Taylor: How was Europe?

Victoria: Amazing. And tiring. Not used to moving so fast.

Taylor: Did Kate like it?

Victoria: Oh, totally. She made a list of cities she wants to go back to, and spend more time in.

Taylor: Let me guess. Paris?

Victoria: You’d think, but surprisingly, Paris did not make the cut. She said after the Eiffel Tower and the Louvre, there wasn’t really much else she wanted to see.

Taylor: Wow. What cities made the list?


Taylor: Okay, I get the first two, but why Geneva?

Victoria: I think Switzerland in general. She really liked it. Said she want to go back in the winter.

Taylor: Ah. Well, glad you guys had fun. You two need to make your way out here to D.C. now :)

Victoria: Yea, I know. Maybe after my classes are over.
Victoria: How’s the Smithsonian?

Taylor: I got offered a permanent position last week!

Victoria: Seriously?! Congratulations!!

Taylor: Thank you! Only took a full year of working my ass off.

Victoria: What are you doing, exactly?

Taylor: Right now? Working on new exhibits for the fall events. I’m actually talking to some people in Europe about temporary art loans.

Taylor: Side note, how hard is it to learn Italian?

Victoria: If it’s like French, not too bad. Gonna take some lessons?

Taylor: I might. If for no other reason than to know what they’re saying when they talk about the dumb American girl.

Dad: Kate got our package, right?

Victoria: Yes. We opened it when we got back from Europe.

Victoria: Did Kimiko not get the papers we sent back to your office?

Dad: She did. What about the card?

Victoria: She got that too. Why are you asking?

Dad: Kimiko said it hasn’t been used yet.

Victoria: That’s because my wife is terrified of it.

Dad: Why?

Victoria: She’s worked hard her whole life to get where she is, and being handed the keys to the family vault is incredibly disconcerting.

Dad: Oh. Well, we didn’t mean for it to be.

Victoria: I know. She’s also scared that if she does use it, you and Mom will start judging her.

Dad: Really? We gave it to her with the expectation that it would be used.

Victoria: I’ve tried talking to her about it. She’s adamant that she can get by with the money she makes from her job.

Dad: I’m sure she can. That doesn’t mean she isn’t allowed to spring for some nicer things if she wants.

Victoria: Again, she’s worried about being judged.
**Dad:** Well, tell her that no matter what she does with it, I’ll always judge your mother harder.

**Victoria:** ... shoes again?

**Dad:** I am convinced that there are not enough days left in her life to wear all the pairs she currently has.

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**Chapter End Notes**

So, as you guys might have noticed, I didn't write about the wedding.

I feel like I covered the big events in Escaping the Light well enough that there's no need to do them again. That includes Kate & Victoria's wedding, as well as a couple of other events you guys can probably guess at.

That's not to be said that the story will end as soon as you think. I just checked; WWAA is actually longer than EtL, and I haven't even finished it yet. I wouldn't be surprised if this fic tops 150 chapters.
August 2019. Concurrent with ch 57 of EtL.

Victoria couldn’t help but smile, as she scrolled through the photos on her laptop.

*She looks so pretty,* she thought, as she examined the photo of her and Kate on the hotel roof. *This is definitely one we should have framed.*

“Oh, I really like that one.”

She smiled, looking behind her as Kate peeked over her shoulder “So do I,” she agreed. “I think that’s the one we should hang on the wall, Mrs. Chase.”

Kate blushed. “That’s going to take some getting used to,” she admitted.

“Well, start getting used to it.”

Her wife sat down at the table, the corner between her and Victoria. “So... you want to frame that one? Not the one of us dancing?” Kate asked. “I thought that was really good.”

“I like that one, too, but I think this one is more picture-frame worthy.” Victoria nodded. “We could put the one of us dancing on the cover of the photo album.”

“Oh, I like that idea.”

Victoria waited for a follow up, but Kate never gave one. After a few minutes, she looked over at her wife, who was sitting in the chair silently while squirming. “What is it?”

“Hm?”

“I can see you mulling on something,” Victoria turned to her. “What?”

“I...” Kate paused. “Vicky, you know what.”

Yes, she did. But she was really hoping to avoid the conversation. She sighed, slowly closing the laptop. “Kate...”

“Vicky, we said we’d talk about it after the wedding,” Kate reminded her quietly. “It’s been almost two months.”

“Yea, okay.” Victoria clasped her hands on the table, interlocking her fingers. “... I still don’t know what to say. I’m sorry, I know that’s not what you want to hear. But I’m still not a hundred percent about kids.”

“Well, I am.” Kate reached over and took Victoria’s hand. “I know that might not be what YOU want to hear. But you knew what I thought about it already.”

“I don’t...” Victoria hesitated, trying to sort out her thoughts. “I’m not opposed to them, babe. I just never really thought I’d have any.”

Kate smirked. “Did you ever tell your parents that?”
“No, of course not.” Victoria shook her head. “The whole ‘heir to the fortune’ thing aside, I know they’d love grandkids. But this is our decision, and I’m not making it based on what THEY want.”

Kate nodded. “You’re not saying ‘no’, right?”

“No, of course not.” Victoria shook her head. “I know how you feel, babe. If I felt that strongly about it, I would have said something WAY before we got to the wedding.”

“Well, I would hope so.”

Victoria sighed as she leaned back in her chair. “Okay. Well... look, let’s face it. You’re the one who’s going to have three months off every year, and your job isn’t going to be nearly as stressful as mine. So can we agree that you’re the best one to do this?”

Kate pursed her lips and nodded. “That’s fair. And I kind-of wanted to be the one to do it anyway.”

“Then I only have one more condition.” Victoria licked her lips. “We have to wait until after I pass the bar and get a job. I’m not going to deal with you going through this while studying and looking for work. And that means we’re not starting anything for about a year.”

The pained expression that crossed Kate’s face almost made Victoria take it back. But after a few seconds, her wife nodded again. “I can live with that,” she allowed. “But once you get work, I want to take this seriously.”

“Deal.” Victoria smiled. “Also, YOU are changing every single diaper.”

“The heck I am.” Kate fixed her with a glare. “You’re gonna have to get your hands dirty, sweetheart.”

“Then I’ll just-”

“And you are NOT allowed to hire a nanny.”

“... crap.” Victoria rubbed her forehead. “How about a butler? I can afford a good one.”

Kate folded her arms. “Vicky, you are not going to hand our theoretical baby off to someone else for the icky parts.”

Victoria’s phone buzzed in her pocket. “Babe,” she whined, as she retrieved it. “It would be so much...” she paused as she looked at the screen. “Oh, fuck.”

Kate watched the blood drain from her wife’s face. “Vicky?” she asked, alarmed. “What’s is it?”

“Something’s wrong.”

“Huh?”

Victoria turned her phone to show Kate the screen.

**Chloe: FIREBUG**

“What is that?” Kate frowned. “Firebug? What does that mean?”

“Hang on.” Victoria’s fingers flew over the phone as she called Chloe, putting it on speaker. “Need to make sure this isn’t a false alarm.”
It rang several times, and Victoria’s eyes were glued to the phone the whole time. After thirty seconds, a clicking noise came through the speakers.

“Hey, this is Chloe Price. I can’t come to the phone right now. Probably because my girlfriend’s thighs are blocking my ears.”

“CHLOE!!” Max yelled in the background. “Don’t you DARE put that on your voicemail!!”

“Of course not, babe, I would never.” There was a pause. “Anyway. Leave a message, and I’ll get back to you.”

Victoria glanced at Kate. “It’s not a false alarm. Max is in trouble.”

Kate sat up, now alert. “What?! How do you-”

“After Max visited Arcadia Bay earlier this year, we came up with a code word, to use if someone started looking for her.” Victoria grabbed her laptop, opening the lid and starting her messaging program. “The idea was that if Chloe used it, they were going off the grid, and we should expect them to turn up unannounced.”

“So, what? They’re on their way here?”

“Maybe.” Victoria started typing. “I know we’re one of the choices. It’s between us, Penny, and Steph. We’ll find out soon, I think.”

Kate stood and walked around to stand behind Victoria’s shoulder. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to figure out what happened.” Victoria finished her message and sent it.

**Victoria:** What the hell is going on?!

**Penny:** I don’t know. Max didn’t answer, when I called her.

**Rachel:** Me either. I think their phones are in that bag of Chloe’s.

**David:** Did Chloe say anything to anyone?

**Jake:** It was me, guys. Someone showed up to my apartment looking for Max.

**James:** Who was it?

**Jake:** I don’t know. All I got from her was the name Elizabeth.

**Steph:** Someone named Elizabeth came looking for Max?

**Jake:** She even had a picture. I told Chloe, and she sent the code word right after she hung up.

“Who is everyone?” Kate frowned. “David? James?”

“David is Chloe’s stepdad. He’s a cop in Phoenix.” Victoria pointed at the screen. “James is Rachel’s father. He’s the district attorney, back in Arcadia Bay.”

“Rachel? Wait, the girl who...”

“Yea.” Victoria pressed her lips together. “That’s her, and Steph.”
Kate glanced back at her. “Are you gonna be okay?”

“I’m ignoring that fact that I hate them for Max’s well-being.” Victoria started typing again.

**Victoria:** What did she say?

**Jake:** That her name was Elizabeth, and she had my apartment as Max’s address of record. She said she wanted to speak to her, but didn’t say why.

**David:** What did you tell her?

**Jake:** A half-truth. That Max moved out a year ago, but I had no idea where she lives now.

**Rachel:** It sounds like someone sent a PI after her to me.

**Steph:** From First Light?

**Rachel:** You think there’s anyone else looking for her?

**James:** That’s a good point. And one that we may be able to confirm.

**James:** David, are private investigators credentialed in California?

**David:** Yes. And they have to register with the state.

**David:** Can you describe her, Jake?

**Jake:** White, mid-twenties, brown hair, about five-four, hundred and twenty pounds or so.

**Steph:** Wow, could she be any more generic?

**David:** It might not be a problem. Most PIs are male, and over the age of thirty.

**David:** Let me call a friend in the SFPD. I’ll have her run the name Elizabeth and all its variations, see if she comes up with anything matching that description.

**Penny:** What if she’s from out-of-state?

**James:** Then she’s breaking the law.

**Rachel:** This IS First Light we’re talking about.

**James:** True. I’m stuck in court at the moment, but I’ll have the police up here do a search once I can reach them.

**Steph:** And the rest of us?

**David:** Remember the plan, and follow it.

“What does that mean?” Kate asked.

“Make sure we’re home, in case they show up.” Victoria glanced at the door. “Steph and Penny are local. If they haven’t heard from her in the next hour or so, that means they’re probably on their way here.”
Kate frowned. “You don’t know?”

“We’re not supposed to. That’s the whole idea.” Victoria looked back at her wife. “Chloe’s going to pick at random, so nobody knows where they’re going.”

“And then what?”

“Then they stay put, until we figure out what’s going on.” Victoria exhaled slowly, closing her eyes. *Please, God, let Max be okay.*
A couple of weeks earlier...

She watched the sun rise slowly, from her small balcony.

The brunette checked her watch; a little before seven in the morning. Not yet, she thought as she lifted the cigarette to her lips and took another drag. Few more minutes.

Watching the sun come up over Seattle was one of the things she enjoyed about her day. Her apartment was small, and definitely cramped, but it did was in a great location for the price. While it was hardly a high-rise, her balcony on the eighth floor still gave her a good view.

Although she hated looking at the construction project a few blocks over. A rather expensive new office building that was still being erected, which promised to be the greenest and most energy-efficient building in Seattle when it was finished.

Probably wouldn’t mind so much if I didn’t know that hundred-and-twenty-million-dollar price tag included three-point-four million in kickbacks, she thought dryly. She took another puff as she watched the construction that was underway. Not to mention the fancy glass coming from child-labor factories in Bangladesh.

Not your story, not your problem.

Her smart watch vibrated on her wrist.

Okay. Time to get ready.

She ground out her cigarette, dropping it into the slightly-overflowing ashtray before she turned and headed back inside.

The other occupant of her bed was still snoring. She sighed, as she grabbed the comforter and yanked it back. “Hey,” she called. “Wake up.”

“Wuh... huh?”

“It’s time for you to go, Jesse,” she ordered. “I have to shower and get dressed. Come on, get up.”

Groaning, the woman rolled right-side up and brushed the red hair from her eyes. “Jules... it is WAY too early for you to be such a bitch.”

“Yea, well, some of us have jobs.” Juliet pulled her sleep shirt off, dropping it on top of the basket with the rest of her dirty laundry. “And you have a husband to get back to.”

“No, I don’t. He’s in Vancouver with his twenty-year-old fuck-bunny of an assistant.” Jesse ran her eyes over Juliet’s body, a hungry look coming over her face. “And if you’re not in too much of a hurry, you could use some company in that sh-”

“No,” Juliet replied dismissively, as she tied her hair into a loose bun. “I have someplace to be. You need to go.”

Jesse sighed, dropping her head back on the pillow. “You’re a real buzz-kill. Can I at least spend a
few minutes waking up?”

“T’m leaving in twenty minutes,” Juliet told her. “If you’re not ready by then, I’ll toss you out on
your ass naked.”

“Ooh, kinky.”

Juliet ignored her, as she walked into the bathroom and stepped into the shower. She grimaced as she
turned the handle, the icy water blasting her skin while she grit her teeth and waited for it to warm
up. The sound of the running water, thankfully, drowned out whatever Jesse had to say as she
showered.

When she finally stepped out and towed off, her apartment was quiet. She breathed a sigh of relief,
as she opened the door to find Jesse gone. Thank God, she thought to herself as she got dressed. *I
really hate dealing with this shit before work.*

The bus ride to her office was about thirty minutes long. She spent most of it sending texts to several
people, to see if they had anything for her.

One of the perks of being a young and pretty reporter was that a lot of men enjoyed talking to her.
She smirked as she fielded texts from a Homicide detective, a Lieutenant in the Seattle Fire
Department, a court clerk, and a paralegal at one of Seattle’s prestigious law firms. Despite making
their professional relationship clear to all of them, every single one clamored for her attention.

*Not that they have anything important to say.* Juliet shook her head as she read texts from the
paralegal, about how his firm was about to sue some big corporation on another big corporation’s
behalf for breach of contract. *Man, nobody gives a shit.*

She also spent a little time browsing Facebook. Her smirk faded, as she saw a familiar set of wedding
photos pop up in her feed for the fifth or sixth time that week.

Juliet tried not to stare at Dana Ward for too long. The two of them had hardly spoken since the night
of the junior prom. Their relationship had been one of the things that carried her through high school,
and she missed talking to her. But the past few Facebook messages she’d sent her had gone seen, but
unanswered. Juliet flipped past her smoothly as she continued to scroll.

*Victoria did all right, I have to admit. Her wife is pretty cute.* Juliet paused as she looked over the
group photo, Victoria and Kate standing in the middle with all of their bridesmaids. Juliet glanced
over them all quickly, recognizing Courtney and Taylor easily enough; they hadn’t changed their
appearances much, since high school. And on Kate’s side... her gaze lingered on the familiar
brunette. *Nice to see that she’s doing well. I should reach out at some point and say hi.*

The bus stopped, announcing their destination Juliet quickly got up, sticking her phone back in her
pocket and forgetting about it as headed for her office.

“Morning, Juliet.”

She nodded at her editor, Rick. “Morning,” she said as she sat down in her cubicle. “How’s the piece
been coming?”

“James is almost finished.” He nodded at the empty cubicle next to hers, which was typical; her
coworker usually didn’t show up before noon, but tended to work long after midnight. “Thanks, by
the way, for getting everything to him so quickly.”
“No problem.” Juliet dropped her purse on the desk. “We doing the round-table today?”

“No point.” Rick shrugged. “You know when he starts writing, he’s not coming up for air until he’s finished.”

Juliet nodded. “Fair enough. Did I miss anything important yesterday?”

“No, we’re still in a rut.” Rick looked her up and down. “Unless you’ve got anything?”

“Nothing worth our time.” Juliet sighed, as she spun her chair around in a circle.

The Seattle Times Investigative Team worked exactly like Spotlight, from the Boston Globe, in that they normally worked on major in-depth stories that took weeks, sometimes months, to get to the bottom of. Reporters were hand-picked for the department, and Juliet was one of the youngest to ever earn her spot. Partially because of the connections she was able to make and maintain, and partially because of her way of asking questions that made people want to tell her the truth.

“Who did you talk to this morning?” Rick asked.

“A few people.” Juliet shrugged, glancing behind him. “Winston’s here.”

Her co-worker walked through the door, an energy drink in one hand and a mostly-eaten McDonald’s breakfast sandwich in the other. “Hey Jules,” he said dismissively, as he plopped down at his desk. “Your brain liquify yet?”

“No yet.” Juliet rolled her eyes, as she knocked on her head with a fist; since her encounter with a pimp the year before, when she’d gotten a concussion for asking questions, Winston had enjoyed giving her grief about brain damage. “Feels a little flimsy, though.”

“Keep an eye on that. I don’t care what the doctors say, those MRI machines fuck up your brain.” He pushed the remainder of his sandwich into his mouth, chewing loudly with his mouth open. “Wush ooh art wenton-”

“Jesus, Winston, learn some fucking manners.” Juliet grimaced. “Don’t talk with your mouth full.”

He paused and swallowed. “When you start wanting to chew on people, give me a heads up,” he remarked. “That was going to lead into a zombie joke, but I think it fell flat.”

“Yea.” Rick shook his head. “Come on. Time for the round-table.”

The three of them sat down at the circular table in Rick’s office, consisting of six chairs.

James’ seat, of course, was empty since he wasn’t there. Juliet sat between Winston and Rick, scooting in as she opened her notepad.

Opposite her was Chen, a reporter who’d transferred from Los Angeles after a gang had put a price on his life. The man knew more about organized crime than anyone Juliet had ever met, and spent most of his time working police contacts up and down the west coast.

Next to him was Darcy, a tiny Indian woman who worked as their researcher. They didn’t ask where her information came from, and the office rumor was that she had backdoor access to every public
database in Seattle, as well as a few that were private. She sat at the table patiently, spinning her
phone idly while waiting for the meeting to start.

“Okay, let’s make this quick. There’s a thing upstairs that I can’t miss.” Rick glanced at Chen.
“Where did you land on that raid at the docks?”

Chen shook his head. “Nothing for us,” he reported. “The Vice guys I talked to said the smugglers
told them everything, but it’s all overseas contacts. They wound up passing all the info to the FBI,
who will probably give it to Interpol.”

“How?” Rick pursed his lips. “You give it to Crime?”

“Yea, Irene’s gonna do a piece. She gave me a donut for giving it to her.”

“Nice.” Rick scratched off an item on his notebook, turning to Darcy. “What about the Norwood
project?”

“Still working on it.” Darcy shrugged. “I know it’s there.”

“We ALL know it’s there,” Juliet muttered.

Darcy grinned. “Yea, well, until we actually FIND it, we’re shit out of luck.” She looked back at
Rick. “There’s always proof of corruption. I’ll keep digging.”

Rick nodded, as he scribbled notes. “You get anything from City Hall?”

“I’ve got nothing.” She looked at Winston. “But that’s more you anyway.”

Winston was their resident political expert, and was the most familiar with the local government
workings. He took a second to sip his drink, before he replied. “I’ve got a bunch of stuff, but not
from Norwood,” he said. “Sorry.”

“What DO you have?” Rick asked.

“Mm.” Winston leaned back in his chair. “Well, I got it from the third source this month that the
Deputy Mayor is sleeping with his secretary.”

“He’s divorced, nobody cares.” Rick waved dismissively. “Next.”

“Internal affairs arrested a homicide detective for coercing people to lie on the stand.”

“Crime will cover that. Next.”

“My guy in Tacoma’s Urban Planning department said some cult from Oregon is buying a bunch of
land outside the city.”

“Not worth our time. Next.”

“Debbie Bancroft is going to resign tomorrow morning, on account of the whole embezzlement
thing.”

“Politics is already on it. What else?”

“The state’s budget oversight committee is about to rule that the cuts to Seattle’s infrastructure repairs
aren’t going to be allowed without a hearing in-"
“Boooooorrrrriiiiiinnnnnggggg,” Darcy drawled as she spun in her chair.

Rick looked less amused. “I’m with her. Tell me you have something that’ll actually make me want to read the article, Winston.”

Winston shrugged. “I can’t just pull news out of thin air, Rick. But I did hear from Karen Williams, over at the DA’s office, that they’re getting a lot of pressure from high-up to talk to Frank Meyers about a plea deal.”

Rick frowned. “The man is on camera soliciting sex from a fifteen-year-old boy.”

“Yea, but you know they don’t want a trial playing out in the media.” Winston rolled his eyes. “The man donated six million dollars to the Governor’s election campaign. Nobody wants that fact in the papers.”

“That’s politics,” Chen pointed out. “It’s a piece, but there won’t be much investigating. Hell, the list of donors is public.”

“I’m not saying it’ll be a hard article,” Winston defended. “But we should still write SOMETHING.”

“Fair point.” Rick nodded. “Chase it, confirm it, write it up. I’ll bring it to Ned when I see him at the meeting.” He glanced to his left. “Juliet?”

She shrugged, as she held up her phone. “I also got it from a source, that the Deputy Mayor is fucking his secretary.”

“Oh, Jesus Christ.” Rick threw his hands up. “Literally nobody gives a shit.”

Everyone chuckled at his outburst. Juliet smirked as she waited for it to die down. “Are you-”

“The man is divorced, and his kids are in college. The secretary is widowed, and her kids are in high school. They are two consenting adults, and they’re not fucking in City Hall during business hours.” Rick shot her a look. “Nobody in Seattle will care, we’ll embarrass the secretary, and piss off the Mayor’s office. The story isn’t worth the aggravation it’ll bring on our heads.”

“I know all that.” Juliet nodded. “I was going to ask if you’re aware that the Daily Blotter has already done an article about it.”

“No. You know why? Because nobody that matters in this city gives a shit about the Daily Blotter.” Rick shook his head. “Anything else?”

“Nothing really worth...” Juliet’s voice trailed off, as her eyes went distant. “... hmm.”

“What?”

She slowly turned to Winston. “Humor me, for a couple of seconds. You said there’s a cult buying land in Tacoma?”

“Yea?” Winston looked at her, curious. “What about them?”

“They’re from Oregon?”

“Uh huh.”

“What’s the name of the cult?”
“First... something.” Winston frowned, as he flipped through his notebook. “I wrote it down here, somewhere.”

“It’s not First Light of Christ, is it?”

He looked back up and nodded. “Yea, that was it. They sound pretty fuckin’ pretentious.”

Juliet blinked. “You have no idea.”

Rick leaned forward. “You’re familiar with these guys?”

“I should be.” Juliet glanced at him. “I used to live ten miles from their church.”

The other four reporters looked at her silently. “You’re kidding,” Chen stated. “You lived next to a cult?”

“I went to high school with the kids that worshipped there. I even knew a couple of them.” Juliet leaned back in her chair. “These guys are WAY more than just a ‘cult’.”

“You think there’s something here?” Rick asked.

“I don’t know.” Juliet looked back at Winston. “Did your guy say what they were doing with the land?”

“No, but I can ask.” He tilted his head. “Is this something you want to pursue?”

“If these people are coming to town, then I think this is something the city would be VERY interested in,” Juliet affirmed.

Rick pursed his lips. “How bad are these guys, exactly?”

“Short version? They think gay people are a stain on the earth. They actually beat two teenage lesbians to death a couple of years ago, and their head pastor is still in jail for attempted murder after he almost killed a different kid. In their early years, they mostly did polygamy and tax evasion, but they stopped with the polygamy, because Oregon said that they can’t keep marrying eight-year-olds.”

Across from her, Darcy’s eyes widened. “Holy shit.”

“Yea. Their track record on woman’s rights is atrocious. They still practice arranged marriage, mostly to teenage girls.” She glanced at Rick. “These are bad people. And if they really are moving in down the street? This is something we should look into.”

He sat silently, looking at her in thought as he absorbed what she said.

Then his phone buzzed in his pocket. “Shit,” he muttered as he stood. “I have to go.” He glanced at Winston. “Get the info from your guy. Find out what these people are planning.”

Winston nodded. “Got it.”

“I want to know more about these weirdos.” Rick looked at Juliet. “This meeting will probably last an hour or so. Dig up EVERYTHING tangible that you can find.”

“Are we doing this?” she asked.

“I haven’t decided yet. But we don’t have anything better to talk about, so I’m open to being
pitched.” He picked up his notebook. “Do the research. I’ll be back.”
An hour later, Rick was back in his office. Juliet stood at the far wall, which consisted of a giant whiteboard, next to Winston and Darcy; Chen had left to pursue another story. She held several sheets of paper in her hands as she cleared her throat.

“Okay, so in order to understand First Light of Christ, you have to go back to the beginning,” she started. “In this case, way back to the mid-sixties, and a man named Mark Jefferson.”

Rick nodded. “I’m guessing he’s the church founder?”

“He was. When Jefferson was a young man, he was going to seminary school, but dropped out after several disagreements with his teachers. He wanted to practice a religion with a more literal approach to what’s written in the bible, so he started First Light of Christ with some other passionate and spirited youths.” She drew one of the papers, using a magnet to stick the photo onto the whiteboard. “Support grew rather quickly, and the church has since swelled to a few thousand parishioners that have made their home in Arcadia Bay, Oregon. There they practice their faith, pray, and do the best to better the community.”

Rick studied the picture of a young man with glasses, close-cropped hair, and a goatee. “Sounds like a good story.”

“It’s supposed to. That was what First Light has posted on their website.” Juliet smirked as she crumpled the paper in her hands, tossing it into the nearby waste basket. “The real story was detailed by an expose article in the Oregonian during the late nineties, and is a little less romantic.”

“I figured. How does that go?”

“Well, to begin with, Jefferson didn’t drop out of seminary school. He was kicked out, after his teachers caught him acting inappropriately with underage girls at a playground near the school a few times. Eventually, the staff got tired of him and told him to move on. And since this was pre-Catholic Church scandal, he essentially got away with everything.”

Rick shook his head. “Of course he did.”

“Yea. Now, Jefferson’s mother descended from some of the people who originally founded the city of Arcadia Bay near the turn of the century, so when she died around that same time of a heart attack, he wound up inheriting a shitload of land. Something like...” Juliet looked at Darcy. “What was it again?”

“Close to six hundred acres on the edge of the national park,” Darcy answered. “Not really worth much, it wasn’t developed at the time. Arcadia Bay was still being built, and it wasn’t near anything, so nobody really cared back then.”

“Right.” Juliet turned back to Rick. “So, since the seminary wouldn’t let him fulfill his sick fantasies, Jefferson decided to establish his own religion in the beginning of sixty-eight. He used what little money he had to build the church that’s still standing today, preached wherever he could, and started attracting like-minded individuals. One of whom was a man named Harry Prescott.”

“And what is his role in this fucked-up fairy tale?”

“The money,” Juliet said simply. “Harry was a recently-divorced heir to a large railroad fortune. He was apparently attracted to the ideals Jefferson preached, including polygamy. And Jefferson was
attracted to the mountains of money Prescott had at his fingertips. So Harry bankrolled the church, and they used that money to start establishing a community; they bought businesses, recruited others from the area, and began developing the rest of Jefferson’s land.”

Juliet hung another photo, of an older man with glasses and a head of thinning hair. “In exchange for his generosity and good will, Jefferson made Harry Prescott a church Elder. The position and his money made him a very influential man in the up-and-coming community, both in and out of the church, and even more people became interested; the membership exploded from less than a hundred to almost a thousand by the summer of nineteen seventy-one.”

She paused. “And Harry’s money meant that a lot of people wanted his favor, which he handed out in exchange for brides. Witnesses interviewed after the fact told authorities that Jefferson performed all twelve of Harry’s marriages.”

Winston raised his eyebrows. “Twelve? Really?”

“Yep.” Juliet nodded. “One for each of the Apostles, according to Harry.”

“Christ. I can barely handle one wife.”

“Well, Harry’s wives were between the ages of ten and sixteen, so you’re still the better man.” Juliet shook her head. “While not every male in the church was into the polygamy aspect, there was a ten-year period where a lot of old men were all marrying each other’s daughters left and right. Harry was just one of them, and he wasn’t even the most prolific.”

“Christ.” Rick leaned back. “Tell me they all got tossed in the can.”

“They did. The Oregon State Police eventually showed up in the spring of seventy-nine and arrested a dozen or so people, including Harry and Jefferson. In fact, when they went to arrest Jefferson, they found him in bed next to two of his wives, aged twelve and thirteen.” Juliet took hold of the magnets holding Jefferson and Harry’s photos and pushed them off to the side. “They were both sentenced to life in prison, and have since passed away.”

“Of what?”

“Harry of old age, Jefferson of cancer.”

“Mm.” Rick pursed his lips. “What a shame. The church carried on without them?”

“It did. The church leadership has changed a few times, though it’s been steady for the past decade or so.” Juliet nodded towards the picture of Jefferson. “Prescott’s son wanted nothing to do with the church, so he disavowed his father and ended their financial support. Harry’s role in what happened is more-or-less forgotten to history. But the money First Light had already spent laid the foundation for who they are today. Jefferson, of course, is still seen as their Prophet, and they all still revere him greatly.”

Rick nodded. “So, who runs the church now?”

“Officially, these two men.” Juliet turned to the whiteboard and used another pair of magnets to hang two more pictures. “Pastors Wyatt Rogan and James Thompson are the two current religious leaders in First Light of Christ. They write and deliver the sermons, preaching their twisted version of Leviticus and Revelations. They more or less set the fervor.”

“What do we know about them?”
“Not much,” Darcy spoke up. “Born and raised in the church, from what I can tell. No real higher education, no Facebook accounts, very little presence on the internet aside from the church YouTube channel.”

Rick frowned. “They have a YouTube channel??”

“It’s mostly their sermons,” she explained. “Typical Christian fundamentalist nonsense, about why they’re right and everyone else will burn in hell. A fair amount of homophobia, dinosaurs weren’t real, evolution is a myth, usual stuff you see from assholes like this.”

“We also know that they’re both married,” Juliet added. “Pastor Thompson’s wife is very active in the church. Pastor Rogan’s is not.”

“Mm.” Rick pursed his lips. “You said they were ‘officially’ in charge. Who’s unofficially in charge?”

Juliet held up four more pieces of paper. “Well, in First Light it’s a little muddy. Those two deliver the sermons, but the church still has Elder positions. There’s currently for of them, filled by these men.” She hung four more pictures. “James Scott, Ryan Caulfield, Preston Xavier, and Richard Jefferson. They don’t take part in the sermons, but each of them is responsible for keeping the church in business.”

“How so?”

“Let’s start with Elder Scott.” Juliet tapped his photo. “He’s their accountant, basically, manages all of their money using the MFA he got back in the 60’s. Scott is the oldest Elder, the second one after Harry Prescott, and one of the few still-living members of the church who’s been around since the beginning; he actually filed the original paperwork with the IRS for their tax-exempt status.”

Rick tilted his head. “He wasn’t a polygamist?”

“He was not. Elder Scott was already married to his high-school sweetheart when he joined the church, and didn’t see fit to take any other wives. He has one child and two grandchildren. His son is a CPA with his own Accounting degree, his right-hand man, and probably next in line for the Elder position after he passes.”

Juliet tapped the next picture. “Then we have Elder Caulfield. He joined the church with his parents as a teenager, but they died in a car accident right before he graduated high school. Went to OSU and earned a degree in Business Management, then transferred to law school at the University of Oregon, where he graduated second in his class. The church contracts out some of their legal work, but this guy does the heavy lifting; he defends the higher-ups in court when they get themselves arrested, though he loses about as often as he wins. Also married to his wife, who is one of the more passionate parishioners, and has one daughter from whom he’s estranged.”

“Estranged? Why?”

“It’s... complicated. And a long story. But she’s no longer with the church.” She moved to the next photo. “Elder Xavier’s the only one from out of town. He went to Yale in the late seventies, and had a very lucrative job as an executive in New York. At some point, he traveled to Oregon and met his wife, who was the daughter of one of the church’s former Elders. Then it’s the typical story; boy meets religious girl, boy falls in love with religious girl, boy marries girl and becomes a fundamentalist zealot who uses his MBA to operate First Light’s business holdings.”

Rick raised both of his eyebrows. “You mentioned that before. How many businesses does this
“Quite a few of them,” Darcy answered. “I only did a quick search, but they run several businesses around Arcadia Bay, including a restaurant, two grocery stores, a pawn shop, a used car dealership, and two laundromats.”

“Which, I don’t think I have to point out, are businesses often used by white-collar criminals to launder money,” Juliet added. “Anyway, Xavier and his wife have three kids, all of whom were married before they turned twenty, and two grandkids.”

She came to the last picture. “Elder Richard Jefferson is the nephew of Mark Jefferson, and is basically viewed as the heir to the throne. He’s also the only one who doesn’t have a useful professional skillset; as far as we can tell, he never went to college. What he does have, however, is influence. His uncle’s word was law, back when he was alive, so when Richard speaks, people listen. In fact, most people think that the reason the church hasn’t progressed in it’s views is because Jefferson won’t let it, on account of trying to keep his uncle’s vision alive. His wife just had their fifth kid.”

“Jesus.” Rick rubbed his hands together. “This is like a crime family, how they’re organized. Hell, La Casa Nostra could probably learn a thing or two.” He looked at Winston. “What did your guy say?”

“He didn’t have much.” Winston double-checked his notes. “The land is only a few acres. It’s being purchased with funds from a company called Abel Industries, but he knows it’s a church organization because they applied for the tax exemption with First Light’s IRS identification number. Other than that, he won’t have any more for us until probably next week.”

Rick frowned. “Why next week?”

“Because the church has plans to build on that land,” Winston explained. “Otherwise, it wouldn’t have gone through Urban Planning. But they haven’t submitted the architectural plans to the city yet. My guy expects them within the next couple of days.”

“Will he slip us a copy discreetly?” Juliet asked.

Winston shook his head. “He can’t, unfortunately, not without risking his job. We can get them the legit way, with an official information request, but that will tip them off to the fact that we’re on to them.”

“Hmm.” Rick looked at Juliet. “What would these guys do with a few acres of land?”

“Honestly, I’m not really sure.” Juliet shrugged. “I know what these guys are like, but their thought process is way beyond what I would care to guess. Maybe they’re expanding?”

Winston tilted his head. “But why do it in Washington? Why not somewhere else in Oregon, where they’re already established?”

“I don’t know.” Juliet looked back at her boss. “There’s something here. I want this.”

Rick studied the faces on the dry-erase board carefully. “What’s your end goal with the story?”

“These guys shouldn’t be here,” she stated plainly. “Or anywhere, really, but they definitely shouldn’t be coming into Washington. They’re trying to sneak across the border, and we need to shut them down. Loudly, and publicly.”
“There’s a first amendment issue,” Rick reminded her. “These guys might be homophobic sociopaths, but they’re still allowed to believe whatever they want.”

“There’s also precedent,” Juliet countered. “The Westboro Baptist Church is banned from entering several parts of the country to preach and protest. And First Light of Christ has been designated as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center.”

Darcy frowned. “Are you actually okay with this?” she asked their boss. “I mean, really?”

“No, of course not. I’m playing devil’s advocate.” He looked back at Juliet. “What is the worst thing these guys are accused of?”

“You think it really gets worse than beating children to death?” Juliet started to say more, but paused. “Actually... maybe? Sort of?”

“Seriously?” Winston raised his eyebrows. “How much worse can it get?”

“These guys still do arranged marriages,” Juliet explained. “But there were rumors, floating around about the girls that got pulled from high school to be ‘home schooled’.” She gestured with air quotes. “Rumors that they were pulled out to be married way before they were legally allowed to be.”

“Wow.” Darcy looked at Juliet with wide eyes. “What the fuck? How have these people not been locked up?”

“Lack of proof.” Juliet shrugged. “But maybe we can dig something up.”

Rick took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. “Okay. Color me interested.”

Juliet brightened. “We’re doing this?”

“YOU’RE doing this,” Rick clarified. “James is going to be working on his article for a few days. And I’m not a hundred percent certain that this will pan out, so I’m not going to commit Winston and Chen to it.”

“Can I borrow Darcy?” Juliet asked.

“Sure.” Rick waved his arm. “Unless something better comes up, she’s all yours.”

Darcy scowled at the both of them. “What am I, a fucking rental car?”

“Find out what you can, as fast as you can.” Rick ignored their researcher. “I want to see something solid, Juliet. Because right now, these guys just look like an inconvenience. Give me a great excuse to tell all of Seattle about these shenanigans, and get it quickly.”
“You know, I’m not a cop,” Juliet commented as she slowly sat up in bed. “But I think what we’re doing might, ethically, fall under bribery.”

A snort sounded from the kitchen. “Speaking as a cop, it’s only bribery if I wasn’t going to give you what I had unless we had sex.”

“Mm.” Juliet turned and planted her feet on the floor, bending over to retrieve her shirt. “So, you were going to tell me what you found out anyway, right? Regardless of whether we had sex or not?”

“I mean, yea, of course.” The man sauntered around the corner, holding a bottle of bourbon and two glasses, wearing nothing but his athletic boxers. Juliet let her eyes wander over his defined abs as he spoke. “The fact that we got to fuck just makes driving over tonight worth my time.”

Juliet smirked as she accepted the glass. “Your moral compass might be a little off, Sam.”

“It is. Which is one of the reasons I was picked for the Vice Squad.” He uncapped the bottle, looking at the label. “Speaking of vices, why do you drink such terrible liquor?”

“Because my pay is shit,” Juliet remarked dryly. “And there’s nothing wrong with Jim Beam.”

“Agree to disagree.” Sam poured them both a small amount, setting the bottle aside as he sat back down and took a sip. His entire face scrunched up, as he grimaced. “Ugh.”

Juliet rolled her eyes as she took a healthy swallow from her glass. “God, you’re such an elitist pussy.”

“Big talk for a woman who drinks Kentucky piss water.” Sam shook his head, as he handed her his glass. “You could at least spring for a bottle of Maker’s Mark.”

“Next time.” Juliet poured Sam’s drink into her glass, setting the empty tumbler on the night stand. “So. Tell me what you found out.”

Sam sighed. “First Light of Christ.”

“Yep.” Juliet leaned back onto her pillow, taking another drink. “Start talking.”

“I spoke to a buddy of mine, who works for the Oregon State Police,” Sam said. “He did confirm that several teenagers from First Light have been removed from their homes. And he said that some of them have told their social workers that there are arranged marriages going on before the legal age in Oregon, which is seventeen. A few of them even cited that as the reason they ran away.”

“And the local PD hasn’t gone Ruby Ridge on their asses because...” Juliet prompted.

“There’s no proof. No smoking gun. There’s only the statements of the teenagers, which First Light categorically denies. And when social workers do visit their community, they batten down the hatches like professionals.” Sam shook his head. “It’s a he-said, she-said situation, and while everyone wants to do something about it, everyone’s hands are tied.”

“Shit.” Juliet sighed, taking another sip from her drink. “Well. This was pointless,” she muttered. “Least I got laid.”

“Excuse me.” Sam sounded hurt. “Do you really think I would come here to get some top-tier sex
without having something good?”

Juliet looked at him. “How good?”

Sam nodded towards the kitchen. “Go look in my duffle bag.”

“Seriously?” An exasperated expression came over Juliet’s face. “You want me to get up? I just laid back down.”

“When you see what’s in my bag,” Sam said with a grin, “you’re going to want to go for round two.”

Juliet gave him a wary look, but she slowly got up, setting down her glass and walking towards the couch. She unzipped Sam’s duffle bag, pulling it open to reveal some workout clothing, a water bottle, a couple of protein bars… and several folded pieces of paper. She pulled out the first one and opened it, the paper expanding until it was almost three feet wide, holding it so she could read it.

Her eyes blinked rapidly, as she realized what she had in her hands.

“No way.”

“You’re welcome,” Sam called from the bed.

Juliet whipped her head around. “Is this fucking legit?”

“Yes.” He grinned. “The architectural plans Abel Industries submitted to the city, day before yesterday.”

Her eyes shot back and forth between the paper and Sam. “How did you get this?!” she demanded. “I need to know, Sam. If you filed a request, then those megalomaniacs are going to-”

“It was given to me by my cousin,” Sam interrupted. “He’s one of the supervisors over at the City Hall, in Tacoma. He knows your boy Winston Darnold was looking into getting it. He owed me a favor, so I had him make a copy and sneak it to me. Nobody knows that you have it.”

“Jesus.” Juliet looked back at the paper. “This is exactly what I needed.”

“Yea?” She could practically hear Sam grinning. “How badly did you need it?”

Juliet smirked, as she folded the paper back up and set it on the counter before turning back to Sam. She slowly took her shirt off as she walked towards the bedroom. “Buckle up, cowboy.”

“Tell me how you got this again?”

Juliet didn’t meet Darcy’s gaze, as they looked over the plans at their office the next morning. “I fucked it out of a cop with loose morals and picky tastes in bourbon.”

Darcy scoffed. “No, really.”

“I don’t tell Rick who my sources are, I’m certainly not going to tell you.” Juliet tapped one of the lines on the paper. “What’s this here?”

“Um... according to the legend, a line for one-twenty-volt power.” Darcy studied the plans intently. “I think the box might be the main circuit breaker for that building.”
Juliet glanced over at her. “Are you sure?”

“Fuck, no. Do I look like a goddamn architect to you?” Darcy shook her head. “But if I was to hazard a guess...”

“Fair enough.” Juliet looked back at the plans. They’d taped all the individual pieces of paper up to the wall, each one showing a different building. Or, in a couple of cases, a different floor to a building. “Man, this place is crazy. How many people do you think could live here?”

“Well, the main structure is three stories, so...” Darcy trailed off, thinking. “I dunno, fifty people maybe? Why so many?”

“And why so big of a church?” Juliet pointed to another piece of the plans. “It could probably hold three times that number.”

Darcy’s phone buzzed with an incoming text. “Winston says eight feet,” she said as she read it. “Any higher and you have to get a waiver, which the city won’t grant without a REALLY good reason.”

“And they’ve got seven feet of brick, plus twelve-inch wrought-iron spikes. So they’re at the max height for those walls.” Juliet nodded, as she stepped over to the paper that displayed the layout for the entire compound. “Why do they need walls at all? Why not a fence? That seems so much cheaper.”

“Keep people in?” Darcy suggested. “If those rumors are true, maybe they don’t want people running away in the middle of the night.”

“... hmm.” Juliet stepped back, folding her arms. “There’s another possibility we might want to consider.”

Darcy looked confused. “What?”

“They’re trying to keep people OUT?”

Juliet and Darcy stood in front of Rick’s desk, as he looked between them. “That’s a strong leap, and a pretty sensational accusation,” he cautioned. “We can’t just print that. You need something to back that up with, or we’ll get the pants sued off of us.”

“If they wanted to keep people in, they could do that just fine and much cheaper with a chain link fence,” Juliet argued. “They don’t need to spend ten times what they normally would just to keep people from leaving with a brick wall instead.”

“You can climb over chain link,” Rick reminded them. “People do it all the time.”

“Then top it with barbed wire,” Darcy countered.

“You can cut through chain link, too.”

“High-strength chain link that can’t be snipped with hand tools is also available,” Juliet replied. “But police could still get through it, with some breaching saws. You’re not penetrating that wall with anything lighter than a main battle tank, and climbing over those spikes is asking for trouble.”

“There’s something else we noticed, too.” Darcy reached out and tapped the area near the gate on the plans. “See this guard shack? And the lines running to it?”

Rick nodded. “What about it?”
“That line on the bottom isn’t one-twenty-volt.” Darcy pointed to the legend in the corner. “That pattern means that it’s two-forty. That’s completely unnecessary for anything they might put in a building that small, unless they plan on running it through there to something else.”

Rick looked back at her. “And you have a theory about that, too? Beyond that it might be for, I don’t know, an electric gate?”

“There’s already a one-twenty line running along the wall for a motorized gate.” Darcy paused. “But hydraulic pop-up barricades, like the kind the military uses for base defense? Those things require dedicated two-forty-volt power.”

“I don’t see those on here.”

“They don’t need to be. First Light can install them later without the city’s permission, once the compound is finished.”

Rick leaned back in his chair. “Okay, this is very interesting. But it’s all conjecture, guys. Even if you were right, and I’m not saying you aren’t, we can’t DO anything with it.”

“That building.” Juliet pointed. “In the corner, there. See it?”

Rick looked back at the plans. “The media studio?”

“Look at the size, Rick.” Juliet whipped out another paper from under the main layout plan, detailing the building in question. “See these dimensions? What media studio is only twelve by fifteen feet? You’d barely fit a control panel and a camera, never mind anything substantial.”

“And where are the hookups?” Darcy asked. “The media studio we have here has hookups for cable, ethernet, and telephones. None of which are in that building; all it has is one-twenty-volt power. With only one outlet, by the way, so if they want to hook up anything more than a couple of computers, they’re fucked.”

Rick frowned. “Maybe those other hookups aren’t in the plans yet.”

“They are in the main building and church,” Darcy countered.

“Then... I don’t know, maybe it’s a storage room.”

“So call it a fuckin’ storage room,” Juliet shot back. “There’s no reason to disguise it by calling it a media studio.”

Rick looked at her. “Okay. Let’s say, for a few minutes, that it’s not a media studio. What is it?”

Juliet took a slow breath. “Remember how I told you that they beat those two girls to death a couple of years ago?”

“Not likely to forget.”

“Did I tell you that they never found the place where it happened?”

Rick stared at her. “You’re kidding.”

“Everyone assumed that it was in the church somewhere, but when the cops investigated, they never found any evidence,” she explained. “Those girls were covered in lacerations. They bled like crazy, and they never found a trace of blood anywhere. The church, their parent’s houses, any of the other properties First Light owned, nothing.”
“And...” Rick looked back at the plans. “What? You think they’re going to construct a building for the express purpose of beating the homosexuality out of people?”

“Well.” Juliet paused. “If you’re building a compound anyway.”

“Jesus Christ.” Rick ran his hand down his face. “I thought society was done with shit like this after the Salem Witch Trials.”

Juliet leaned forward, planting both hands on her boss’s desk. “This is happening, Rick,” she started. “A cult of misogynistic, abusive, homophobic psychopaths is setting up camp right under our noses. They are constructing a building for the purpose of beating the shit out children. And we are the only one who are in any kind of position to tell people about it. If we don’t, and they go through with this?” she paused. “The lives of anyone that might die in that compound are on us.”

Rick was silent, as he looked between her and the plans in front of him. Juliet could practically feel the wheels turning in his head.

“Okay.”

Juliet blinked. “Okay?”

“Okay.” Rick pointed a finger. “But we need more than just conjecture and theories, before we bring this to print.”

“Like what?” Darcy asked incredulously. “We’ve got a pile of sordid history a foot thick on these guys.”

“And all of it is second-hand.” Rick shook his head. “We need to talk to someone who knows these guys. Someone with first-hand knowledge of what these fuckers are capable of, who can say that yes, these fuckers are that crazy.”

Juliet listened silently.

“I want to see some quotes,” Rick continued. “I want someone telling the world what they went through. If we’re going to write this, it needs to have impact. I want someone to tell us, on the record, how fucked up these people really are. Because without that, it’s just a few reporters who don’t actually know these people spouting hypotheticals.”

“I...” Juliet hesitated. “I might know someone who can help.”

Rick’s eyebrows went up. “Who?”

“How’s our travel budget?”

“Thin.” He folded his arms. “Why?”

“There was a... person I was kind-of, sort-of familiar with, back home,” she answered evasively. “They ran away from the church when they were a teenager. But back when they were still with First Light, they were in a great position to learn all kinds of juicy, fucked-up details.”

“They sound perfect,” Rick agreed. “You should call them.”

“I can’t.”

“And why is that?”
“Because they don’t have any kind of phone number I can find. Or a Facebook page.” Juliet paused. “And if we’re going to ask someone to relive such a traumatic part of their life, it should be face-to-face anyway.”

Rick scrunched his face, clearly not happy with her answer. “Hey, man, you do this and I’ll write a story worthy of a full frontpage spread,” she assured him. “But I need you to authorize some travel funds, so I can go to San Francisco and get the scoop we need.”
Julie: Knocking on Doors

I hate this fucking city.

Juliet slammed her hand on the steering wheel of her rental car, as she glared at the car in front of her. It hadn’t moved for ten minutes, also stuck due to the accident ahead of them.

I’m going to kill everyone. This is it. This is what they’ll say made me snap, when they tell the story of the San Francisco Traffic Killer. She smirked. Not the politics and stress of being an investigative reporter. Not being scorned by one of her many lovers, both male and female. Getting stuck in traffic is what sent Juliet fucking Watson over the edge.

The phone rang, and she fumbled it out of her purse to answer it. “Hey, Darcy.”

“You at the hotel yet?”

“No.” Juliet sighed, as she slouched in her seat. “I’m stuck in fucking traffic. Some out-of-town asshole ran into one of the cable cars and blocked the whole road, so I can’t get out.”

“...you know that YOU’RE an out-of-town asshole, right?”

“True, but I’m smart enough to not run into a cable car.” Juliet shook her head. “Did Chen get back to you?”

“Yea, he called his buddy and had him run a search through the state DMV. By the way, you know your friend’s legal name is Maxine, right?”

“I... actually didn’t.” Juliet winced. “We weren’t really friends. I just knew of her, and we went to the same high school. I guess it makes sense, though, since Max isn’t really a girl’s name.”

“Right. Anyway, there’s only one Maxine Caulfield in California, and the photo matches that Facebook picture you printed. I just sent you her address.”

“Oh, hang on.” Juliet reached over to the touchscreen on her car and brought up the navigation app. “Just read it off to me.”

“Why?”

“My car has a GPS in it. What is it?”

“Wait, seriously? I thought Rick only approved an economy car.”

Juliet rolled her eyes. “The upgrade to a brand-new Prius was thirty bucks. You my fucking auditor now?”

“No, but if one asks you, I know nothing about it. You ready?”

“Go for it.”

Darcy rattled off the address. “Google says it’s an apartment complex, but it doesn’t say which building the unit is in, so you’ll probably have to search it.”

“I’m sure I’ll find it.” Juliet watched the directions come up on her screen. “Oh, shit. She’s only, like, thirty minutes away.”
“Really? From where you are right now?”

“Yea.” Juliet looked up. “You think she’s home?”

“On a Sunday morning? Probably.”

“Then screw it. I’ll go see her now.” Juliet glared at the car in front of her. “If I can get out of this FUCKING TRAFFIC JAM!!” she yelled.

Darcy was still laughing as Juliet hung up the phone.

Juliet slowly made her way up to the apartment door, double-checking to make sure it was the right number.

Okay, then. Juliet took a deep breath, before she rang the doorbell. Let’s see if Max even knows who I am.

The door unlocked and slowly opened. Juliet deflated, as she saw a man behind it wearing a ragged sweatshirt with a faded logo, coupled with worn jeans.

That’s not Max.

“Can I... help you?” he asked, a curious look on his face.

“Oh, yes, hi!” Juliet smiled brightly. “Sorry, I was expecting someone else.”

“Who, exactly?” the man asked with a smirk.

“I was actually looking for Maxine Caulfield.” Juliet glanced into the apartment. “I was told that she lived here?”

The man blinked, and shifted uneasily. “Um... no,” he said, and Juliet detected a hint of caution in his voice. “I’m sorry, who are you?”

“Oh, I’m Elizabeth,” Juliet replied, giving her old pen name; not knowing who the man was, she didn’t want him to have her full name. It was way too easy to Google her and figure out who she worked for. “And you are...”

“Jake,” he said simply.

“Ahh. I apologize, Jake, I had this apartment as her address of record. She doesn’t live here?”

Jake shook his head. “I’m sorry, I live alone.”

Shit.

“You’re sure you don’t know who she is?” Juliet reached into her back pocket and produced the picture she’d printed out and cropped from Facebook, holding it up “Like I said, she had this apartment listed as her address of record.”

He looked at the photo. “Right. Max. Yea, she lived here a while ago.”

Jesus, would it have killed you to say so?!

“She’s not here anymore?” Juliet asked, lowering the picture.
“Nope.” Jake shook his head. “She rented my spare room, but she moved out over a year ago.”

FUCK.

“Any idea where she might have gone?”

Jake tilted his head. “Can I ask what this is about?”

“I’d... rather not say. But it is kind-of important that I see her.” Juliet tried not to let the desperation into her voice. “I’d really like to talk to her. Do you know where I can find her?”

“Sorry.” Jake shrugged. “She didn’t say. And we haven’t really stayed in touch.”


“Sure.” He nodded, as he started to close the door. “Have a good one.”

“You t-”

The door closed before she could finish her sentence, and she heard the lock being thrown.

Rude-ass.

“Nothing?”

“Dude, this isn’t CSI. I can’t wiggle a new address out of thin air.” Juliet could hear Darcy scowl, as she typed. “It doesn’t help that your friend has, like, negative internet presence.”

“No Facebook?” Juliet pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to think. “What about Google Plus, LinkedIn, Twitter... fuck, try Tumblr or something.”

“I made a search algorithm to check every form of social media I can think of.” Darcy countered. “I have a couple of close hits on Facebook. But they’re locked down. I can’t even see pictures. All the other results are worthless.”

“Shit.” Juliet leaned back in her seat. “What about the guy who answered the door? Jake?”

“Do you have ANY idea how many people named Jake there are in San Francisco?” Darcy scoffed. “Can you narrow it down?”

“I mean, not... oh! Yes!” Juliet perked up. “His shirt had a logo on it. I think it was a military patch.”

“Are you sure?”

Juliet squeezed her eyes shut, trying to remember what she’d seen. “It had one of those tabs, like a Ranger tab, except it said Airborne.”

“Okay, was the patch black, or red and blue?”

“Definitely black.”

“Any idea how old the guy was?”

“Mid-thirties, looked like.”

“People with the first name of Jake, or Jacob, who served in the hundred-and-first airborne within
the last fifteen years.” Darcy paused. “Narrowing it down to San Francisco. This could take a minute.”

“Right.” Juliet sighed. “I’m gonna call Chen really quick. Maybe he can get something from his cop friend.”

Juliet’s day turned more and more frustrating as it went on.

Chen’s contact with the police couldn’t come up with anything else. Max had never been arrested, or even received a speeding ticket. “He says she might not even have a car,” Chen told her. “She doesn’t have a driver’s license, only an ID card.”

“Wonderful.” Juliet took a second to take a bite out of her hamburger, as she had a late lunch. “It doesn’t feel like it should be this hard to track someone down.”

“Speaking as someone who’s been on the other end of this, I can appreciate that it might be difficult,” Chen said dryly. “Sorry, Juliet.”

Darcy had some better news, when she called back in the afternoon. “That’s definitely the guy,” Juliet told her after getting texted a picture.

“His name is Jacob Franklin,” Darcy said. “You were right, he was in the hundred-and-first. Retired back in oh-five. Can’t find out why, but as young as he is, it’s probably a medical discharge; he does have a Purple Heart.”

“Any connection to Max, aside from being her former roommate?” Juliet asked.

“I’m looking right now, gimme a second... shit. His Facebook is locked down, too.”

Juliet slouched in her seat. “Great.”

“Hang on. His LinkedIn page isn’t.”

“Somehow, I doubt Max has a LinkedIn page, but not a Facebook.”

“Me too. But... shit, we might have something.”

Juliet leaned forward. “What?”

“Okay, so this guy has a few photos on his page. A few group photos, looks like, but there’s one here that might be a lead. Check your phone, I just sent it to you.”

She turned her phone on speaker and brought up her messages, opening the photo in question. It was a picture taken in front of a restaurant, with Jake and an attractive blonde standing beside several other people; they looked like wait staff and cooks. “What am I looking at, exactly?”

“Some restaurant he opened last year with that blonde girl; looks like she’s his business partner. But look at the far left side of the photo. You see her?”

Juliet zoomed in and saw her; half of a brunette standing sideways, a cell phone to her ear. She seemed to be listening to a call intently.

“... holy shit, Darcy, I think that’s Max.”

“I think so too.”
“What is she doing in that photo?”

“This dude runs a business. Employs a lot of people. Maybe she’s one of them.”

Juliet frowned. “He said they haven’t stayed in touch.”

“Yea, he’d be the first person to lie to a reporter.”

“Fair enough. Any idea where she might be?”

“Given that she’s not standing with the others, probably not at the restaurant. I, personally, would swing by their offices and ask someone. You want the address?”

“Yes, please.”

“... fuck.”

Juliet stared at the door to Franklin-Seymour. And through the glass, to the lights that were off. All the desks were vacant; there was clearly nobody home.

She scowled as she got back on the elevator, and rode it back to the lobby in silence. As soon as she walked out of the building, she called Darcy back.

“What did they say?” she answered.

“Hey, Darcy, does it maybe say on the internet that those offices are closed on Sundays?”

“...fuck.”

“I covered that already.” Juliet got to her car and slid inside, slamming the door closed in frustration. “God damn it. I thought I’d have found her by now. This was not supposed to be so fucking hard.”

“Okay, calm down. Just go back tomorrow.”

“My flight out is at eleven. Which means I need to be at the airport by nine. I won’t have time to get there, ask around, find her, and make my flight.” Juliet ground her forehead into the heel of her palm. “I cannot go back to Seattle with nothing, Darcy. I’ll never hear the end of it from Rick if I do.”

“Well, if you’re up for a Hail Mary...”

Juliet sat up. “What?”

“I expanded the search algorithm I set up for Max, and I hit a new connection on a couple of Facebook posts,” Darcy explained. “A friend that, oddly enough, you two seem to have in common.”

Juliet frowned. “Who?”

“A woman named Stephanie Gingrich.”

“Oh. Right.” Juliet sighed. “Yea, she used to run a Facebook page about Max, after she ran away from home. She hasn’t spoken to her in years, as far as I know.”

“Her Facebook activity would suggest otherwise,” Darcy countered. “She’s mentioned Max a few times recently. Apparently they’ve met and hung out.”

“Huh.” Juliet paused. “I didn’t think they’d reconnect, after high school.”
“What happened in high school?”

“A lot.” Juliet pushed ahead. “Can you find a phone number? I’ll call her real quick.”

“No. But I can give you an address. She’s not that far away from you.”

“She’s in San Francisco too?”

“Has been for a couple of years now.”

Juliet pursed her lips. “Hell. One more door to knock on, I suppose.”
**Juliet: Assault and Battery**

*Fuck, this is going to be awkward.*

Juliet trudged up the stairs of Steph’s apartment complex slowly, as she tried to figure out what she was going to say. *Shit, she may not even remember me. We barely knew each other, back home, before Max ran away.*

*And we certainly weren’t friends afterwards.*

She hadn’t joined Victoria and the others in tormenting Steph and Rachel, after what they’d done had come to light. But she’d hardly been friendly, either. She’d given the two of them the cold shoulder a few times, and refused to acknowledge them in classes.

*Come on. She has to know that she did a shitty thing, back then. Juliet rolled her shoulders as she walked. And it sounds like Max forgave her, at least, if they’re actually hanging out. Maybe once she hears that we’re trying to knock First Light down a peg, she’ll forget that I was an asshole back in Oregon.*

*I hope so, anyway.* Juliet exhaled slowly as she got to Steph’s door, raising her fist and knocking. *If I go back empty-handed, I’m fucked.*

Heavy footsteps approached the door, and it opened.

*You have GOT to be kidding me.*

It was definitely not Steph. A tall girl with blue hair looked at her, blinking. “You’re not pizza.”

“Um... no?” Juliet couldn’t help but look puzzled. “I’m sorry, I was looking for Steph Gingrich.”

The blue-haired girl slowly tilted her head, as she looked her up and down. “And who are you?”

“My name is Elizabeth,” Juliet replied, giving her pen name again. “Does she still live here? I just wanted to ask her a couple of qu-”

The girl’s hand was on her collar before she even realized it. The tug on her shirt forced her off balance, and she flew inside the apartment before she could react. “HEY!!” she finally yelled, as the door closed behind her.

She was slammed into the wall beside the door, and Juliet recoiled from the look of anger on the other girl’s face. “What the FUCK do you want?!?” she snarled, her nose touching Juliet’s.

“What the fuck?!” Juliet struggled in a panic, grabbing the girl’s arm. “Let go of me, you goddamn psycho!”

The girl grabbed Juliet’s wrist and twisted, flipping her around. She felt herself fly forward, her waist colliding with the edge of a kitchen table as she was bent over. Her face was violently forced into the surface of the wood, and she cried out in the pain that radiated from her shoulder.

“I asked you a FUCKING question!” The blue-haired girl planted her elbow on the back of Juliet’s neck, pulling up on her wrist. “What the fuck do you want?! Why are you here?!”

“OWOWOW!!” Juliet screamed, thrashing against the pain to no avail; the bluenette was several inches taller than her, and had every advantage. “Let me GO!”
“Not until you answer me!” the girl shouted. “Why are you looking for Steph?”

“I just wanted to ask her a couple of questions! That’s all!” Juliet struggled against the crazy girl holding her in place. “Let go of me!”

Another sharp tug, and Juliet gasped in pain. “Questions about WHAT?!”

“OW! FUCK! Alright, ALRIGHT!” Juliet yelped, desperate for the girl to let go of her. “I wanted to ask her if she knew where Max Caulfield lived! Let me fucking go!”

“Why are you looking for Max?? What do you want with her?!”

Juliet tried to wiggle her way free, but to no avail; the grip on her wrist was like iron. “What?! Why the fuck does it matter to you??” she retorted.

Wrong answer.

She already felt like her arm couldn’t move any higher along her back, but the girl put more pressure on it and it rose another two inches. The increased pain almost blinded Juliet.

“AAAAAAAAHHHHH! FUCK!” she screamed, as loud as she could, hoping someone would hear her and call the police. “I JUST WANT TO INTERVIEW HER!! THAT’S ALL!! I JUST WANT AN INTERVIEW!!”

“What?” The girl sounded confused, as she eased the pressure on Juliet’s arm.

“Jesus Christ!” Juliet gasped. “I want to interview her for a story I’m writing! That’s all! I swear!”

“What the fu- Juliet?!”

She looked up and saw Steph, still wearing her signature white beanie. The brunette had an incredulous look on her face as she took a step forward. “Juliet Watson, is that YOU?!”

“Steph!” Juliet tried to stand back up, but only moved a couple of inches before the blue-haired girl forced her back down. “Make this crazy bitch let go of me!”

“Juliet, what are you doing down here?!” Steph asked, not moving to help her. “I thought you were working in Seattle or something! Why are you running all over San Francisco looking for Max?!”

The fuck? Juliet blinked in surprise. “How the hell did you know I was- OW!” she yelped as her arm was twisted again. “Fuck! Stop!”

“Do you know this girl, Steph?”

“Yea. We went to high school together.” Steph folded her arms. “Jesus, Juliet, what the hell?! We haven’t spoken in years, and you just knock on my door with a fake name?!”

“It’s my old pen name! I go by Elizabeth when I deal with people I don’t know!” Juliet spoke quickly, pain still radiating from her shoulder. “Now tell your girlfriend to let me go!”

“Maybe you can let go of her now,” Steph allowed, as she looked at the other girl. “I don’t think she’s a threat.”

“You sure she’s not with the church?”

“Yea, no, she’s not with First Light.” Steph looked back to Juliet. “Are you?”
“Fuck no!” Juliet shook her head. “I’m trying to write a story about them! That’s why I’m looking for—”

Juliet finally saw her standing behind Steph; A second brunette, looking at her with wide eyes. She paused in surprise as she took in the hair, the freckles, the nervous expression on her face... “Wait, Max?” she asked incredulously. “Is that you?”

A spike of pain shot up her arm, and she cried out in pain. “What the hell do you mean, you’re trying to write a story?” the blue-haired girl demanded.

“I’m a reporter!” she yelled back, her face starting to flush with anger. “I’m writing a story about First Light! It’s my fucking job!”

“Prove it.”

“Check my back pocket! Left side!” she shot back. “That’s my press pass!”

She felt a hand dig into her back pocket, tugging out the laminated card on the lanyard. It sailed into Steph’s hands. “You work for the Seattle Times?” she asked, examining it.

“Yes!” Juliet snapped. “Now call off your fucking attack dog!”

She waited a few heartbeats, still trapped on the table. Finally, the girl pulled her back upright and pushed her away. Juliet stumbled into the wall, hard. “Shit!” she gasped, cradling her arm as she glared at the girl. “What the fuck is wrong with you?!”

“Juliet, we thought you were working for First Light,” Steph walked over and gave her ID back. “The guy you visited this morning, Jake? He called everyone right after you left, and told us that some mysterious woman had showed up, looking for Max.”

Well. That explains how she knew I was running around town. Juliet didn’t soften her glare, as she looked from Steph to the bluenette, who still had a hard look on her face. “And what, your girlfriend decided to assault me until I told you who I was?!”

“She not my girlfriend,” Steph corrected. “She’s Max’s.”

Max is... gay? Juliet looked at the brunette, then back to her assailant. Her running away is making a lot more sense. So... “What, did you think I was coming to kill her or something?”

“Nobody knew who the fuck you were,” the girl retorted. “Or why the fuck you were here, looking for Max.”

“So rather than ASK me,” Juliet seethed, “you decided to just try and break my goddamn arm?!”

The girl narrowed her eyes, and Juliet braced herself as she got ready to fight. “I haven’t figured for sure one way or another yet, you little-”

“Oh, maybe we can calm down a bit.” Steph stepped between the two of them, looking at her. “Juliet, how exactly did you manage to figure out where Max lived?”

Juliet took a deep breath as she massaged her shoulder, the pain slowly going away. “I’m still Facebook friends with Dana Ward. I saw her in Victoria Chase’s wedding photos, and that Max was one of the bridesmaids. My paper has a contact with the LAPD, and I asked them to run a discreet search on Max’s name in the California DMV. That’s how I got her address.”
“And you just decided to show up out of the blue?” The bluenette folded her arms. “Why not, I don’t know, CALL her? Or shoot her a message through Facebook?”

“I couldn’t find her on Facebook. Or her phone number. Otherwise, I would have,” Juliet retorted. “I got permission from my editor to see if I could track her down in person.”

“Why didn’t you just call Dana, then?” The girl countered. “Ask her, explain why, all that. Then we could have saved everyone the heart attack.”

Juliet glared at her attacker. “Yea, you know, I never thought about that,” she said condescendingly. “Because that was the first thing I learned, when I became an investigative reporter, that I should go around blabbing about what I’m working on to people that don’t need to know about it. Especially a world-class gossip like Dana.” Juliet stood up, away from the wall as she lowered her arm slowly while maintaining a steely expression. “I had no idea people were wound up so tight about Max’s location. This was supposed to be an easy trip, not a goddamn Guantanamo Bay interrogation!”

“What do you want, exactly?”

Juliet looked over as Max finally spoke up, speaking quietly. “What story are you working on, and what does it have to do with First Light?”

“I’m doing an exposé piece, about your old church,” she replied, in a softer tone of voice. “I’ve been working on it ever since we learned about their expansion project.”

“What expansion project?” Max and her girlfriend asked in unison.

“I found out, a couple of weeks ago, that they were planning on opening another one of their churches just outside of Tacoma,” Juliet said. “Since I’m more or less familiar with their fuckery, I let my editor know a little bit about them, and we agreed that we should do a piece on their history. So the public is aware of who’s moving in down the street. But we wanted to talk to someone who was IN First Light, to make sure the story has an impact.”

Steph heaved a deep sigh. “We’re sorry, Juliet. When you showed up at Jake’s apartment, he called Chloe, and she hustled Max over here, in case you had her new address.”

Chloe, huh? “I don’t. I’ve been calling a few people, to try and find her, but I wasn’t making any progress. I heard a rumor that you two were back on speaking terms, so I figured I’d swing by and ask you.” Juliet glanced between Steph and Chloe. “Are you guys really that worried about her safety?”

“Extremely.”

... given what we know, I guess that’s not out of line.

“Well... fuck.” Juliet sighed, turning to Max. “I’m sorry. Like I told you, I just wanted to find you and ask for an interview. So you could give me some insight into your old church. I figured, you know, since you ran away from them, you could probably give me some better info than the police reports.”

“Yea. I, uh...” Max paused, glancing at Chloe. “Sorry my girlfriend tried to kill you.”

Chloe made a noise of derision, which Juliet chose to ignore.

“Why do you want to interview ME, though?” Max continued. “I’m not the only one who ran away from the church.”
“Well, I don’t really know anyone else from that church. And you’re the daughter of one of their authority figures. I figured you would be familiar with their inner workings.”

Max gave her a non-committal shrug. “Not really. My parents kept me away from everything. I didn’t even know that they were abusing gay kids until the one pastor got arrested for it.”

Wonderful.

“Well, even if you don’t know much, an interview from one of their Elder’s kids is a good way to deliver a slap in the face.” Juliet grinned at her joke, but dropped it, since Max didn’t return it. “I can promise that I won’t reveal your location. Even under oath, I’ll refuse to testify. There is very clear precedent in place, for a reporter protecting her sources.”

Max pressed her lips together, and she seemed to be thinking about it. She looked like she was about to say something when the doorbell rang.

“That’ll be the pizza.” Steph commented, as she looked at her. “How about we take a few deep breaths over some food?” She smirked. ‘Call it our way of apologizing for grievous bodily harm.”

The information Max gave her actually made Rick smile, when she presented it.

For the next two months, Juliet did very little besides eat, sleep, research, and write. Just arranging a Skype interview with James Amber took a couple of weeks in itself, which gave her a foot in the door to speak with Stacy Hemingway. That interview was almost as valuable as Max’s, since it got her official confirmation that teenagers were being abused and abandoning the church.

The week before the interview came out, Juliet and Darcy presented the finished piece to Rick and the others. She was questioned by them and the paper’s lawyers for hours, about the quality of her sources and the exact language to use.

“You can’t just print this theory,” one lawyer told them. “Telling Seattle about these ‘Sinner’s Exorcisms’ is one thing. Accusing these wackjobs of constructing a building for the sole purpose of performing them opens a door to slander.”

“I want that info in there,” Juliet argued. “That’s an important part of the story.”

“Can we change the wording?” Rick suggested. “Something like ‘we can’t know what that building might be used for, but educated guesses could be made’ sort of thing?”

The lawyer pursed his lips. “Maybe,” he allowed. “It needs to be very clear, though, that we’re not accusing this church of anything.”

“It will be,” Rick promised.

The piece was finally given the green light around noon on Saturday, and was immediately sent to the printer. When she got the news, Juliet took an early day and went home, collapsing into bed.

Her alarm woke her a little after one-thirty in the morning. She was quick to get dressed and head out into the city, walking to the nearby convenience store just in time for the delivery truck to round the corner.

She waited for the men on the truck to unload the paper, then walked to the counter and watched the cashier stock the shelf. Juliet smiled as she read her headline, the first one she’d ever written that made the front page; she couldn’t help but be a little pleased with herself.
“Can I help you, miss?” the cashier asked.

Juliet slid a few bills across the table. “Ten copies of the Times, please.”

The young man arched his eyebrows in surprise, but complied, stacking them neatly. “You buying them for an office or something?”

“Or something.” Juliet shrugged, looking at the front page. “What do you think?”

Leaning over, the young man read the headline carefully; **CHURCH OF HATE TO OPEN CHAPEL IN TACOMA**. “Damn,” he remarked, as he scanned the piece. “First Light of Christ? Never heard of them. Must be heinous sons of bitches, though, if they got to the front page.” He paused, looking at Juliet. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Juliet took the top copy of the paper and passed it to him. “You should read it, it’s a good story. And tell your friends, too.”
Sam: I have a favor to ask.

Juliet: What’s that?

Sam: I’m going to the police gala in two weeks, and I need a date. You up for a night of good food and okay music?

Sam: Possibly dancing?

Juliet: I seriously cannot be the only girl you could think to ask.

Sam: You aren’t. But the first three said no.

Sam: The last one called me an asshole.

Juliet: You should date dumber women.

Sam: Christ, you sound like my mother.

Juliet: Why do you need me, exactly? Just go by yourself.

Sam: Because I’m trying to get promoted, and it’ll be easier to schmooze with you on my arm than if I go alone.

Juliet: So... bringing an investigative reporter to the gala as your date will help you out?

Sam: Well, if you told them that you worked the Metro desk instead, that would be great.

Juliet: And what happens if I get recognized? You’re not my only source in the Seattle PD.

Sam: Who else is?

Juliet: ... you know how I don’t tell anyone about you? You like that anonymity? Because my other sources sure do.

Sam: Look, it’s mostly higher-ups. They’ll be paying attention to me; you’re mostly going to get looked at by their wives.

Sam: Please be my arm candy for a few hours.

Juliet: Wow, I can’t believe you’re still single.

Sam: Juliet...

Juliet: Fine. On the condition that I don’t have to act stupid, and I get laid at the end of the night.

Sam: Well, I figured the second part went without saying.

Darcy: Do you know anyone in the DA’s office?
Juliet: Yea. Why?

Darcy: Anyone who can make a speeding ticket go away?

Juliet: Yes.

Darcy: Sweet. Can you call them?

Juliet: Fuck no.

Darcy: Dude! Come on!

Juliet: Don’t “dude” me. Those are favors I’m saving for the zombie apocalypse. Or when I need a kidney. Or the eventuality that Trump gets elected for a second term. I’m not calling one in for a fucking speeding ticket.

Juliet: Just pay the damn fine.

Darcy: I can’t! I’m broke!

Juliet: Then you shouldn’t be speeding.

Juliet: Wait, speeding in what? You don’t have a car.

Darcy: My new moped.

Juliet: Are you serious? How the fuck do you get a speeding ticket on a moped?!

Darcy: Dodging traffic in a construction zone.

Juliet: Being stupid. Got it.

Darcy: PLEASE help me. They doubled it because of the construction zone, and I don’t have six hundred bucks.

Juliet: ... IF I do this, you’re going to owe me big-time.

Darcy: Deal.

Unknown: I sent it.

Juliet: When?

Unknown: Just now. But it’s a big file, so it might take a few minutes to get to your inbox.

Juliet: All the financial records? Call logs? Internal messages?

Unknown: Just like I promised.

Juliet: That’s perfect. We’ll start going through them as soon as I get them. There’s two other reporters waiting to tear through everything.

Unknown: And your end?
**Juliet:** I’ll keep you out of it. Nobody will know that we spoke. The information was given to us by a confidential source that we will refuse to name.

**Unknown:** I need your word on that, Miss Watson. If the wrong people find out that I had anything to do with this, I’m finished.

**Juliet:** They won’t get anything out of my office. But I need you to tell me how you got this.

**Unknown:** We’ve got moles in the GOP offices downtown, just like they have moles in ours. I had one clone her hard drive and drop it in the mail.

**Unknown:** I only looked through it for a few minutes, but she definitely called a known political fixer in Los Angeles back in March, when news of the scandal broke. I don’t know what he’s been doing, but we do know that her son is still attending classes at USC.

**Juliet:** I’m sure they don’t want anyone to know that something might be amiss. Do you know if her son actually plays soccer?

**Unknown:** No, I don’t. We don’t do opposition research on our opponent’s families.

**Unknown:** I suspect that if she has any connection to William Singer, you’ll be the ones who discover it.

**Juliet:** I just got your email. We’ll find out soon enough.

**Unknown:** Then I’m going to turn this phone off. I think we’ve been talking too long.

**Juliet:** Right. Good luck on your campaign rally tomorrow. And congrats on what I suspect will be a successful race in November.

**Unknown:** Thanks.

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**Angela:** Did you get my email?

**Juliet:** I did. I’ll be honest, Ang, I don’t think it’ll happen.

**Angela:** Really?

**Juliet:** My source was very insistent that they remain anonymous. Going on camera will be a non-starter.

**Angela:** Damn.

**Angela:** Were they the only one you spoke to from First Light of Christ?

**Juliet:** They were. I was made to understand that everyone else has left the state, or are still minors.

**Angela:** Bummer. That would’ve been a good segment.

**Juliet:** Yea. Sorry.

**Angela:** Eh. We’ll revisit it later. My boss has been wanting to do a thing about the 2020 race anyway.
Juliet: Just tell everyone the DNC is going to win. End of story.

Angela: You don’t even know who they’re fielding yet.

Juliet: I know who they’re running against. That’s good enough.

Juliet: Hey, what are you doing?

Maddie: Not much. Why?

Juliet: How’s everything at the DA’s office?

Maddie: It’s good. But if you’re looking for the scoop on the Sanders case, I can’t help you. The ADA has a different paralegal working for her.

Juliet: Yea, I know. I was actually curious if we could trade favors.

Maddie: ... I’m intrigued. What do you need?

Juliet: I’m trying to help out a friend. Any chance you can make a speeding ticket go away?

Maddie: Maybe. What’s in it for me?

Juliet: What do you want?

Maddie: How about a date? A real one, not a booty call, though sex at the end of the night wouldn’t suck.

Juliet: ... Jesus, you too?

Maddie: Huh?

Juliet: Nothing. Maddie, I’ll take you out if you want, but I’ll be honest; I really don’t have those kinds of feelings for you.

Maddie: Yea, I know you don’t. But there’s this new ADA who keeps trying to ask me out, and won’t take the hint. So when I get seen being touchy-feely with a girl in the bar my coworkers frequent, he’ll finally leave me alone.

Juliet: ... so I need to be your escort for the night.

Maddie: That’s a rather dismal way to look at it. But yes.

Maddie: It’s drinks. And dinner. We do a little bit of obvious PDA, split the bill, and go back to my place for the night.

Maddie: I know you don’t like it, but I really want this guy to get the message. And I don’t have anyone else I can ask.

Juliet: Have you considered just telling him that you’re gay?

Maddie: I don’t bring my sexuality to work. Unlike some of these people, I keep it professional.
**Juliet:** And you’ll make the speeding ticket go away?

**Maddie:** Send me the ticket number. I’ll have a clerk lose the paperwork.

**Juliet:** ... fine. I’ll get back to you.

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**Juliet:** I just left the deposition.

**Max:** How did it go?

**Juliet:** Like I said it would. Your father came up with six different ways to ask me who my source was, and I told him six different times that I wasn’t going to tell him.

**Max:** ... thank you.

**Juliet:** Thanks aren’t necessary, Max. Comes with the job.

**Max:** And you’re sure you won’t get in trouble?

**Juliet:** Please. I would LOVE to get charged for not revealing a source. Do you have any idea how much my credibility would skyrocket if I got thrown in jail for that?

**Max:** That seems extreme.

**Juliet:** Yea, it won’t happen. That’s “threat to national security” level of desperation.

**Max:** So, what happens now?

**Juliet:** Nothing. I go get some lunch, and your father goes back to Oregon. He made a very long drive, spent a fair amount of money, and has nothing to show for it.

**Max:** Wow. I wonder how the other Elders will feel about that.

**Max:** What about the compound?

**Juliet:** The Tacoma city council passed a resolution that killed the purchase deal. Your old church tried to fight it, but they didn’t have much of a leg to stand on, since the city owned that land.

**Juliet:** They also weren’t impressed with the answers Richard Jefferson came up with for their questions. They couldn’t answer questions about their “Media Studio”, or why they were wiring power to weird places around the grounds, or how emergency services would be able to access the property.

**Max:** Power wiring? What was that about?

**Juliet:** The city inspectors took a closer look at the plans. They think First Light going to be putting in some serious compound defenses, but Jefferson wouldn’t answer any questions at the meeting about it.

**Juliet:** My favorite quote from the session might be when the one councilwoman told them “This was a bad idea when David Koresh did it, and the concept hasn’t improved with age.”

**Max:** LOL
Juliet: Yea. She’s definitely got my vote.

Juliet: Lunch. Every day next week.

Darcy: Huh?

Juliet: I just saved you six hundred bucks. You’re buying me lunch every day next week.

Darcy: OMG THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU!!!

Juliet: I want that chicken curry stuff from the Indian place you always go to on Monday.

Darcy: Those are leftovers from the dinner I have with my parents on Sundays. My mother cooks that chicken for me special.

Juliet: Six hundred dollars.

Juliet: And you don’t even want to KNOW what I had to do to make it go away.

Darcy: Okay, okay. I’ll have her make an extra one.

Juliet: Good.

Darcy: What DID you do?

Juliet: I had to sell my body.

Darcy: Come on, seriously.

Juliet: You know, someday I’m going to tell you the truth up front, and you still won’t believe me.

Darcy: Yea, yea.

Juliet: I need you to tell me something.

Angela: What?

Juliet: Say you had someone who would go on camera for the First Light story. What kind of coverage would it be looking at?

Angela: National, most likely. It’s an interesting story, so we would probably push it for a Sunday special.

Angela: Do you have some people?

Juliet: Possibly. But they would be putting themselves in very real danger by talking to you. Would you be willing to disguise voices and identities?

Angela: Not for all of them. We would need at least two former parishioners willing to go on-camera, or else we could get accused of yellow journalism. Ideally three.

Juliet: What about people who aren’t from the church? I could try to get the DA who prosecutes
them. Or the social workers who’ve taken custody of the kids who run away.

**Angela:** We’d probably want to talk to them, too. But they won’t have the same impact as people who can give first-hand accounts.

**Angela:** Why am I telling you this? I know you know how this works.

**Juliet:** ... the primary source is a friend of mine.

**Angela:** For real?!

**Juliet:** Yes. She ran away when she was sixteen, and spent years living on the streets. It took her a long time to get where she is now. She just got engaged a couple of months ago. And she’s gotten death threats, most likely because of that article I wrote. Those fuckers actually left a dead cat on her doorstep.

**Angela:** Shit. I had no idea.

**Juliet:** These are bad people, Ang. She wants to hit them hard. But before we talk seriously about this, I need you to promise that your station will do everything they can to keep her location a secret from these psychos.

**Angela:** We won’t ask her anything about where she lives now. And we’ll give her every opportunity to back out before we air the story.

**Juliet:** That’s it?

**Angela:** She’d have to go on camera, Jules. Unless you want to convince her to go into Witness Protection, the level to which we can protect her is limited.

**Juliet:** ... fair enough.

**Angela:** I’ll call you in a little bit. We can talk more about this.

**Juliet:** No. I’ll make a throwaway Skype account and call you. I want to be very careful about how we go about this.

**Angela:** You got it.
Kate & Victoria: Oops

Victoria’s eyes never left the laptop, as she jiggled her foot and waited for an update.

“Here you go.” Kate put bottle of water down in front of her. “Anything?”

“No.” Victoria sighed, as she took the bottle and unscrewed the cap. “If they’re on their way here, it could be hours, depending on the train.”

“The train?” Kate frowned. “Chloe has a truck.”

“First thing she’s doing is leaving it somewhere. They’ll only be taking public transport, and they’ll be paying in cash.”

“You guys put a lot of thought into this.”

Victoria shrugged. “It was mostly Chloe’s stepdad. He came up with the plan, and gave her the emergency cash.”

“Has he heard back, about the private investigator?”

“If he has, he hasn’t told—” her computer beeped, distracting her. She let out a long sigh as she slouched into her chair. “They’re with Steph.”

“Oh, thank God.” Kate took her spot behind Victoria’s shoulder again. “Wait, she’s not—”

“That was the phrase we’re supposed to use if they’re there.” Victoria typed out her answer to Steph’s question. “Hopefully we’ll get some answers soon.”

They stood quietly, reading the texts as they flew across the screen. “That’s a good point,” Victoria said with a frown. “Where would this woman get a posed photo of Max?”

**Steph:** Victoria, are your wedding pictures on Facebook?

The two of them exchanged looks of horror.

“Oh no,” Kate gasped quietly.

“Fuck.” Victoria hammered out her text. “Babe—”

“On it.” Kate ran back to the couch and grabbed her laptop, opening it and quickly navigating to her Facebook page. “Oh, God, she’s in the group photo on my profile picture.”

“Delete it,” Victoria told her. “And every other photo she’s in. And every comment and tag that mentions her name.” She slammed both of her fists down on the table in anger. “And she’s all over my profile, too. FUCK!!”

**Victoria:** I am so sorry.

**Steph:** Don’t worry about it. I’m sure they’d understand.

**Victoria:** You think so?

**Steph:** We can ask them when we see them. But yea, I think so.
That doesn’t make me feel better, she thought miserably.

“Oh, God.”

“What?”

Kate looked back at her with wide eyes. “Thirty people shared the group photo she’s in,” she said quietly.

“Get their names. We need to call them, too.” Victoria opened her Facebook page and started going through her photos. “Christ, a bunch of people shared them from my page. Including my mom and dad.”

Kate didn’t respond; she already had her phone to her ear. “Alyssa? I need your help,” she said quickly. “That photo we’ve been sharing on Facebook, the one that’s got Max in it? I need you to delete it. And all the other photos with- yes, Alyssa, right now!”

Victoria had her phone in her hands, typing out her own text.

**Victoria:** I need you guys to go through your Facebook pages and delete all the photos that have Max in them ASAP.

**Taylor:** Why?

**Dana:** What for?

**Victoria:** Someone tracked Max down through the wedding photos. Her and Chloe are in hiding.

**Courtney:** Shit. Okay, on it.

**Dana:** Is she all right?

**Victoria:** Don’t know. Still not sure who it is yet.

**Courtney:** Is there anything else we can do?

**Victoria:** If you recognize anyone else who shared the photo, call them and have them remove it. We’re kind of in a jam.

**Taylor:** You got it.

“I never realized that she was the same girl.”

“It was,” Victoria bit her lip. “Sorry, Dad. I guess I should have said something.”

“I remember you making such a huge thing out of going to Portland that weekend. But I completely forgot her name. I feel terrible.”

“It’s our fault,” Victoria assured him. “We completely spaced when we put those photos online.”

“Don’t beat yourself up over it, sweetie. Anybody could have made that mistake.” He paused. “Your mother and I will delete the photos. And I’ll have Kimiko get in touch with our friends’ assistants, to have them do the same.”
Victoria heaved a sigh of relief. “Thanks, Dad.”

“How is Max doing? Other than the obvious, I mean.”

“She’s much better, away from those assholes. Her girlfriend’s an absolute rock, and pretty damn scary in her own way.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” She almost felt her father smile. “And it feels good to know that my instincts were correct.”

Victoria frowned. “What does that mean?”

“Don’t worry about it, sweetie. I have to go. Like I said, we’ll take care of those photos.”

She sighed, as she got off the phone. “My dad’s going to take down the photos he can,” she informed Kate. “And Kimiko will call his friends’ people. How are you coming along?”

“I got most of the pictures with her off our Facebook accounts,” Kate replied. “I’m just double-checking the photos for any tags we missed.”

Victoria’s laptop beeped. She quickly read the texts, frowning. “What is it?” Kate asked, looking up.

“Steph said we can...” she stopped. “What the hell?”

“What?”

“You have got to be fucking kidding me.” Victoria started typing. “I know the girl who was tracking down Max.”

Kate’s eyebrows shot up. “Excuse me?”

“It’s not a private investigator. It’s a reporter we went through high school with.” Victoria leaned back in her chair. “Juliet fucking Watson. Go figure.”

“Who is she?”

“Real bulldog of a reporter who works for the Seattle Times,” Victoria explained, as she followed the conversation on her laptop. “Wow. Apparently she wanted to interview Max, to get background on a story about a new church First Light is opening in Tacoma.”

Kate stood and walked around behind Victoria. “So... Max isn’t in any danger?”

“Doesn’t look like it.”

“Thank God.” She paused. “Did Juliet say how she found her?”

Victoria quickly typed out the question. Steph replied back immediately. “Ah, hell.”

“Crap.” Kate sighed, as she went back to her laptop. “Please tell Max that we’re sorry.”

“Will do.”

Victoria: I am SO sorry, Chloe.

Chloe: Don’t worry about it. We didn’t think about it, either.
Chloe: We probably should have said something before the wedding.

Victoria: We got all of the photos taken off Facebook. Kate has been double- and triple-checking everything, to make sure they’re all gone.

Chloe: Appreciate it.

Chloe: Seriously, don’t beat yourself up over it. Shit happens. And at least it wasn’t First Light.

Victoria: Thankfully. Are you and Max back home?

Chloe: Yea, we took our phones out of the Faraday bag ten minutes ago. We missed a few calls.

Victoria: No shit. Everyone was freaking out for a minute.

Victoria: I don’t think any of us really ever expected to see that code word actually used. I just thought you were being paranoid.

Chloe: Better safe than sorry.

Chloe: Hang on. Am I hearing right, that Kate took your last name?

Victoria: Um, yea? How did you know that?

Chloe: Kate’s texting Max. She’s groveling, too.

Chloe: That’s cool. I figured she would hyphenate or something.

Victoria: So did I, honestly. We had a big talk about it, though. She said that my parents were better to her, and she doesn’t really want to be tied to her mother anymore.

Victoria: She’s officially a Chase now.

Chloe: Damn, Vic. You done charmed her but good.

Victoria: Will you PLEASE stop calling me that? I REALLY don’t like it.

Chloe: Well, I do. And the fact that it bugs you makes me feel warm and fuzzy.

Victoria: ...

Victoria: Hey, you know what would be funny?

Max: Uh... what?

Victoria: If you swiped Chloe’s phone from her, so she couldn’t answer.

Victoria: Then called it, to leave a message.

Max: Why would this be funny, exactly?

Victoria: Trust me? Please?
Max: This is really weird, but okay.

Chloe: FUCKING SNITCH

Victoria: ... SO warm and fuzzy.
August 2019. Concurrent with ch 59 of EtL.

Brooke felt like she was walking on eggshells for three days after Regina’s nightmare.

It took almost two days for Regina to bounce back from her bad dream. By Wednesday evening, she was almost back to normal. “I am so tired of the Civil War,” she muttered as she did her summer classwork on the coffee table.

“Yea, I know.” Emily rolled her eyes, as she played with her phone on the couch. “How inconsiderate of Abraham Lincoln, to insist on freeing all the slaves at the cost of our homework.”

“Oh, hush.” Regina ran her fingers through her hair, as she stared at her textbook. “Unless you want to educate me on the Gettysburg Address.”

“It was a very famous speech,” Brooke offered helpfully.

“Thank you so much.” Regina shook her head. “You finished my homework in six words.”

“Oh?” Brooke glanced at her. “Does that mean we can turn the TV back on?”

Regina sighed, as she glanced over her books. “Know what? Sure,” she allowed. “I did my fair share for the night. Can we watch Grey’s Anatomy?”

Emily put her phone down and picked up the remote for the DVR. “You remember which one we were on?”

“The one where there’s a love triangle of some kind,” Brooke replied. “And the one doctor says or does something that gets hilariously misinterpreted by the others.”

“Oh, good, you’ve narrowed it down to the entire fucking series.”

Regina and Brooke snickered as Emily worked the remote, and they settled back to watch the show.

For about a half-hour, anyway. That was when Brooke noticed the headlights sweep across the windows. She glanced over as another set of lights shined through, a second car pulling into the driveway. Frowning, she craned her neck... and her heart dropped into her stomach.

The first car was Miss Amber’s; she watched the social worker get out, Miss Hemingway exiting the passenger seat. The second car, though, was a police cruiser. Two female officers walked up to the social workers, the four of them exchanging brief words before heading for the door.

“What’s that?” Regina frowned, looking at Brooke. “Is someone here?”

“It’s Miss Amber.” Brooke turned back to them. “She brought her boss. And a couple of cops.”

Regina frowned as her brow furrowed in confusion. Emily’s face immediately drained of color, as a knock sounded at the door.

Jane let everyone in, and the adults all filed into the living room slowly. Emily paused the show, as Brooke tried to keep her heart rate below three digits. “Miss Amber?” she asked. “What’s going on?”
“We need to talk to Regina.” The social worker looked between the three of them. “Brooke, Emily, you guys need to head upstairs. Go to your room, and close the door.”

Regina got a very worried look on her face, as Brooke and Emily exchanged glances. They both stood and headed upstairs without a word.

They did as asked, and closed the door to their room. Then they immediately sat down and leaned against the door, to try and listen.

They caught most of the conversation; the story Miss Amber fed Regina, about investigating her husband for statutory rape, and the teenager’s hysterical denials. As the pitch of her voice became higher and higher, the conversation got more difficult to follow. When the crying started, Emily tucked her knees up and hugged herself.

“Did we fuck up?” she asked quietly.

Brooke sniffed, trying to wipe the tears from her eyes. “I don’t know,” she admitted, her voice cracking.

It was about an hour, before they heard Regina’s sobbing fade and the front door close. Brooke picked her head up as Emily slowly stood, going over to the window. “They’re leaving.”

“Where’s Regina?” Brooke asked. “Is she with them?”

“I can’t tell.” Emily looked back at her. “It’s too dark, I can’t see much. I think so, though.”

They heard the footsteps in the hall, and turned around as Jane opened the bedroom door. “You girls can come out now,” she said gently.

“What happened?” Brooke asked, as she stood. “Where’s Regina?”

“Miss Amber and Miss Hemingway are taking her to a hospital,” Jane informed them. “She’s pretty upset. They’re going to have her evaluated by a professional.”

Emily and Brooke exchanged glances. Neither of them responded, or made any move towards the door.

“She’s going to be fine,” Jane insisted. “They’re just being careful. It...” she paused. “It wasn’t an easy conversation.”

“Yea.” Brooke sighed, as she sat down on the bed and pulled out her phone. “Thanks, Jane.”

“The two of you did nothing wrong.”

Miss Amber came back the next morning, and immediately sat Brooke and Emily down on the couch. She was on the coffee table, leaning forward onto her knees as she met their gazes.

“I’m sure you guys feel bad,” she continued. “But that was not a secret that you were supposed to keep. That was something we needed to know, so we could act on it.”

“Where’s Regina?” Emily asked quietly.
At a mental health facility in Portland.” Miss Amber nodded. “The on-call doctor saw her last night. She’s been diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and the staff admitted her.”

Brooke felt a cold spot forming in her gut. “So she’s been committed,” she muttered.

“No, she is not committed.” Miss Amber gave her an exasperated look. “She is receiving the help that she needs. Help that she would not have gotten if you two hadn’t let us know what happened. You guys did exactly the right thing.” She paused. “And I know Max told you so.”

Brooke looked up. “How’d you know that?”

“Max and I talk a lot, too.” Miss Amber smirked. “She’s one of my best friends.”

“What about...” Emily hesitated. “The guy who... you know.”

“The police arrested him late last night,” Miss Amber assured her. “They’re charging him with a slew of crimes, including Rape. His son was also arrested and charged with Statutory Rape, Accessory After The Fact, and Obstructing Justice.”

“So they’re going to jail,” Emily stated.

“They are.” Miss Amber straightened up. “I spoke with the District Attorney this morning, actually. Between the doctor’s reports and Regina’s statement, he has more than enough to charge the two of them. And once the baby is born, they’re going to conduct a paternity test. Regina is still a minor, so when it comes back that that man is the father...” Miss Amber paused. “He’s not going to get out of jail for a long time. If at all.”

“Mm.” Emily dropped her gaze to her lap.

“Can we visit her?” Brooke asked. “Or call?”

Miss Amber shook her head. “Not yet,” she explained. “In a few weeks, yes, but right now she needs to focus on getting better.”

“Does she know that we sold her out?” Brooke asked quietly.

“No.” Miss Amber shook her head again. “And there’s no reason to tell her.”

Brooke and Emily exchanged silent glances.

“Girls, I know you two feel guilty, but telling her it was you won’t do her any good,” Miss Amber stressed. “It might make you feel better, but it won’t help her. And you two are her only friends right now; if she refuses to speak with you anymore...” she let the sentence trail off, the ending unsaid.


“Look, you two did the right thing.” Miss Amber nodded. “I want you to-”

“Martin Parker.”

Miss Amber looked at Emily. The teenager’s gaze was still fixed on her lap. “I’m sorry?”

“Emily?” Brooke leaned forward, to try and look her in the eye, but the blonde wouldn’t meet her gaze. “What are you doing?”

“I can’t sit here and feel like I did the right thing if I won’t even sack up for myself.” Emily picked at
her nails, refusing to make eye contact with either of them. “My husband’s name, the one you were asking for when you came and got me from the hospital. It’s Martin Parker.”

Miss Amber blinked, staring at Emily. After a few seconds, she slowly turned to look at Brooke. “I need you to give us a few minutes,” she told her quietly.

“No.” Emily looked up as Brooke was halfway out of her seat. “I want her here.”

Brooke looked at her hesitantly. “Are you sure?”

Emily nodded. “You’re my best friend, remember?”

Brooke glanced at Miss Amber, who tentatively nodded. She scooted over next to Emily before she sat back down. She slowly took Emily’s hand as the blonde teenager took a shallow breath, before she started talking.

**Dad:** They got him.

**Rachel:** Martin?

**Dad:** Yep. Brought him into custody a few hours ago. One of my ADAs just came back from speaking to him.

**Rachel:** Do you think he’ll go to jail? I know it’s been a while, since Emily ran away.

**Dad:** Under normal circumstances, I would say probably not. Even given Emily’s age, a fair amount of time has passed, and bringing charges after so long can be very difficult.

**Dad:** But Mr. Parker and his family have made some very serious mistakes.

**Rachel:** Like what?

**Dad:** Well, for starters, a photo of his wedding to Emily is hanging on the wall of their house.

**Rachel:** Are you serious?!?

**Dad:** Yes, we had a good chuckle when Chief Watson told us that. Which eliminated a concern that they would deny everything.

**Dad:** The second, of course, was talking without a lawyer.

**Rachel:** Ryan Caulfield didn’t swoop in to save the day?

**Dad:** Ryan is stretched a little thing, between Brooke’s case and Regina’s attackers. So, no, he didn’t make an appearance, and Mr. Parker didn’t ask for a lawyer after he was mirandized.

**Dad:** The biggest error is admitting that he was in a relationship with Emily.

**Rachel:** A “relationship”? Ew.

**Dad:** Not so plainly. The ADA I sent over is very, very good at manipulating suspects.

**Dad:** She basically insinuated that Emily cheated on Mr. Parker with another man, because he wasn’t good enough for her. Mr. Parker didn’t take kindly to the accusation and became quite
indignant. He insisted repeatedly that the only man Emily ever slept with was him.

**Rachel:** ... wow.

**Dad:** Indeed. He's sitting in a cell right now, while we do the paperwork to file charges with the judge.

**Dad:** Listen, we don’t want to have to call Emily as a witness. If her experience was anything like Regina’s...

**Rachel:** Yea, if you guys could avoid that, it would be great.

**Dad:** We’re going to encourage him to plead out, so she doesn’t have to. But it means he’ll get a reduced sentence.

**Rachel:** If it keeps Emily from the stand, then it’s worth it. Besides, I think hearing that Martin was charged will be very helpful.

**Dad:** How is she?

**Rachel:** If you didn’t know her, you’d never suspect anything was wrong. She’s such a strong kid, and I don’t have a clue where she gets it.

**Dad:** I imagine her social worker has a little something to do with it.

**Rachel:** ... I’m just trying to keep these kids safe.

**Dad:** And you’re doing an incredible job. I’m very proud of you.

**Rachel:** Thanks, Dad.
July-September 2019. Concurrent with ch 56-59 of EtL.

“It doesn’t work.”

“Yes, it does.”

“No, it DOESN’T.”

“Yes, it DOES.”

Steph watched in amusement, as Jesse and Lars argued in the conference room while they waited for Mark to join them. Their boss had called a meeting for all of them, first thing in the morning, but was running late. Her coworkers had taken the opportunity to get into it about a piece of concept art Lars had made for an upcoming game.

The premise they were arguing about was the main character. Lars had produced a sketch of a girl in her mid-twenties who was going to develop supernatural powers. As soon as Jesse had seen it, though, she’d vetoed the drawing based on the girl’s haircut. “You can’t give a girl who’s supposed to be ‘average’ an undercut,” she argued. “The players won’t empathize with her. She needs normal hair.”

“It is a very popular style these days,” Lars shot back. “I found a picture of a model rocking the undercut in Vogue.”

“A model is the exact opposite of ‘average’,” Jesse pointed out. “Give her a regular shoulder-length cut. Or a ponytail. Or a bob.”

“That’s boring.” Lars crossed his arms. “We don’t do boring. The girl is SUPPOSED to be interesting.”

“Then why doesn’t she have any tattoos?” Jesse gestured at the picture in front of her. “You gave her a punk haircut with no tattoos. She needs at least a little something on her arm. Which, again, does not make her ‘average’.”

“This is coming from YOU?!” Lars asked incredulously, looking pointedly at the ink on Jesse’s neck.

Jesse rolled her eyes. “I never claimed to be ‘average’.”

“Okay, we need a tiebreaker.” Lars looked at Steph. “Your people know fashion, right?”

“What the fuck?” Steph looked at him incredulously. “Why the hell are you asking me? ‘Your people’? Do I LOOK like a fashion expert?”

“If you’re not, you should give your lesbian membership card back,” he joked.

“Blow me. Let me take a look.” Steph accepted the paper, examining the drawing. “Okay... I’m gonna concur with Jesse, that she doesn’t really fit the description of ‘average’. At least, not without any tattoos or odd coloring in her hair.”
Jesse smirked, as she leaned back. “Told you.”

“BUT, I think it works for the premise of the game,” Steph added. “I mean, the premise is that a girl who’s basically a side character in her own story develops superpowers after the apocalypse starts, right?”

Lars nodded. “There’s a couple of steps in between, but yea, that’s pretty accurate.”

“Well, then the story isn’t really about a girl who’s ‘average,’ she pointed out. “It’s about a girl who doesn’t have a strong sense of direction, and can’t decide what she wants to do. When shit starts to get real, she becomes one of the ‘chosen’, or whatever, and she finds her destiny.” Steph handed the paper back. “In that context, I can buy the undercut. It’s a pretty faddish hairstyle that a lot of girls try; exactly the kind of thing someone who isn’t sure of herself would do.”

Jesse’s face twisted, as she struggled to come up with an argument. Lars just nodded. “I might need you to say that all again, in an email,” he told her. “Just to help me sell it.”

Mark opened the door and walked in before she could retort. “Sorry,” he said hurriedly, closing the door and locking it behind him. “I was having printer problems.” He began passing out papers to the three of them. “You guys all need to sign these before we begin.”

Jesse frowned as she examined the paper. “An NDA? Really? I signed one this year already.”

“This is a new one, straight from Legal,” Mark told her. “They want to make sure we’re extra-covered, on top of our standard NDA. This is big shit.”

They all signed quickly, passing them back to Mark, who collected them in a folder. “So what’s this big thing?” Jesse asked.

“The top floor finalized a deal with Sony,” he started. “The CTO is in Tokyo right now, meeting with some very high-ranking people at Sony HQ. He’s coming back in two days.” He paused. “And he’ll be bringing a PlayStation Five development kit back with him.”

Steph froze, her mouth dropping open as she absorbed what her boss had just said. The development kits were prototype machines, given exclusively to video game companies. They mimicked all of the hardware and software that would be packaged with the console, to let developers create games prior to release. “We got our hands on a PS5 dev kit?!” Jesse asked. “Are you shitting me? I didn’t think they were available yet!”

“I shit you not. We’re one of the first stateside companies to get them. The lead programmer got a hard-on when they said that in the board meeting today.” Mark grinned. “And that’s only part of the big news.”

“Seriously?!” Steph leaned forward. “What’s the rest of it?”

“We were able to finagle the deal because our CEO managed to convince Sony that we would have a launch title that was worthy of the new system,” Mark said. “He head-hunted some of the best writers in the business, and they’ve been working on a script for months.”

Lars leaned forward as well. “What kind of game?”

“An open-world linear story game,” Mark answered. “I met the writers he hired, and guys... this is going to be big.” He grinned. “The team has experience from The Last Of Us, Horizon: Zero Dawn, and Detroit: Become Human.”
“Jesus Christ,” Jesse breathed. “This game’s gonna be a blockbuster. What do we know about it?”

“I got a few notes.” Mark picked up a piece of paper and scanned it. “It’s set a couple of decades in the future, in a post-apocalyptic setting following an alien invasion of Earth. The story is going to follow the leader of a group of people attempting to overthrow the invaders.”

“What do they want from us?” Steph asked.

“The need concept art for the animators.” He glanced between them. “I wanted my best working on this, which is why you’re all here. If any of the others ask what you’re working on, you’re to tell them you’re bound by a secondary NDA. They push you on it, you tell me. And I want each of you guys working on different characters.”

He looked at Lars. “You’re on the protagonist,” he told him. “You have absolute free reign. Gender, race, looks, all of it is dealer’s choice. But they want someone who looks capable of leading a valiant, last-ditch offensive consisting of Earth’s last soldiers.”

Lars nodded. “Got it.”

“Jesse, you’re on the secondary characters,” Mark said next. “They’ll want at least three, possibly up to five or six. You don’t have any constraints either, but you should know that they’re exploring a possible multiple-choice romance storyline between your characters and the protagonist, so you need to work with Lars closely.”

“Okay.” Jesse leaned forward. “Are they soldiers, civilians, what?”

“Take your pick. They’re still polishing the story, so they’ll take whatever ideas we can give them.” He turned to Steph last. “I want you to work on the antagonist.”

Steph looked at him, startled. “Like, the actual big bad evil guy? The alien boss?”

“Yep.” Mark nodded. “I have an information sheet I can give you about him. And they do specify that it will be a masculine character,” he added. “I want you to make him based on that info.”

“… okay, then.” Steph accepted the paper he handed her. “I can take this with me, right?”

“The writers and Legal sanitized it,” he assured her. “Just, you know, keep it off Facebook. And that applies to all of you,” he emphasized. “Of everyone that works here, I’m sure I don’t have to remind you three about that, but after Patrick…”

They all winced, as he let the sentence hang. Patrick had been one of their new artists, hired earlier that year. But he’d gotten too excited, after one of his designs had been selected for an upcoming game, and he’d posted the picture to Facebook with the game’s title. It had picked up by at least one spoiler site before he’d taken it down. He’d been terminated for violating the NDA as a result, and as far as they knew, he wasn’t having any luck finding new work.

“And this is a lot bigger than leaked concept art,” Mark continued. “This game is on Presidential Security level of lockdown. If one of you blows this for us, they might fire me too, just on principle.”

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This is bullshit.

Steph was sitting at her kitchen table while she glared at the character sheet in frustration, three days later. She’d been given two weeks to come up with the design, and so far, she had nothing.
I’m better than this, she thought angrily. I come up with character ideas over drinks in a bar, for fuck’s sake. Why is this guy giving me so many problems?

I mean, aside from the fact that’s he’s going to be the antagonist of what may very well be a Game of the Year. And a PlayStation Five launch title, to boot.

So, no pressure.


Religious zealot. She smirked. I should know a little something about that.

Right. He’s basically a combination of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Pope. Her hand moved idly along the tablet, the stylus almost drawing the initial shape on its own as she thought. He needs to be a character people can empathize with, not some asshole who wants to tear shit up because he’s a sociopath. So I can’t make him too ugly.

Wonderful. I’m shooting for the video game version of Thanos.

She worked for a few minutes before her ringtone startled her so much that she jumped in her seat. Steph cursed, glaring at the line she’d just messed up from her stylus jerking across the screen.

“Dammit.” She quickly hit the Undo button on her tablet before she picked up her phone, her eyebrows going up in surprise. “Whoa. Haven’t heard from him for a while,” she commented as she answered it. “Hello?”

“Good afternoon, Miss Gingrich. How are you?”

“I’m okay, Mister Harding.” She leaned back in her chair as she tried to remember the last time she’d actually spoken to the private investigator. “You?”

“I’m fine, thanks. I’m sorry I haven’t called for a while.”

“It’s okay. I figured you were busy.”

“Well, I have been. Which is actually the reason I called you.”

Steph leaned forward in her chair, now alert. “Did... you find something?”

“Possibly.” She heard papers shuffling around. “Now, as I said last time we spoke, I was going to start looking into attendance rosters from motorcycle rallies that took place in San Bernardino during early 1993, to see if there might have been some evidence of your mother’s attendance.”

“Right, I remember.” Steph nodded, trying not to get her hopes up. “Did you?”

“I’m afraid not,” he lamented. “So I expanded the search, going six months in either direction... I hope you’ll forgive me, but you did say your mother wasn’t sober when she told you about the rally.”

“Yea, she was three-quarters through a handle of Jack Daniels.”

Harding snorted in amusement. “A woman after my own heart. Anyway. The attendance sheets weren’t online for some of them, but there were quite a few photos that I looked through. I was checking a rally that took place in late 1992, and... well, Miss Gingrich, I may have found him.”
Steph’s heart rate spiked, and she started blinking rapidly. “Are you serious?”

“I want to emphasize the word MAY, Miss Gingrich. It’s hardly concrete. But there is a group photo of the San Bernardino chapter of the Hell’s Angels. One of the riders has a woman sitting on the back of his motorcycle who I would swear was your mother.”

“Holy shit.”

“Again, Miss Gingrich, it’s not concrete. The photo was taken in the early nineties, so the quality is rather poor. And the woman is wearing sunglasses.” He paused. “I couldn’t find a better picture of her. But I did find another picture of the rider, one that was taken at a much closer range with a much better camera. Could you check your email, please?”

“Hang on.” Steph grabbed her laptop and opened it, quickly loading her email program. She found a new message from Harding waiting for her. “Are those the photos?”

“They are.”

She opened the first one and examined it closely. Harding had been right, the quality wasn’t great; she could only zoom in so much before it became too blurry. But the woman in the sunglasses did bear a striking resemblance to a younger version of her mother. “I think you’re right,” she said quietly. “I’d put money on it, that’s my mom.”

“And the man? Do you happen to recognize him?”

She opened the second photo. A large man with dark hair and a full beard looked back at her. “No,” she said immediately. “I’ve never seen him before. Who is he?”

“His name is Michael Thompson, according to the photo archives of the San Bernardino Hell’s Angels website. Unfortunately, he’s not listed as a current member.”

Steph slumped in her chair. “So... is he... dead?”

“I don’t believe so, no.” Harding cleared his throat. “He isn’t featured on their ‘In Memory Of’ page. I had a friend in the SBPD check their records, and it looks like he simply left the Hell’s Angels some time ago. According to a more recent report, Mister Thompson is now a member of a motorcycle club called the Locos Lobos.”

She frowned. “Never heard of them.”

“They’re not an outlaw club like the Hell’s Angels, so you probably wouldn’t have.” Harding sounded amused. “Think less ‘Sons of Anarchy’ and more along the lines of ‘friends who ride and drink together every other weekend’. Your potential father appears to be a rather prominent member of their Santa Cruz chapter.”

“Santa Cruz?” Steph’s eyes widened. “That’s, like, an hour away from my apartment!”

“Yes, it is,” Harding agreed. “So you have a decision to make.”

“What decision?”

“To confirm whether or not Mister Thompson IS your father, we would need a paternity test,” he explained. “To ensure the integrity of the results, I would physically go see him and get a sample. That would fall under the ‘additional expenses’ clause of the payment contract you signed, I’m afraid, as would the test itself.”
“Oh. Right.” Steph bit her lip as she looked across the apartment at her TV; it was brand new, and had been more expensive than she’d originally planned for, so she was a little short of funds. “How much would it cost?”

“Between the trip and the test, you’re looking at about two hundred dollars.”

“Damn.” Steph sighed. “I wish you’d told me that a week ago.”

“Sorry about that.” He paused. “We don’t have to do it right away. He’s lived in Santa Cruz for twenty years, so it’s not likely that he’s going anywhere. You can save for the trip, if you’d like.”

Steph leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table. “How sure are you, that this is the guy?”

“Scale of one to ten...” he hesitated. “Seven. Maybe a soft eight.”

“You’re that sure?”

“Only because of your eyes,” he replied. “Your mother has brown eyes, which is normally the dominant trait, genetically. But your eyes are a rather distinctive shade of blue. And Mister Thompson’s are the same color. There are some other facial features that you two share, like cheekbones and ears, but the eyes are a big sell.”

She looked back at the open photo on her laptop. Harding was right, they did have similar shades of blue in their eyes.

“... Miss Gingrich?”

“Can I call you back?” she asked quietly. “I have to think.”

“Of course. Let me know what you decide.”

She hung up, focusing back on the laptop.

This guy could be my dad.

And he’s a former Hell’s Angel. Her stomach flip-flopped. Wonder how excited he’d be about having a kid, really. What if he tells Harding to fuck off?

I wonder if he already knows about me? Maybe he told my mom that he wasn’t interested in being a father

Maybe he used to beat my mom.

Maybe he adopts puppies and crochets scarves for the homeless. She ran her hands through her hair. Fuck.

Steph didn’t get much else done on the character that night. Nor did she get much sleep.

She mostly lay in bed, stuck thinking about the man who could be her father. Even fifteen years later, she could still remember what her mother said when she’d asked her about him.

“Your father?” Her mother had slurred. “Why do you want to know?”

“Everyone else talks about their dad,” Steph had answered quietly; even as a child, she knew not to talk too loudly when her mother had been drinking. “Robby’s even came to school to talk about his
job.”

“Well, he’s probably got a good dad.” Her mom had tilted the glass back, swallowing everything in it.

“Was mine a good dad?”

“I’m not sure who your dad is, sweetie.” Her mom shook her head. “But I don’t think he would have been a good one. Whoever he was, he wouldn’t have cared about you like I do. All he wanted was a quick lay.”

Steph, all of ten, had frowned. “What does that mean, Mommy?”

“Don’t worry about it.” She leaned forward, picking up the bottle of brown liquor and pouring some more into her glass.

“What was he like?”

“He was...” Her mom hesitated. “It doesn’t matter, sweetie. He’s not here, and I am. Now, go get Mommy the bottle of Coke from the fridge.”

Steph sighed, as she reached over to her nightstand and retrieved her phone. She brought her text messages up and clicked on Chloe’s name, pausing before she started typing.

Do I want to bug her about this?

...

Screw it. Won’t be the first time she listened to me vent. It’s only nine at night anyway, I’m sure she’s still awake.

Steph: I just heard from the PI. He may know who my dad is.

Six weeks later

“How sure?”

“The test came back with a probability of ninety-nine-point-nine-nine-nine-eight percent certainty,” Harding told her. “Congratulations, Miss Gingrich. You found your father.”

She slumped into the couch, too stunned to speak.

“I know, it’s a lot to take in.” Harding paused. “Do you want to take a few minutes? I can call you back.”

“No.” Steph shook her head to clear it. “Does... he know?”

“Not yet. I always call my client first,” Harding assured her. “But you do have some decisions to make.”

Steph frowned. “What decisions?”

“Well... you do want to meet him, right?”
“Yes,” she said immediately. “I mean, I spent enough money trying to find him.”

“True,” Harding acknowledged. “I can get back in touch with him. I’ll give him a copy of the paternity test, as well as the other DNA sample from you, in case he wants it verified at a second lab.”

“Um... can I ask...” Steph leaned forward onto her elbows as she looked at her coffee table. “How was he, when you saw him? And asked for a DNA sample?”

“He was actually very excited, when I told him why I was knocking on his door,” Harding informed her. “We spoke for a while in his house. I showed him your picture, and he got very emotional. He offered to submit to the paternity test before I could ask.”

“Wow.”

“Yes, I wasn’t expecting that,” Harding admitted. “I was able to dig up a little bit more about him. Would you like me to send it to you in an email?”

“Please.” Steph bit her lip. “So... what happens now?”

“Once he’s satisfied, I can act as an intermediary, and arrange a meeting. I usually recommend a restaurant or bar that isn’t very busy. Are you okay with that?”

Steph nodded. “Yes.”

“Very well. I’ll get ahold of him, then, and call you back with the details.”
Emily sat on the couch nervously, playing with her fingers as she rapidly bounced her foot up and down. “She’ll be okay, right?” she asked. “The judge won’t make her go back?”

Across from her, on the easy chair, Miss Amber sighed as she looked at Emily. “I don’t think so,” she replied. “Her lawyer seems pretty confident that she’ll stay in foster care.”

“Mm.” Emily went back to staring at the floor.

“She’ll be okay, Emily.” Miss Amber smiled reassuringly. “No matter what happens, Brooke will be fine.”

Emily bit her lip. “If you say so.”

The noise at the top of the stairs interrupted them. They tuned as Brooke walked down the stairs in slacks and a blazer, ready for her day in court. “How do I look?” she asked Miss Amber.

“Good.” The social worker stood from her seat. “You ready for this?”

“No.” Brooke sighed. “But let’s do it anyway.”

The ride to the courthouse was markedly silent. Neither Brooke or her social worker said a word. Rachel wanted to make small talk, as she drove, but she couldn’t come up with anything. She knew what she wanted to say, which was that everything would be all right, no matter what the judge ruled.

She had already made sure of that.

*There’s a gym bag in the trunk of my car, with some clothes and a thousand dollars. She mentally rehearsed the plan in her head. My keys have been clipped to the outside of my purse all day. If the judge rules for Ryan, I’ll take Brooke to the bathroom, give her my keys, and send her inside. The windows open to the parking lot; she can climb out and take my car to the bus station.*

*Then distract the others. Tell Ryan and her fuckhead grandfather that she went to the bathroom. Stall as long as you can, once they figure out she’s gone. My car? I don’t remember where I parked. Keys? Let me rifle through my purse... oh, shoot, I know they’re in here somewhere...*

*She exhaled slowly. Tell her to get as far as she can, she thought. Doesn’t matter where, as long as it’s away from Portland. Take the buses a few times at random, change clothes when she can. Her end destination is San Francisco. Tell her to take an Uber to the address in the bag, and tell the woman who answers the door that I sent her. Steph will know what to do.*

*Fuck, I hope we win this case.*

It would be the end of her career. Hell, she’d be lucky if she didn’t end up in jail. *Doesn’t matter,* she thought as she hardened her heart. *I made my promise already. I’m not breaking it. No matter what.*
Brooke had a backup plan, too. One that she knew for sure Miss Amber would not approve of.

Her main plan, of course, was the proof of First Light’s money laundering. She had pictures of the bank statements on her phone; if the judge threatened to rule against her, she planned to tell everyone there about her grandfather’s fraud.

But Emily had brought up a good point, when Brooke mentioned it. “What if he makes you go back with them anyway?” she’d asked, in a nervous tone.

Brooke had scoffed. “After I tell everyone that I have proof of his crimes? You don’t think the judge will worry about my grandfather killing me or something?”

“That boy Pastor Rogers beat up went back to his parent’s house, when he left the hospital.” Emily had bit her lip. “I don’t think the judge will make you go back. But I’m still worried.”

She had made a good point. Which was why Brooke had developed a second backup plan.

She’d originally seen the idea on a TV show. One where the camera crew went inside a prison, and were shown the different contraband the guards confiscated from the prisoners, including shivs. One of the guards had mentioned that the worst were the ones made out of plastic. They could be sharpened to a razor’s edge, and were completely invisible to metal detectors. Like the ones used by the courthouse security.

Brooke had found the stray piece of Plexiglas in Pete’s garage. Using some sandpaper, she’d sharpened it to a fine point, then wrapped duct tape around it to form a handle. She’d used another strip of duct tape to secure it to the inside of her forearm, so when she walked through the metal detectors, they stayed silent.

“It’s gonna be okay, Brooke.” Miss Amber smiled at her reassuringly, finally speaking as they walked down the hall. “You’re not going back.”

Brooke nodded. “I know,” she said quietly, trying not to think about the weapon taped to the inside of her arm.

*Don’t think about it. Don’t hesitate. Yell that you’re not going back, pull it out, and stick it in your neck.* She scratched her chin, a shiver going down her spine as she felt her carotid artery. You’ll bleed out in seconds, and be on the front page of the paper tomorrow. Probably traumatize everyone in that courtroom, too. She suppressed the smirk from crossing her face. *We’ll see if any judge in the state’s willing to send another kid back after that.*

“BROOKE!!”

She spun at the interruption to her thoughts, recognizing the voice; her mother was at the far end of the hall, restrained by Brooke’s father and her grandfather. “Let me go, LET ME GO!” she yelled, struggling against them. “I WANT TO SEE MY DAUGHTER!!”

Miss Amber immediately took Brooke’s elbow, guiding her away. Brooke spared the three of them one last look, focusing on her grandfather.

His face was calm, but his eyes betrayed his indignation, as he looked at his grand-daughter. Brooke imagined that her clothes, the red highlights in her hair, and the fact that she was ignoring the three of them made his hackles rise. His glare was certainly intense, and for a few heartbeats, she felt herself start to wither under his look.

So she channeled her inner Max Caulfield, raised one hand, and flipped him a middle finger.
His eyes narrowed, and his nostrils flared. She watched his face flush, but she knew her grandfather was too put-together to make a scene in public. Especially in a courthouse.

A hand grabbed her arm and forced it down. Brooke looked and saw Megan next to her, as she helped Miss Amber usher her around a corner. “We do not need to antagonize your grandfather any more than we already have,” she chastised Brooke quietly.

“Mm.” Brooke shrugged, as they walked. “Felt appropriate.”

“Nevertheless.” Megan brought them into a side room, closing the door behind her. “Have a seat. Our case will be heard in about thirty minutes.”

Brooke looked around the room. It was small, barely bigger than an office, and only had a table and a few chairs. She picked one of them and sat down, her lawyer sitting across from her. “So... now what?”

“I want to make sure we go over a few things beforehand.” Megan leaned forward. “This hearing is serious, Brooke, and there are some behaviors that you need to follow. The most important of which is that you not engage with your family or Ryan Caulfield.”

“What does that mean?”

“Don’t look at them, don’t speak to them, and don’t make any non-verbal gestures.” Megan smirked. “To include middle fingers.”

Miss Amber sat next to Brooke. “Judge Haskins takes his job very seriously, Brooke,” she stated. “Everything you do will be observed in that courtroom. And the judge’s decision is essentially final; you cannot give him any reason to think that you’re immature, or a liar.”

“You especially need to keep yourself under control when Doctor Ericson gives his testimony.” Megan picked the conversation back up. “He’s going to say some very bad and untrue things about you on the stand, that much we already know. You need to remain indifferent. If he gets a rise out of you in that courtroom, you’ll only feed his narrative.”

Brooke exhaled slowly. “So I can’t tell him that he’s an egotistical prick?”

“It certainly wouldn’t help your position.”

“But I’d be right.”

“Yes, you would.” Megan smirked. “But this is court, Brooke. It doesn’t matter if you’re right; it only matters if you win.”

Brooke did exactly what she was told.

When she entered the courtroom behind Megan, she kept her eyes caged forward, focusing on her lawyer’s shoulders. She ignored her mother, crying from across the aisle as she sat next to her father. And the other table, where her grandfather sat next to Ryan Caulfield. She didn’t spare them a glance, as she took her seat at the table next to Megan.

“Now what?” she whispered, as she scooted her chair in.

“Remember to drink water if you’re thirsty,” Megan whispered back, as she drew a couple of files from her briefcase and placed them on the table. “Keep your cool. And be respectful, if the judge
asks you a question.”

Brooke frowned. “Can he do that?”

“This is his courtroom. He can do whatever he wants.”

“ALL RISE!!”

The booming voice of the bailiff startled Brooke, but she managed to keep her composure as she stood beside Megan.

“Judge Robert Haskins, presiding,” the bailiff added as an older man in black robes entered the courtroom.

“Be seated.” The judge took his own chair, as everyone sat down. He produced a pair of reading glasses, as he studied the paper in front of him. “This is docket nineteen-three-four-seven, Scott versus Oregon. Is everyone present?”

Ryan stood. “Ryan Caulfield for the Scott family, your honor.”

Brooke watched Megan follow suit. “Megan Weaver for Oregon, your honor.”

The judge looked at her and frowned. “Miss Weaver. I thought you were private practice?”

“I’ve been contracted by Child Protective Services to act as the litigator for Brooke Scott,” Megan replied. “I’ll be representing her interests.”

“Your honor,” Ryan started. “We object fiercely that we’re even here. Brooke Scott is a minor, and her parents have been kept in the dark not only as to her whereabouts, but to what degree of anonymity she’s being given. She did not even pick Miss Weaver to act as her attorney.”

“The question of Miss Scott’s status is the reason we’re here, your honor,” Megan shot back. “Until YOU make the decision, not Mister Caulfield, Brooke is still under the guardianship of the state of Oregon. CPS has been making decisions in her best interests, as is their charge.”

“Your honor-”

Judge Haskins raised his hand, silencing Ryan. “We haven’t even started arguments, Mister Caulfield,” he chided. “And Miss Weaver is acting in good faith. Save your objections for later.”

Brooke fought hard to keep the smile from her face. Nice.

“Now, Mister Caulfield.” Haskins removed his reading glasses. “Unless there’s anything else, let’s get started.”
Brooke: Witnesses Against

Brooke had a hard time following most of what the two lawyers shot back and forth.

They spent almost an hour, it felt like, hammering out various arguments about her. She stayed silent throughout, only watching Megan as she went back and forth between Ryan Caulfield and the judge. Brooke did notice that for most of the arguments, Judge Haskins sided with Megan, which made her feel a lot better.

“You have witnesses, Mister Caulfield?” the judge finally asked.

“Yes, your honor.” Ryan nodded. “Pastor James Thompson, if we could.”

The man sitting next to Brooke’s parents stood up, shimmying his way towards the aisle as he came forward. He smiled kindly at Brooke, as he passed her.

She ignored it. Brooke knew it was an act. She’d seen him rant and rave from his pulpit, about how faggots and dykes were demons who would all burn in the hottest pits of hell for their wickedness. Miss Amber must be a big fan of his, she thought dryly as he took the stand.

“Pastor,” Ryan started, standing up to face him. “You know why we’re here today, correct?”

“I do.” Thompson nodded.

“How well do you know Brooke?”

“Very well, I would think. I witnessed her baptism, after she was born, and I was in charge of her youth prayer group when we met every Sunday.”

“So, for most of her life, you would say?”

Thompson nodded again. “I think that’s fair.”

“In what capacity have you interacted with her on a personal level?”

“Well.” Thompson leaned back in his chair. “I’ve spoken to her on many occasions over the last few years, starting when she was twelve.”

It took all of Brooke’s effort to maintain a neutral expression. LIAR, LIAR, PANTS ON FIRE, MOTHERFUCKER, she screamed in her head.

“For what purpose?”

Thompson cleared his throat. “I speak to a number of young adults in the church who have... difficulties,” he said. “From crises of faith to issues with their parents. Brooke is, simply put, one of a couple of dozen teenagers that has difficulty with their family.”

“What kind of difficulties?”

“Her attitude when she started growing up, for one, became very hostile towards her family,” Thompson stated. “Screaming matches between herself and her parents were not uncommon in the Scott household. Nor were physical fights between her and her older brother, which mostly consisted of her using him as a punching bag.”
I’m going to use YOU as a punching bag if I get a chance, Brooke fumed. Once I find a heavier baseball bat.

“And how many times did you and Miss Scott speak about her transgressions?”

Thompson looked up. “Oh, I would say we had at least a dozen or so sessions with her and her family.”

Ryan nodded. “And how was she during those sessions?”

“I’m afraid she was rather combative,” Thompson said mournfully. “She made very wild accusations, insulted her family and I, and refused to listen to anything we would try to say to her. I’m afraid that she’s a very disturbed youth.”

“Were you surprised, that she was taken by a Child Protective Services agent?”

“Not that she was able to convince them, no.” Thompson shook his head. “Brooke could certainly spin some very vivid tales about her troubles. I am surprised that a social worker would fall for them, though.” He paused. “I was under the impression that they received training in how to differentiate between exaggerations and people in real need of help.”

Brooke could feel the heat in her face. She ground her teeth and clenched her toes, and she wanted nothing more than to stand up and tell the Pastor that he was a lying son of a bitch.

Megan seemed to sense that, as Ryan thanked Thompson and sat back down. She gave Brooke’s arm a quick squeeze, as she stood. “Mister Thompson, may I-”

“Pastor Thompson,” he interrupted, correcting her snidely.

“Forgive me, Pastor. Though that leads me to my question.” Megan tilted her head. “What is your job in First Light of Christ?”

He blinked, surprised. “I’m sorry?”

“What role do you play, in the day-to-day operation of your church?”

“Objection, relevance,” Ryan called out.

Megan looked at the judge. “Given that he claims to have spent a lot of time with Miss Scott, your honor, I don’t think it’s inappropriate to ask him what, specifically, he does in the church.”

“Neither do I. Overruled.” Haskins nodded. “The witness will answer.”

Thompson leaned back in his seat. “Well, I prepare and deliver sermons, and perform ceremonies in accordance with our beliefs. And as I’ve said, I offer my counseling services to our parishioners and their families that need them.”

“That sounds like an important job,” Megan allowed. “Did you go to school for that? Or receive any religious training? At, say, a seminary?”

“No.” Thompson shook his head. “I was hired by our Head Pastor, Michael Rogers. Since he’s... indisposed, myself and Pastor Rogan assumed his duties.”

“No higher education?” Megan pressed. “I’m aware that Pastor Rogers had a degree in Religious Studies.”
Thompson shook his head again. “I learned by experience, not through school.”

“Mm.” Megan noded. “Go back to your sessions, if you could. What, exactly, did you and Brooke speak of?”

“Uh, objection.” Ryan stood again, a seemingly incredulous look on his face. “The specifics of Miss Scott’s sessions with Pastor Thompson are covered under at least two different kinds of privilege, your honor.”

Haskins nodded. “Miss Weaver, I’m afraid that I have to agree with-”

“Pastor Thompson is not a therapist, your honor,” Megan interrupted him. “Nor is he a psychologist, or any kind of medical professional. His sessions are not covered under doctor-patient confidentiality. Additionally, he stated that Brooke met him with her family, which means that it was not done in the sanctity of confession; ergo, he doesn’t have religious privilege, either.”

“It was still a private session with the Scott family,” Ryan protested.

“If Pastor Thompson is here testifying, your honor, then the Scott family has clearly waived any confidentiality they might have had,” Megan countered. “And that cuts both ways. The witness cannot answer Mister Caulfield’s questions, and then refuse to answer ours.”

“That’s... all very true.” Haskins pursed his lips. “Very well. The witness will answer.”

Brooke hid her smirk as Ryan sat back down, looking like he’d just swallowed a lemon while Thompson shifted in his seat. “Um, I’m sorry, what was-”

“You mentioned that Brooke made some wild accusations. What were the nature of those accusations?”

He paused. “Well, she claimed that she faced abuse, and that her brother-”

“What did the police say, when you reported that?”

Thompson blinked. “I’m sorry?”

Megan took a few steps closer to the witness box. “What did the police say when you reported that a teenager claimed that she was being abused at home?” she asked, speaking slowly. “As a member of the clergy in the state of Oregon, Pastor Thompson, you are a mandated reporter for suspicions of child abuse. Is a teenager claiming that her parents hit her not enough to warrant a phone call?”

His face flushed, and Brooke started to feel a little smug. “It was clearly obvious that Miss Scott was lying.”

“How so? The dresses your church mandates for female parishioners all have long sleeves. Only her hands and face were ever visible to you. Did you make her strip her clothes off?”

“No!” Thompson exclaimed, sounding offended. “Of course not!”

“Then how do you know that there weren’t hidden bruises? Cigarette burns?” She paused, turning and looking at him from the side of her eyes. “Whip marks?”

“Objection!” Ryan shot back to his feet. “Miss Weaver is badgering our witness, your honor, and has apparently forgotten that Pastor Thompson is not on trial for anything here.”

Haskins cleared his throat. “Miss Weaver, I think you’ve made the point you were aiming for.”
“Very well, your honor.” Megan paused. “What else was discussed in those sessions, Pastor?”

Thompson cleared his throat. “As I said, we made several attempts to curtail her compulsive lying, the screaming at her family, and the assaults on her brother.”

“Where she used him as a punching bag?”

“That’s correct.”

Megan cocked her head. “What were the nature of her brother’s injuries?”

“I’m... sorry?”

“What, exactly, did Brooke do to her brother?” Megan asked. “Did she punch him? Kick him?”

Thompson shifted on the stand, seemingly debating his answers in his head. “Both, I believe. I don’t recall the exact nature of her attacks on young Henry.”

“Mm hm.” Megan walked back to the table, retrieving a folder as she continued to speak. “Did Henry fight back?”

“No,” Thompson said immediately. “Henry was very brave, when his sister took her rage out on him.”

“I find that interesting, given his history.” Megan opened the folder. “How many times has Henry Scott been suspended from his high school for bullying?”

Brooke blinked in surprise. *Henry was suspended from school for bullying? Really?*

Thompson, for his part, looked equally confused. “I beg your pardon?”

“Objection, your honor,” Ryan said as he stood back up. “Henry Scott is not the focus of this hearing, and his history is irrelevant.”

“It goes to the witness’s credibility, your honor,” Megan countered. “And Pastor Thompson was the one who brought Henry Scott into this.”

“Fair enough. Overruled.” Haskins looked at Thompson. “Do you know the answer?”

Thompson shook his head. “I don’t.”

“That’s okay, I do.” Megan held up the folder. “According to the records we subpoenaed from Arcadia Bay High School, Henry was punished for bullying on four separate occasions. And there were multiple complaints made against him by other students. Did you know, Pastor Thompson, that he slammed a student’s hand in a locker door for bumping against him in the hallway?”

“No.”

“Were you aware that he smacked a phone out of another student’s hand hard enough to break it?” Megan turned the page. “Or that he shoved a student into a cinderblock wall for accidentally stepping on his foot?”

“Is it so hard to believe, Miss Weaver, that Henry has enough morals not to hit another girl?” Thompson asked boldly. “Or that he wouldn’t hit his sister?”

Megan closed the folder. “It is difficult, Pastor. Those three students in question were all girls under
the age of sixteen.”

Brooke hid her smug smirk by scratching her nose. *Fuckin’ got him.*

“Pastor, I think it’s fair to suppose through your lack of knowledge about any of this that you’ve never spoken to Henry about these issues,” Megan stated. “Do you think that parents who ignore their son’s blatant assaults are fit to look after another teenager? To bring their daughter, who weighs sixty pounds less than her brother, back into a home with a violent young adult?”

“Your honor, counsel is testifying,” Ryan said. Brooke noticed that he looked a lot less pleased than he had earlier.

“I’ll withdraw the question. I only have one more, anyway.” Megan paused. “You claim to know Brooke very well, on a personal level, going back to when she was born. Is that true?”

Thompson jerked his head in a nod, clearly not as comfortable as he’d been when Megan started questioning him. “It is.”

“When is her birthday?”

He did a double-take. “I...”

“If you were there for her baptism, and know her as well as you claim, surely you remember when she was born?” Megan asked.

He didn’t answer, his eyes shifting towards Ryan. Megan smoothly stepped between him and the other table, as she continued to speak. “I’ll grant that almost seventeen years have passed. Do you remember the month?”

Thompson took a deep breath through his nose. “I can’t seem to recall,” he finally stated. “It has been a while.”

Megan hummed before turning back to Haskins. “I have nothing further for this witness, your honor.”

Brooke felt about a million times better, as Thompson stood and made his way back to his seat.

“We would like to have Doctor Ericson come to the stand.”

That sentence made Brooke’s blood boil. She folded her hands together and watched, as her... *no, fuck him. He’s not a psychologist, he’s a fucking asshole,* she thought angrily as her sat in the witness box.

Ryan asked him a few questions, about his credentials. Brooke had to admit that they sounded impressive enough; Harvard medical school, a member of the American Psychological Association, and the founding partner of his own practice in Seattle. He’d apparently also written two books on teenage behavioral therapy.

*S hit. If I didn’t know he was a scumbag, I’d believe whatever he said.*

“What was your impression of Miss Scott, when you spoke to her?” Ryan asked him.

“I found her behavior to be in line with what your Pastor Thompson told me,” he replied smoothly. “She has a deep-rooted disrespect of authority. And her inability to tell the truth is very alarming.”
Brooke could almost feel her blood pressure spiking

“How do you mean, exactly?”

“She absolutely refused to refer to me as ‘Doctor’,” Ericson explained. “Failure to recognize authoritative titles is a red flag in young children and teenagers. Furthermore, she was very consistent in repeating information that I knew to not be true.”

“For example?”

“Well, she was very insistent that she had been abused at home.” Ericson shook his head. “However, I had the doctor’s report from when she was taken by CPS. There were no noted injuries consistent with abuse.”

_He had what now? Brooke blinked. How did he get that? And I didn’t say SHIT about being abused!_

“Miss Scott also refused to cooperate with my questions,” Ericson continued. “Her refusal to cooperate made it very difficult to perform a proper evaluation.”

_I wonder why, fuckstick._ Brooke felt a sharp pinch in her hand, and found that she was clenching her fists hard enough to dig her nails into her palm. She forced herself to relax.

Ryan nodded. “And your overall findings?”

Ericson sighed. “I hate to say so, but Pastor Thompson was negligent,” he answered. “Miss Scott should have been seeing a professional mental health expert long before her behavior escalated to this level. And she is most certainly a pathological liar.”

The blood rushing in Brooke’s ears made it hard for her to listen.

“If she had been brought to you as a patient,” Ryan said, “what would you have done?”

“Well, for starters, there is medication to help her control her pathological need to lie to others.” Ericson nodded. “I would also recommend that she start an aggressive round of therapy, with at least a couple of sessions a week. If her behavior continued to escalate, I might also recommend admission to a mental health facility.”

The heat in her cheeks was starting to worry her. Brooke took a second to slowly inhale, and then exhale through her nose as Ryan finished his questions. _He’s a cocksucker_, she thought. _Megan is going to tear him a new one. I’m sure she is._

“Miss Weaver?” Judge Haskins turned to her. “Do you have questions for the witness?”

Brooke turned to Megan, as her lawyer cleared her throat. _Come on, rip him apart already!_

“I have nothing for this witness, your honor.”

_WHAT?!_
Brooke: Witnesses For

“It wouldn’t have done any good.”

Brooke blinked as she looked at Megan. They were still sitting at the table, during a short break ordered by the judge. “Why?” she asked in a low voice.

“Unlike Thompson, he’s a legitimate doctor. Your session with him was confidential,” Megan explained. “I can’t ask him for specific details about what the two of you discussed. And he wouldn’t answer if I did.”

“But-”

“Brooke.” She turned and saw Miss Amber leaning over the railing behind her. “Trust Megan. She’s got this.”

Brooke bit her lip, then sighed. “Okay,” she said, turning back to her lawyer. “Um... are we doing okay? Because Mister Caulfield is objecting, like, a lot.”

“We’re fine,” Megan assured her. “It’s a tactic he likes to use with other lawyers, to get inside their heads. But it doesn’t work on me.”

“Oh. Okay. Cool.” Brooke exhaled slowly. “So... now what?”

“ALL RISE!!”

“Watch and learn,” Megan whispered as they stood for the judge’s entrance.

“Be seated. Miss Weaver?” Judge Haskins looked at her. “You have your own witnesses, correct?”

“Yes, your honor.” Megan nodded. “We would like Doctor Greene to come to the stand.”

_Huh?_ Brooke whipped her head around. Her guidance counselor stood from a bench in the back of the courtroom and made her way up front. She smiled at Brooke as she passed the railing, before taking her seat next to the judge.

“Doctor Greene.” Megan stood, walking over to the witness box. “Can you tell us about yourself, job-wise?”

“Of course.” Greene nodded. “I’m a therapist, with a doctorate from Stanford. I was a professor there for five years, and helped author two books before I left. I’ve also written sixteen articles for professional publications.”

“In the course of your job, how many people do you speak to each year?”

“About two hundred different kids between the ages of five and eighteen,” Greene replied. “I’ve also been contracted by state and federal law enforcement to interview children on numerous occasions.”

“In fact, you’re held in very high regards by the law enforcement community,” Megan prompted. “How many criminal trials have you testified in, on behalf of children?”

“About forty or so, though I don’t really keep count.”

Megan nodded. “Has your testimony ever been disallowed by a judge?”
“No.”

“Would it be fair to say that the government considers you to be an unquestionable authority on the psyche of teenagers?”

“I would never say that about myself.” Greene paused. “But empirical evidence would suggest that they think so.”

“Good.” Megan indicated the teenager. “You’re familiar with Brooke Scott, correct?”

“Yes, I am.” Greene looked at her. “She’s one of the teenagers from First Light that I speak to regularly.”

Megan nodded. “How many times have you spoken with her?”

“We’ve had...” Greene glanced up in thought. “Fifteen or sixteen sessions, since she’s left the church.”

“Far more than Doctor Ericson’s one session,” Megan observed.

“By a wide margin, yes.”

“You were listening to Doctor Ericson, correct?” Megan watched as Greene nodded. “Are there any points of his testimony you find fault with?”

“Oh, certainly.” Greene nodded again. “Namely, all of it.”

Brooke’s mouth twitched in a smile that she quickly repressed.

“Such as what?”

“Well.” Greene cleared her throat. “For starters, compulsive lying is a symptom of a larger mental issue. Simply being labeled as a pathological liar is not a proper diagnosis.”

“What kind of issue would it indicate?” Megan asked.

“Psychopathy, Sociopathy, Bipolar Disorder, Narcissism... generally, the full gambit of Cluster B personality disorders,” Greene explained. “I’ve seen no evidence of Brooke meeting the criteria for any of those conditions.”

Megan nodded. “In your expert opinion, is Brooke a pathological liar?”

Greene shook her head. “No.”

Oh, thank God.

“Has Brooke ever told you that she was abused?” Megan went on. “In any capacity, by her family or anyone else?”

“She has not.” Greene coughed. “As far as I know, she’s never made any such claims.”

“Objection, calls for speculation,” Ryan called out.

Megan looked at the judge. “She did say ‘as far as she knows’, your honor.”

“Yes, she did.” Haskins nodded. “Overruled.”
Brooke hid her smirk again, as Ryan sat back down.

“Doctor Greene.” Megan paused. “Have you spoken with many teenagers who ran away from First Light?”

“Yes.” The doctor nodded. “I’ve worked with twenty-two children who have left the church.”

“Would you tell us how they’re doing?”

“Objection!” Ryan called again. “The other children who have left the church are not the focus of these proceedings.”

“Your honor, Mister Caulfield and Mister Scott are very insistent that it’s in Brooke’s best interest to rejoin her old religious community,” Megan countered. “I think the issues being faced by the other children are indicative of what kind of community that is.”

Judge Haskins hummed, as he appeared to think it over. “I’ll allow the question,” he said after a few moments. “Please answer, Doctor Greene.”

The doctor cleared her throat again. “Several of the teenagers who have left First Light exhibit very alarming mental health issues,” she started. “They range from Stockholm Syndrome to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The teenagers have experienced panic attacks, at the thought of being made to go back, and several of them have prescriptions for anti-anxiety and sleep medication. One teenager is currently admitted to a hospital for her own well-being, as a direct result of her upbringing.”

Brooke’s gut clenched, as she tried very hard not to think about Regina.

“Do you think sending Brooke back into that environment would be of more benefit to her than staying in foster care?” Megan asked.

Greene shook her head. “Absolutely not.”

Megan ended the questioning by thanking her, then making her way back to the table. Brooke watched her grandfather lean towards Ryan and engage in what looked like a quiet but heated discussion. Wonder what they’re talking about?

“Mister Caulfield?” the judge said after several seconds. “Do you have questions for this witness?”

“Yes, your honor, I apologize.” He stood, and Brooke thought she detected a hint of irritation on his face. “Doctor Greene. How did you come to meet Miss Scott?”

“Objection, irrelevant,” Megan called out.

Judge Haskins looked questioningly at Ryan Caulfield. “Is there a point to the doctor’s answer, Mister Caulfield?”

“We want to know the circumstances that lead to Miss Scott being seen by another therapist,” Ryan answered. “And whether it was triggered by an event outside of her family’s purview.”

Judge Haskins pursed his lips, then turned to Greene. “Well?”

“I met with Brooke at the request of Child Protective Services,” she answered. “As is the case with all of the teenagers who have left First Light, and are currently wards of the state.”

“And where did you meet Miss Scott?”
“At one of my offices.”

“You have multiple offices?”

“Yes, I do.” Greene nodded. “I see clients at my home, and Blackwell high school.”

Ryan and Doctor Greene had matching facial expressions of indifference. “And which one did you meet Miss Scott at?” he asked. “Was it Blackwell?”

“Objection.” Megan stood. “Your honor, his initial question of how Doctor Greene and Brooke met has been asked and answered. These questions are completely irrelevant to the case at hand.”

Judge Haskins nodded, as he turned to Ryan. “Is there a reason, Mister Caulfield, why you want to know which office Doctor Greene met Miss Scott at?”

“Brooke’s family has not seen her in several months,” Ryan replied. “It is in the best interests of the family to know where Brooke has been going to.”

“Your honor!” Megan interrupted. “Under NO circumstances should Mister Caulfield be told where Brooke is currently attending high school. The safety of these children is absolutely paramount.”

“The safety of those teenagers is EXACTLY why we want to know,” Ryan shot back. “Our families have a right to ensure that their children are safe and secure, even when not at home.”

“Those children have been REMOVED from their family homes by Child Protective Services, and are no longer-”

“ENOUGH!!”

Megan and Ryan both fell silent, at the judge’s order. Haskins shot dirty looks between the two lawyers.

“Miss Weaver,” he started. “We do not raise our voices in this courtroom. Everyone here is a legal professional, and I expect that they will conduct themselves as such. Am I clear?”

“Yes, your honor,” Megan said in a lower voice, as she sat down.

“Mister Caulfield.” Haskins turned to him next. “The question regarding the validity of other children’s removals and placements is beyond the scope of this hearing. We are here to determine the custody of exactly ONE teenager. And Doctor Greene is here to answer questions about her mental health, nothing more. Is THAT clear?”

“Yes, your honor.”

“Good.” Judge Haskins settled back in his chair. “Miss Weaver’s objection is sustained. Brooke is attending a primary school as required by law; whichever one CPS has enrolled her in is not relevant to the matter at hand.”

“Very well.” Ryan turned back to the doctor. “Doctor Greene, do you know where Brooke Scott is currently living?”

Judge Haskins held a hand up, silencing Megan as she shot back to her feet. “Mister Caulfield, Brooke’s current address is also not a concern of her mental health.”

“Your honor, there is a valid reason to this line of questioning,” Ryan objected. “We have received information that Miss Scott has been housed with teenagers of a delinquent nature, who are allowed
to run rampant. We are concerned about her being near those children. And if Doctor Greene has knowledge pertaining to those rumors, it’s her duty to inform this court.”

Brooke’s ears grew hot, as she glared at Ryan. He doesn’t give a fuck about my safety. That cocksucker is trying to figure out who else is in the secured foster home.

Judge Haskins turned back to Greene. “Doctor, do you know Miss Scott’s address? Yes or no, please.”

“No, your honor.” Greene shook her head.

“Do you know who else is living in her foster home?”

“No, your honor.”

“Then the point is moot,” Haskins nodded. “Move on, Mister Caulfield. And the next question out of your mouth had better be about Doctor Greene’s testimony.”

Ryan pressed his lips together for several seconds. “I have nothing further, your honor.”

“Then the witness is excused.”

“Rachel Dawn Amber.”

“And your job?”

“I’m a social worker with the Department of Child Protective Services.”

Brooke watched as Miss Amber sat in the witness box, nonplussed, as Megan asked questions. “Can you tell us how you first met Brooke Scott?”

“I went to see her at her old high school,” Miss Amber replied. “She called our office, to let us know that she was in trouble, and wanted to leave First Light of Christ.”

Megan nodded. “Did she say what kind of trouble she was in?”

“Not until I met her at the school,” Miss Amber shifted, getting comfortable. “She informed me that she had been told by her grandfather, James Scott, that she was married and was being forced to go live with her husband.”

“Objection, hearsay,” Ryan called.

“Your honor, Miss Amber is repeating the information that she put in her official report,” Megan retorted. “One that was signed by herself, her supervisor, and Brooke. It’s hardly hearsay.”

Judge Haskins nodded. “Continue, Miss Amber.”

“Yes, your honor.” Miss Amber turned back to Megan. “Brooke was also told at that meeting that she was going to be forcibly pulled from school, and was shown a notarized marriage license.”

“Your honor, facts not in evidence,” Ryan objected.

Judge Haskins turned to Miss Amber. “Is there proof of this marriage license?”

“No, your honor.” Miss Amber shook her head. “Only what Brooke said she saw, but we had no
reason to doubt her. Not since two court clerks have been sentenced for accepting bribes to falsely notarize official documents for members of the First Light community.”

“Very well.” The judge motioned for her to continue. “And again, Mister Caulfield, there’s no jury here.”

“Miss Amber.” Megan resumed control of the conversation. “You made the decision to remove Brooke from her home at that time?”

“Not in that moment, no.” Miss Amber shook her head. “The determination was made after a conversation between myself and the social worker in charge of our office, Stacy Hemingway. I only brought her back to our office and placed her in a secure foster house on a temporary basis.”

Brooke frowned. *It was temporary?*

“What happened next?” Megan asked.

“We conducted an investigation into Brooke’s claim,” Miss Amber answered. “It was unfortunately hindered because her family refused to speak to us without a lawyer present. We did, however, arrange to have one of the before-mentioned court clerks brought down from the Pine Creek Correctional Facility and interviewed by the District Attorney’s office.”

“And what did the court clerk say?”

“She admitted that while she had falsely notarized several marriage licenses on behalf of First Light, she didn’t keep records of the names. However, when shown a picture of Brooke’s father, she identified him as one of the-”

“Objection!” Ryan stood. “Again, my client and his family are not on trial, and we strenuously object to this new information being considered. Mister Scott has not been apprehended or charged with any crimes relating to this fraud.”

“That’s because the clerk was the only witness,” Miss Amber countered. “The prosecutor decided not to pursue a criminal case. But the clerk signed a sworn affidavit, which I have here,” she added, as she reached into an attaché case by her feet and produced a stapled set of papers.

Judge Haskins took them and flipped through them for a couple of minutes, before setting them aside.

“Did that solidify the decision to keep Brooke in foster care?” Megan asked.

“It did.” Miss Amber nodded. “First Light has set a disturbing precedent for how they deal with teenagers that rebel against the church. After consulting with my supervisor, it was decided that Brooke should remain a ward of the state, so long as she desires not to go back. And Brooke has made it abundantly clear that she does not wish to return home.”

Megan nodded. “Let’s pre-empt a few things,” she said. “You, presumably, know where Brooke is staying, and who she’s staying with?”

“Yes.”

“If asked by Mister Caulfield, will you tell him that information?”

“No.”
“If ordered by Judge Haskins, will you reveal that information?”

Miss Amber looked at the judge. “I’m sorry, your honor, but I won’t.”

Haskins frowned. “And why not?”

“Brooke is currently in one of our secured foster homes,” Miss Amber answered. “It’s one we use for teenagers at high risk of being adversely retrieved by their families, and all teenagers from First Light are deemed high-risk by default. Furthermore, Brooke is not the only teenager from First Light at her foster house. There are others, one of whom has received death threats from her family.”

Brooke blinked. What? Death threats? She swallowed. Emily got death threats?

“Are there other reasons, Miss Amber?” Megan pressed.

“Yes.” Miss Amber nodded. “Our office shares a building with the Oregon State Police. A few years ago, a parishioner of First Light was caught trying to break into our offices after hours. He refused to speak when questioned, but we believe he was trying to find the location of his cousin, who had been previously removed from his home by one of our social workers.”

“Objection, speculation,” Ryan called. Brooke noted that he had a sour look on his face.

“Sustained.” Judge Haskins nodded. “But it was a member of First Light, Miss Amber?”

“Yes he was, your honor.” Miss Amber nodded. “Additionally, I’ve signed several non-disclosure agreements regarding information about our wards. I can only break those agreements with an order from the state Superior Court.”

The judge nodded. “Very well. Anything else, Miss Weaver?”

“No, your honor.” Megan nodded at Ryan, as she turned.

Ryan stood quickly. “How did Miss Scott know to contact your office, Miss Amber?”

“She found our phone number,” Miss Amber said simply.

“And how did she get that?”

“I can’t say for certain.”

“Can’t, Miss Amber, or won’t?”

Miss Amber looked at him with disdain. “I can’t,” she repeated. “I never specifically asked Brooke how she got our number.”

She’s right, Brooke realized. And I never really told her, either. I’m sure she knows, though. Way to choose her words carefully.

“Would you care to infer?” Ryan pressed.

The corner of Miss Amber’s lip twitched upwards. “Are you asking me to speculate, Mister Caulfield?”

Brooke suppressed a snort, as Megan sat upright.

“Let’s move on.” Ryan paused. “When you removed Miss Scott from school, did you consider that
“Knowing that there was a possibility that she might not be telling the truth, you elected to remove her from school and her home anyway?” Ryan asked.

“Yes.”

Brooke started to get concerned, with the direction Ryan’s questions were going. Megan seemed to be listening with rapt attention, ready to jump in.

“Is it not standard procedure for CPS to first conduct an investigation, before electing to remove a child from the parent’s home?” Ryan continued. “And is that procedure ignored, when it comes to parishioners of First Light?”

Miss Amber took a deep breath, before speaking. Megan started to lean forward, and Judge Haskins paid very close attention.

“The procedure is different when it comes to children from First Light, Mister Caulfield,” Miss Amber said coldly, “because the last time signs of abuse were overlooked on one of your teenagers, she was violently beaten and wound up disappearing into thin air for several years.”

Brooke watched Ryan’s entire demeanor shift, as he straightened upright and didn’t respond. He almost looked like he’d been slapped.

“Additionally, two teenaged girls died at the hands of your parishioners last year.” Miss Amber leaned back in her seat. “As a result, our office has elected to err on the side of caution for teenagers coming from the First Light community.”

Ryan’s lips were almost white, as he pressed them together and looked at Miss Amber with an unreadable expression. He turned back to the judge after several seconds. “I have nothing further, your honor.”

Brooke blinked, as Miss Amber stepped off the stand. *What in the hell was that?*
“I told you having Greene testify was a bad idea.”

Megan shook her head, as she picked at her salad. “It really wasn’t, Rachel.”

“But now First Light knows where the kids are enrolled in school.” Miss Amber folded her arms. “You could have objected when Ryan started asking about her work.”

“We needed her to discredit Ericson’s testimony,” Megan countered. “And Doctor Greene is listed on Blackwell’s faculty page, so hiding her place of employment would have just annoyed the judge. Besides, wasn’t Linda Everett enrolled in Blackwell before she ran back?”

“... yes.”

“Then they already had that information.” Megan sat back in her chair. “It doesn’t matter, they can’t do anything with it. I’ve been to Blackwell, and unless they’ve got CIA-trained spies in their congregation, First Light isn’t following those kids home.” She paused. “By the way, how did your office convince Principal Wells to put in such good security?”

“We didn’t. He did it himself, after there were four parental kidnappings in one year.” Miss Amber shrugged. “He wasn’t fond of parents taking their kids out of school to play mind games with spouses they were divorcing, so he put a stop to it. When we found out, the decision to send kids there became a lot easier.”

“I bet.” Megan looked over at Brooke, who ate her burger silently. “Hey. How are you holding up?”

Brooke chewed her food slowly, swallowing before she answered. “Okay, I guess,” she replied quietly as she looked between them. “So... now what?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Are you going to call anyone else?” Brooke clarified, as she put her burger down. It was lunchtime, and they had gone to a fast-food restaurant down the street from the courthouse. “Or was that it?”

“That was it.” Megan nodded, as she sipped her drink through the straw. “There won’t be any more witnesses.”

Brooke blinked. “So quickly? I thought we’d be doing this all day.”

“We’re not done yet,” Megan explained. “Ryan and I will each have one more shot to convince the judge to send you home, or keep you in foster care, before he makes his decision.”

“You don’t think he’ll make me go back, do you?” Brooke asked. “I mean, you guys and Doctor Greene laid a pretty good smackdown on them.”

“Yes, we did.” Megan nodded. “I think the judge will go our way. But we won’t know for certain until he makes his ruling.”

“Hypothetically...” Brooke squirmed. “If he says I have to go back. Is there any way to appeal?”

Megan sighed. “I’m afraid not.”

“It won’t happen, Brooke,” Miss Amber said forcefully. “You’re not going back.”
Megan shot Miss Amber a disapproving look, before turning back to Brooke. “IF you do,” she said, “you’ll be watched very closely by Miss Amber and CPS. I wouldn’t worry about it too much.”

“Yea.” Brooke glanced out the window.

*I’m not going back.* She scratched her arm, feeling the sharpened plastic under her sleeve. *No matter what the judge says.*

Megan’s phone buzzed on the table. “Lunch is over,” she said, taking the last bite of her salad. “Let’s get going.”

“The supreme court has dictated that parents will have the ultimate say in how their child is raised.”

Brooke sat still, listening to Ryan as he gave his closing speech. He spoke softly, but his words seemed to carry throughout the courtroom; they had a force to them that Brooke found intimidating.

“Miss Scott’s family has elected to raise her with Christian values and morals,” Ryan continued. “We understand that some may find them to be restrictive. We understand that they may be considered by others to be outdated. But those are the values that the Scott family has chosen to live by, and their decisions as parents must be respected.”

He gestured towards Brooke, not looking at her. “Miss Scott has shown an incredible level of immaturity by exaggerating her situation to state social workers. She’s not only lied, but has diverted an incredible amount of time and resources away from children who need them far more than her.”

*Oh, cool. We’re going to wave the flag of self-righteousness.* Brooke pressed her lips together, as she continued to listen.

“A formal investigation was never completed, and Miss Scott’s claims were never verified.” Ryan shook his head. “She was removed from her home, nigh on kidnapped by CPS, over baseless claims and accusations. There is absolutely no proof to her story. As such, the family finds that they are not only right, but entitled to demand that Miss Scott be returned to their care immediately.”

Ryan nodded, returning to his seat. Brooke glanced at her lawyer, who took a sip of water before she stood.

“A noble sentiment from the Scott family,” she started. “But ultimately, an empty one.”

*Nice. Coming out swinging.*

“Mister Caulfield has failed to elaborate on the values that he casually glosses over.” Megan gestured to Brooke. “If Brooke was returned to First Light, she would not have the opportunity to attend college. She would not have the opportunity to choose her own husband. And yes, there is no proof that Miss Scott was tricked into signing a marriage license, but given First Light’s track record, it is not inconceivable to believe.”

“Additionally, there is a dangerous precedent that has been set by First Light of Christ.” Megan gestured towards Ryan and Brooke’s family. “Two years ago, a pair of homosexual teenage girls were beaten to death for defying the church’s rules. Teenagers have come into CPS care showing signs of physical, mental, and sexual abuse. The pattern is clear to anyone who cares to see it.” She paused. “If you defy the church, there are consequences.”

Megan faced the judge. “The parent’s say in how she will be raised is a moot point, your honor. The fact is that First Light is a repressive society, with a track record that rivals Saudi Arabia in terms of
women’s rights. We strongly object to the idea that no harm will come to Brooke if she were to return, and we implore you to find in favor of her remaining in foster care.”

Her piece said, Megan sat down. Brooke slowly looked to the judge, noting that he seemed to be mulling over everything that was said.

*Please let me stay in foster care.* Brooke’s heart rate increased, as she toyed with her sleeve beneath the table. She briefly visualized the movement of drawing her plastic shiv and jamming it into her neck, and suppressed an involuntary shiver. *I can’t go back.*

The judge cleared his throat, as he leaned forward. “Valid points have been raised by both sides of this argument,” he began. “And quite frankly, I find the fact that Miss Scott was removed from her family without a proper investigation to be alarming.”

Brooke’s heart dropped into her stomach.

“But I have concerns about her returning to First Light, as well.” Judge Haskins turned to Ryan. “Will Miss Scott be allowed to return to high school, Mister Caulfield?”

Ryan hesitated. “Her parents have elected to home-school her for her Senior year, your honor.”

“That does nothing to allay my fears, Mister Caulfield.” The judge gestured towards him with the gavel. “Miss Weaver didn’t have to remind me of your church’s track record towards rebellious teenagers. I am familiar with the unfortunate deaths of Miss Hansen and Miss Wood.”

“That was an extreme case, your honor,” Ryan replied. “The people who perpetrated that crime are in prison. They went far beyond what our church finds acceptable.”

“I think that’s putting it mildly, Mister Caulfield.”

Okay. Brooke took a deep breath. *So he’s not falling for their bullshit.*

“Miss Amber.” Judge Haskins turned to her social worker. “Tell me how, exactly, CPS justifies removing a teenager from her family home without an investigation?”

Her social worker coughed as she stood. “As I said, your honor, there are different protocols in place for First Light teenagers,” she stated. “The church has set a precedent for-”

“I’m familiar with the precedent,” Judge Haskins interrupted. “Does that mean that they’re not afforded due process? The right to a proper investigation? At the very least, an interview, even with legal counsel present?”

Fuck. Brooke’s stomach was doing backflips.

“A judgement call had to be made, your honor,” Miss Amber explained quickly. “As I said, I elected to err on the side of caution. An investigation would have taken time, and-”

“Of course it would have.” Judge Haskins fixed her with a serious look. “That’s the point of due process. And am I to believe that a family that is aware of an investigation would not be watched closely, to ensure the safety of the child involved?”

Miss Amber didn’t reply for several seconds. “It was a chance that I wasn’t willing to take,” she finally said.

“And therein lies the issue.” Judge Haskins leaned back. “Rash moves made without thought have
serious consequences, Miss Amber. It would serve you well to remember that.”

Finally, he turned to Brooke. “Now, Miss Scott.”

Brooke blinked in surprise, at someone speaking to her directly for the first time that day. Megan nudged her with an elbow after a couple of seconds, and she quickly stood. “Yes, sir- I mean, your honor,” she replied quietly.

“I imagine this has been a rather stressful day for you.” Judge Haskins nodded. “You understand that everyone here believes that they have your best interests at heart, correct?”

Brooke nodded. “Yes, your honor.”

“And yet neither Miss Weaver or Mister Caulfield invited you to the stand to ask for your thoughts.” The judge removed his glasses, placing them on his desk, and his gaze softened. “How old are you, Miss Scott?”

“Sixteen.”

“I see you turn seventeen in November, is that correct?”

“Yes, your honor.”

Haskins nodded “Miss Weaver and Mister Caulfield can argue back and forth about your maturity, Miss Scott, but fact of the matter is that you are fourteen months from being an adult, and able to make your own decisions. So.” He paused. “I want to hear, with your own words, what it is that YOU want.”

... hell. Brooke’s mind raced, as she tried to think of what to say. *Fuck, I should have thought of something more than “I don’t want to go home.” I don’t really think that’s all he’s looking for.*

... What do I want?

“I, uh...” Brooke hesitated, licking her lips as she found her answer. “I... want to go to college.”

Judge Haskins nodded as he listened.

“I want to finish high school, and then get a degree,” Brooke continued, her thoughts falling into place as she spoke. “I don’t know what I want to do yet; I haven’t made up my mind. But I want to be more than just a housewife and homemaker. I want a career. I want to see more of the world than Arcadia Bay and Portland.”

She pointed towards her family. “My mother has never left Oregon,” she stated, not looking at her parents. “She married my dad when she was seventeen. She didn’t finish high school, or go to college. And if I go back, neither will I.” She turned and glared at her grandfather. “They can make all the claims about my maturity that they want. But if they tell you otherwise, they’re liars.” She looked back at the judge. “And if you don’t believe me, then you can ask El- I mean, MISTER Caulfield, if any other women in the church have any higher education.”

*That’s right. Fuck your meaningless title.*

“And, my best friend was raped by her ‘husband’.” Brooke made sure to use air quotes. “They can’t claim that’s a lie, either, because he plead out to the charge three weeks ago. And the two men who
‘allegedly’ raped my other friend are being tried right now. Maybe they’ll make me go live with the man they tricked me into marrying when I was seven, maybe they won’t.” Brooke paused. “But I don’t want to take that chance. I got lucky once already. I want to stay with my foster family, and help my friends get better.”

She pointed to her family again. “As far away from them as possible,” she finished.

The judge nodded with an expressionless face, as Brooke stood there staring at him expectantly. She tried to act like her heart wasn’t about to hammer it’s way out of her chest, while she waited for the judge to speak.

“I think that’s a more than reasonable request,” he finally replied. “And certainly one indicative of a mature teenager.”

A smile came over Brooke’s face, as the judge picked up his gavel. “I hereby find in favor of Brooke Scott’s wishes to remain in foster care,” he ordered. “Any contact with her family will be at the discretion of herself and the department of Child Protective-”

A wail from the other side of the aisle startled Brooke, making her jump. She glanced over and saw her mother collapse into her father’s side, sobbing loudly. “IT’S NOT RIGHT!!” She shrieked, the tears streaming down her face.

“Mister Scott,” Judge Haskins said forcefully. “You will control your wife, or-”

“DO YOU SEE WHAT YOU’RE DOING TO YOUR MOTHER?!” Brooke flinched, as her father yelled across the aisle; his face was flushed with anger. “We are trying to do what’s best for you! You have NO RIGHT to second guess our-”

“Bailiff!” the judge barked.

The uniformed officer went towards Brooke’s parents, as her father continued to yell, but between her mother’s bawling and the bailiff trying to get him to be quiet, all Brooke got was loud noise.

Ryan was standing and leaning over the railing behind him, trying to calm her parents down. Her grandfather was standing, too, but he wasn’t looking at Brooke’s parents. He’d fixed her with a dirty look, glaring at her with anger.

It was everything for Brooke not to flip him another middle finger. She settled for glaring right back.

Megan quickly stepped between them, taking Brooke’s elbow and guiding her away from her parents. When she spoke, she had to practically shout over her mother’s histrionics. “Your honor-”

“You’re free to leave, Miss Weaver.” The judge spared her a glance, as he stood. “Take your client and go.”

Brooke’s other elbow was taken by Miss Amber, and the two women ushered her out of the courtroom. Her mother’s wailing increased in volume, as did her father’s angry yelling. Brooke could barely hear the bailiff calling over his radio for backup, as she was taken out the side door.

After a couple of quick hugs, Megan left. She told Brooke that she would be in touch.

Miss Amber sent a couple of quick texts, before taking Brooke back to Jane’s house. “How are you feeling?” she asked, as she drove.
“Better.” Brooke watched the scenery fly by out the window. “My family can’t try again, can they? Like, at a higher court or something?”

“No.” Miss Amber shook her head. “Unless new information comes to light, the judge’s decision is final. And any new information would have to be world-shattering, never mind the fact that we would have to go through another trial.” She smiled. “You’re safe with your foster family, trust me.”

Brooke nodded, falling silent.

Two seconds after they got back and opened the door, Brooke was wrapped in a tight hug by Emily. “Can’t breathe...” Brooke gasped comically. “Going dark...”

Brooke felt Emily smirk. “I moved your stuff into the hallway. Figured it was all getting thrown out.” “God, I can’t believe I wanted to come back.”

Emily let go, stepping back. “Feeling better?” “Yes.” Brooke rubbed the back of her neck. “Pretty big load off.”

Emily smiled. “It’s done, right?” “It’s over,” Miss Amber assured her. “Brooke is staying in foster care with you.”

Brooke watched Emily relax, the girl physically unwinding. “Good,” she remarked. “I don’t need you bringing another newbie to Jane. It might be one who snores.”

“Nice.” Brooke shook her head. “I, uh, have to pee. Be right back.”

As soon as she walked into the bathroom, she closed and locked the door. She let out a shaky breath as she took a seat on rim of the bath tub, a full-body shiver rolling through her.

I’m free. Brooke took a deep breath, as she hugged herself tightly. Holy fuck, I’m free.

... guess I don’t need these anymore.

Brooke pulled her sleeve back, exposing the sharpened plexiglass. She ripped it off her arm, bent it as hard as she could until it broke, and wrapped it in toilet paper before tucking it deep into the trash can.

Then she pulled her suicide note from her back pocket and unfolded it, reading it quickly.

If you’re reading this, then the judge told me I would have to go back to my family.

I know what will happen if I do. First, I’ll face some kind of punishment. And then they’ll force me to live with the man they tricked me into marrying. He’ll rape me, just like Emily’s and Regina’s husbands did, and he’ll force me to have his children. I’ll grow up trapped, as his property, probably never allowed to leave the house after what I’ve done.

I refuse to do it. That’s why I’m dead.

Please tell Miss Amber and Miss Weaver that I’m sorry. And that I don’t blame them. They did their best, and if it was any other teenager, it would have been good enough.

I don’t want anyone else to wind up like me. I don’t know who will see this note first, if you’re a cop,
or a coroner, or what, but please don’t bury this. People need to know that I killed myself so that I
wouldn’t have to go back. Not whatever fairy tale my grandfather will spin, or whatever bullshit
Ryan Caulfield will come up with; I killed myself because it was better than going back to First Light
of Christ. That is the only truth to tell, and I need you to make sure you tell it.

If you are a cop, you need to check the sock drawer in my room at my foster house. There’s an
envelope there with bank statements from one of First Light’s shell corporations, a company called
Abel Industries. It has proof of First Light’s money laundering with my grandfather’s signature on it.
A student at Arcadia Bay High School named Joseph Williams has more information.

And if you happen to interview my grandfather, do me a favor and tell him that I’ll see him in hell.

Brooke’s fingers trembled, as she tore the note in two pieces. Then again, and again, until she had a
small pile of ripped paper in her hands. She lifted the toilet lid, dropping everything in the water
before she flushed.
“I have to say, Lynn, this is very impressive.”

She smiled brightly, as she stood in front of the professor’s desk. “You think so?”

“I do.” Dr. Geraldo nodded, as she examined Lynn’s computer. “This is startlingly close to our initial plan, back when I worked on the Curiosity launch trajectory. And we had a lot of help with that.”

She looked back at Lynn from under her eyelids. “You didn’t hack the JPL server farm, did you?”

“I don’t know how to hack anything.” Lynn frowned. “Does that... happen?”

“Not as often as it used to.” Geraldo turned her attention back to Lynn’s work. “Well, you’ve certainly earned full extra credit. I don’t recall the last time I saw such accurate calculations from a Freshman.”

Lynn beamed with pride. “Thank you. But I have to ask... where did I go wrong?”

“Well, there’s a few things. But the big one is right here; your burn rate to escape orbit is too low.”

Geraldo turned the laptop, pointing. “Here, you’re under by about twenty percent. If we had used your calculations for the launch, Curiosity would have skipped across the atmosphere and re-entered in pieces.”

“I don’t understand.” Lynn tilted her head. “I factored for the weight of the probe exactly, with the data NASA made public.”

“Yes, you certainly did.” Geraldo smirked. “Unfortunately, Lynn, I’m bound by a security clearance from discussing this further with you.”

Lynn blinked. “... oh.”

“But don’t let that distract you from the fact that you did very well.” Geraldo pushed her laptop back towards her. “Of course, you didn’t really need the extra credit to begin with. You’re already pushing a ninety-seven percent.”

Lynn bit her lip, as she took her laptop back. “Full disclosure, I’m angling for your letter of recommendation to the JPL internship next summer.”

“I figured.” Geraldo chuckled. “A lot of students want that slot. But your work ethic definitely makes you a front-runner, Lynn. If you keep this up, I wouldn’t be surprised if you were the one to get it.”

An hour later, she sat on the stairs in front of her dorm, smiling as she exchanged texts with Kate.

**Kate:** Really? A frontrunner?

**Lynn:** That was the word she used.

**Kate:** That’s awesome! Congratulations!
Lynn: I mean, I don’t have it yet.

Kate: I’m sure you’ll get it, with all the hard work you’ve been doing.

Lynn: I hope so.

Kate: Oh, Vicky says hi. And she wants to know what time you’re coming over for Thanksgiving.

Lynn: Hi back. And I’m not sure yet. I have to check the bus schedule.

Kate: Well, let us know, so we can be sure when to start cooking.

Lynn: Should I bring anything?

Kate: Just bring yourself. We’re really looking forward to seeing you.

Lynn: You too.

She sighed, as she lowered her phone and looked over the campus. *It’ll be the first Thanksgiving I spend away from San Diego,* she thought absently. *And I’m not even upset.*

A couple of hours after that, she was sitting in front of her computer, studying for her other class.

“Are you going to be doing that all night?” her roommate, Danica, asked. “It’s Friday.”

“And I have a test on Monday.” Lynn smirked, as she looked back at her friend. “Where are YOU going?”

“Leonard is taking me to dinner and a movie.” She sat down on her bed, wiggling her feet into her shoes. “Seriously, Lynn, you can come with us. I’m sure I can ask Leonard if he’s got a cute friend.”

Lynn shook her head. “I just want to focus on nailing this test.”

“You’re in college, Lynn,” Danica reminded her. “Learning is important, but you’re supposed to have fun, too. Coming out with us for one night won’t kill you or your GPA, and you’ll probably still ace that exam.”

“Honestly, Danica, I don’t really feel like it.” Lynn turned back to her computer. “Have fun with Leonard.”

“... fine.” Her roommate sighed. “Try to do something else, too, okay?”

“Yea, sure.”

She didn’t. For the next hour after Danica left, she studied her electronic textbook and took notes. Totally lost in her schoolwork, she ignored all the residual noise in the hall behind her; she didn’t even hear the music coming from the room next door.

So when her phone rang, she practically jumped out of her seat in surprise.

“Shit,” she gasped, hand over her heart as she tried to recover. She reached over to see who it was. The word DAD made her freeze.

*Talk about out of the blue.* She stared at the screen, not sure what to do as the phone rang again. *It’s*
been MONTHS since Kate’s wedding, and I haven’t gotten a peep. Why is he calling all of the sudden?

... only one way to find out.

She slid the icon, accepting the call, and put the phone to her ear. “Hello?” she asked, hating that her voice sounded so quiet.

“Hi, Lynn.”

“Dad.” She leaned back in her chair, some of her confidence returning. “I was worried that it was Mom on your phone, for a second. Given her penchant for pretending to be other people and-”

“I’m sorry.”

She blinked, the interruption throwing her. “... huh?”

“Lynn, I know you’re angry with me. I just wanted to start this call by saying that I was sorry.”

She took a deep breath. “You’re going to have to be specific,” she said carefully. “What are you sorry for? Mom cancelling Kate’s wedding? Mom locking Kate and Chris into a room together? The horrible things she called Kate and Victoria? The horrible things she called ME?” she paused. “Or your complete lack of ability to stop any of it?”

Her father was silent. “I deserve that,” he said after a few seconds. “And... all of it, I suppose.”

“Cool.” Lynn sighed. “Was that it? Because I have a lot of studying to do.”

“Lynn, please. I know you’re mad at me, but I want to talk,” he told her quietly. “I miss you. And Kate.”

“Well, you have a funny way of showing it,” Lynn retorted. “My number hasn’t changed, obviously. Neither has Kate’s. It’s been almost five months since we spoke at the wedding, and I don’t think Kate even knows the last time you talked to her.” She felt her face flush, as her level of anger rose. “I know you let Mom wear the pants in the family. Did she finally give you permission to call your own children? Because I know you didn’t sack up and do it on your own.”

“Your mother hasn’t been home for almost a week, Lynn.”

That threw her for a loop, and she paused mid-tirade. “... she hasn’t?”

“Lynn... I don’t know if you’ll believe me or not, but I didn’t know that your mother tricked people into cancelling Kate’s wedding reservations,” he said morosely. “Until you said so the last time we spoke, I had no idea.”

“Hm.” Lynn folded her arms. “And it took you five months to figure out I wasn’t lying?”

“No. It took five months because I didn’t want it to be true.” Her father sighed again. “I didn’t want to believe that your mother had so much hatred in her heart that she would do something like that, on what was supposed to be the best day of Kate’s life. I know she didn’t agree with her choices, but I never thought she would go that far.”

“Well, she did,” Lynn shot back. “The bridesmaids had to re-plan the wedding from the ground up overnight. Victoria’s family shelled out tens of thousands of dollars for the new venue because of the short notice. And they sued everyone for breaking their contracts. Mom almost put people out of
business because she’s a homophobic bitch.”

“Lynn, please don’t call your mother a.”

“Mom also left me a message saying that I wasn’t her daughter anymore,” she said frostily. “I will call her whatever the fuck I want.”

Her father hesitated. “I suppose that’s fair.”

“I wasn’t asking for your permission.”

“Lynn, please. I don’t want to fight. You were right, and I was wrong.” He hesitated again, clearly considering his words. “I’m tired of not seeing my children. I don’t want to lose you and Kate.”

She pursed her lips, as she mulled over his words. “How did you find out what Mom did?”

“I took her phone to get fixed, after the battery stopped working,” he explained. “When they were uploading her apps to the new one, I saw that one of them was for wedding planning. I opened it and noticed that it was logged in with your sister’s email address. And that it had a list of information about wedding vendors. I confronted her about, and we got into a pretty bad argument. She wound up leaving to go stay with your Aunt Cathy.”

“Wow.” Lynn couldn’t keep the smirk from her face. “You actually threw down with Mom. I didn’t think I’d see the day.”

“Lynn, I don’t want to ruin my relationship with you.” He paused. “Or Kate.”

“Yea, well, I think at this point, you’ll be lucky if Kate doesn’t tell you to take a long walk off a short pier.”

“I figured,” he agreed. “That’s why I wanted to call you.”

“Oh, yes. How could I be so stupid.” Lynn rolled her eyes. “Once more, I’m the stepping stone to the golden child. I don’t know why I thought anything would change.”

“What?” Her father sounded shocked. “Lynn, what in the world gave you the idea that we loved Kate more than you?”

She blinked, as her brain flat-lined for a second. “You’re kidding me, right?” she finally asked quietly. “You can’t be serious.”

“Lynn-”

“Where do I FUCKING begin?!” she snapped. “Do I start with the PAINFULLY obvious difference, in the amount spent on Christmas presents? The fact that everything Kate ever did had to be perfect, while I was allowed to do whatever the fuck I wanted because you and Mom didn’t care? How Kate got a new outfit for every Christmas party where we were going to see Chris, and I couldn’t even get a backup drive for my schoolwork? Or maybe the part where Mom forgot that it was not only my birthday, but my eighteenth to boot?”

“Your mother didn’t-”

“I WATCHED HER COUNT ON HER FUCKING FINGERS!!” Lynn yelled into the phone. “Don’t FUCKING tell me that she didn’t forget! I was second place to Kate in EVERY eventuality! For fuck’s sake, VICTORIA, who has EVERY reason to hate my guts, has been nicer to me than
Mom ever was!!"

Her father was silent, as Lynn yelled. He didn’t speak for several seconds.

“You’re right.”

“I know I’m fucking right.” Lynn dragged her hand down her face, as she exhaled slowly. “I don’t need your validation.”

“Lynn...” her father paused. “I always trusted your mother, when it came to you girls. I know that’s not an excuse, but... it always felt like she knew you three better than I did. I trusted her judgement when it came to everything. And I’m sorry it took eighteen years for me to figure out I was wrong.”

Lynn exhaled slowly, suddenly feeling very tired. “Well, Dad... it’s nice to hear you say it,” she grudgingly acknowledged. “But I don’t know if I accept your apology yet.”

“I understand,” he replied. “And I do miss both of you, Lynn, not just Kate. I... don’t think very highly of myself, right now, that I let things get so far out of hand.”

“Yea.” Lynn paused. “Please tell me that Jessica isn’t staying with Mom at Aunt Cathy’s.”

“No. Your little sister wanted to stay here.”

“How is she?”

“Not great,” her father answered. “Her doctor wants to up her Ativan dosage. She’s... not handling things very well, with you and your mother leaving.”

A feeling of guilt washed over Lynn, for a second. “I didn’t mean for that to happen,” she said quietly.

“It’s not your fault,” her father assured her. “I should have done something sooner.”

“Still.”

“Lynn...” he hesitated. “I want to come up to Los Angeles, to see you and Kate.”

She folded her arms. “I don’t know if Kate wants to see you, Dad.”

“And... I don’t think I would blame her,” he allowed. “But I want to see you both. I miss you two. And I want to apologize to Kate in person.”

Lynn pursed her lips. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

“What do you think of Kate marrying a girl?”

There was no reply for a few seconds, before she heard her father inhale. “I honestly don’t know,” he admitted. “I don’t hate it. It’s certainly not what I expected. But if Kate’s happy... then I don’t care.”

Lynn hummed. “Yea?”

“I feel really bad about how we handled her coming out to us,” her dad mentioned. “And that I listened to your mother, when she insisted that she knew how to deal with it. I would really like a second chance.”
Pursing her lips, Lynn leaned back in her seat as she contemplated her dad’s words. *He does seem sincere,* she thought grudgingly. *And if he really did get in a fight with Mom... maybe he is sorry.*

“Fine.”

“*Thank you, Lynn.*”

“Yea, well, I’m not the one you’re going to have to grovel to. Mom almost ruined Kate’s wedding right under your nose, so I’d start practicing the ass-kissing for when you call her.”

He sighed. “*Lynn, I don’t want to get in an argument over who you think I love more, but I tried to call Kate before I called you. Twice, actually. It wouldn’t connect. I’m pretty sure she blocked my number.*”

Lynn snorted. “Let me guess, you want me to be your go-between?”

“*Please, Lynn.*”

“Sure. Why not.” She looked back at the date on her laptop. “I’m going to see her and Victoria for Thanksgiving. I’ll talk to them then.”

“*Thank you. And... Lynn, I would really appreciate something.*”

“What?”

“I know you and Kate are angry with me, and I’m sure Victoria doesn’t like me very much either. But... can you please send me a few photos of the ceremony?” he asked. “I would like to see how my daughter looked on her wedding day.”

Lynn frowned. “They put a ton of photos on Facebook,” she pointed out. “I know Stella and the Hills have been sharing them.”

“*Lynn, I’m not sure if you’re aware, but we’ve had something of a falling-out with the Hills after your mother’s behavior towards Stella over dinner last year,*” her father explained. “*We didn’t even go to their Christmas party, remember?*”

“Oh. Right.” She sighed. “Yea, sure. I’ll text you a few.”

“*Thank you.*”

“I didn’t think about asking you until after I sent them.” Lynn bit her lip and looked down at her lap. “I really should have. I’m sorry.”

Kate smirked. “We put them on Facebook,” she reminded her. “I’m not that concerned with who sees them, so long as they don’t see Max.”

“Yea, that’s a hell of a story.” Lynn looked back at Victoria. “Certainly not what I was expecting, after my conversation with her.”

“Well, semantically, she wasn’t wrong.” Victoria shrugged, as she scooped some more leftovers into a plastic container. “Are you sure you don’t want more turkey to take back to your dorm? We’ve still got a ton.”

“No, thank you.” Lynn looked back at Kate. “So... what do you think?”
Kate chewed on the inside of her cheek, as she thought. “What do YOU think?” she asked pointedly. “You got some pretty bad messages, too.”

“Yea, from Mom. Between those and what she screamed at me over the phone on your wedding day, I have no intention of talking to her for a while.” Lynn shrugged. “But... I do miss Dad.”

Kate tilted her head. “Mom called you on our wedding day?”

Lynn blinked. “Oh. I... forgot that I never told you.”

“What did she say?”

“Nothing I’m sure you haven’t heard before.”

Victoria looked at her. “What did YOU say?”

“... a lot.” Lynn shook her head. “Look, just... what do you think, Kate?”

“I’m... I don’t know. Torn, I guess.” Kate drummed her fingers on the table. “I don’t want to flush my relationship with Dad down the toilet. But I don’t really trust him, either. And if I catch wind that he’s trying to bring Mom with him...”

Lynn smirked. “Our dad’s naïve, Kate, not stupid.”

“True.” Kate looked at Victoria. “What do you think, babe?”

Victoria pressed her lips together, not speaking for several seconds. “I will fully support whatever decision you make,” she said carefully. “But if you decide to meet him, I insist on coming with you.”

Kate raised her eyebrows. “Why?”

“Because it’s been a while since I punched someone,” Victoria said simply. “And it felt pretty good, to be honest. If there’s a possibility that your mother will show up, I plan to take advantage of the situation.”

Lynn started snickering, as Kate narrowed her eyes. “I would rather not see you arrested for assault, Vicky.”

“Nevertheless.”
Brooke: The Facility

October 2019. Concurrent with ch 62 of EtL.

“This place looks a lot nicer than I thought it would.”

Brooke turned to Emily, smirking. “What, exactly, were you expecting?”

Emily looked over the hospital, as Jane parked the car in the front lot. “That it would be surrounded by wrought-iron fences. And that we would get greeted by a scary-looking doctor in a white coat, while it was raining heavily.”

“I told you not to watch that movie,” Jane chided as she killed the engine. “This is one of the best psychiatric facilities in the country. It is not the setting of a horror film.”

Brooke and Emily followed Jane out of the car and made their way to the entrance. They all signed in and placed their belongings in cubbies behind the main desk. “I don’t understand why we have to leave our phones,” Emily grumbled.

“To eliminate distractions,” Jane explained, as she turned to the charge nurse. “Is Doctor Howard on his way down? We told him-”

“Yes, I’m here.” The three of them turned as a white-haired doctor rounded the corner quickly, a little short on breath. “Sorry, I was held up with another patient. You three must be Jane, Emily, and Brooke?”

They all nodded. “Are you Regina’s doctor?” Brooke asked.

“Yes, that’s me. I’m Doctor Howard, one of the psychiatrists here.” He shook Brooke’s hand. “You can call me Aaron, if you wish.”

“Where’s Regina?” Emily asked, as she took Aaron’s hand next.

“She’s in the day room,” he replied as he shook Jane’s hand. “Come on, follow me. She’s been looking forward to your visit.”

They all followed him down the hall, Brooke glancing around as they walked. Everywhere she saw patients in white or grey clothes, mostly sweatpants and t-shirts. Orderlies walked around, as well, helping and talking to everyone. She was surprised to see that nobody seemed outwardly crazy; there wasn’t anyone talking to themselves or making a huge fuss. Most of them seemed to be quiet and mind their own business.

“How has she been doing?” Jane asked.

“Very well,” Aaron answered. “Certainly better than when she got here. We’ve made excellent progress with her mental health.”

“What about...” Emily hesitated. “The baby?”

“Regina’s pregnancy is progressing normally,” he assured her. “She’s almost completed her second trimester, and everything is indicative of a healthy pregnancy.”
“Does, um...” Brooke hesitated. “Does she know what she wants to do?”

Aaron looked at her, lips pursed. “I’m afraid you’ll have to ask her,” he said after a few seconds. “She’s very conflicted.”

Emily and Brooke glanced at each other.

“However, I’d ask that you not bring it up,” he added. “I’d rather this was a good visit, not a setback. As I said, she’s been looking forward seeing the two of you.”

“... okay,” Brooke muttered.

They took a turn, and Aaron guided them to a set of double-doors. He opened them, revealing a large room filled with furniture. Several tables were set up with chairs, and couches positioned at several points along the walls. Close to a dozen people meandered about the room.

Sitting at one of the couches was Regina, wearing grey sweatpants and a large grey t-shirt. Her top bulged over her stomach, which had grown much larger since they’d seen her four months before. She was leaning back into the cushions, both hands resting on her belly as she closed her eyes, her nostrils flaring as she breathed deeply.

As the doors closed behind them, Regina opened her eyes at the noise, glancing at the entrance. A smile broke over her face, and she struggled to get to her feet as Brooke and Emily raced across the room towards her. They both grabbed her just as she stood upright, hugging her tightly without speaking.

“You got fat.”

“Dude!” Brooke’s head whipped towards Emily. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“What?” Emily smiled smugly. “We were all thinking it.”

“I was not,” Brooke said quickly, as she looked back at Regina. “You look much better.”

“I feel better,” Regina admitted, from her seat back on the couch. Emily and Brooke had dragged chairs over, to sit across from her. “I do feel pretty fat, though.”

Brooke shook her head, as Emily raised an eyebrow. “You got a sense of humor,” she noted.

“You got a sense of humor,” she noted.

“Yea.” Regina rubbed her belly. “I, uh, did have one before... you know. Doctor Howard says I should use it more often. I guess it helps with my recovery.”

“How is that going?” Brooke asked gently.


“Welcome to the club.” Emily smiled. “We get cool shirts.”

“How is that going?” Brooke asked gently.

Regina nodded. “She told me, too. She drives up to visit a couple of times a week.” Regina nodded. “I was kind of
conflicted, when she told me at first.”

Brooke tilted her head. “Why?”

“I mean...” Regina hesitated. “I still loved my husband. Even after...”

She trailed off, biting her lip, as Brooke and Emily watched her carefully. “And now?” Emily asked.

“Well... fuck him.”

The other two girls snorted at the statement. “Over him, are we?” Emily commented.

“Yea. Doctor Howard kind of walked me through how fucked up what those guys did to me actually was. And he brought in a woman to talk to me, another counselor, who told that she was a...” Regina bit her lip. “She was raped, too.”

Emily and Brooke shifted uncomfortably. “And?” Brooke implored.

“We talked through it for a while. She was raped by her husband, and she said she kind of knew where I was coming from, but...” Regina looked down at her lap. “She brought up a good point. If my husband really did love me, he never would have put up with what his father did to me.”

Emily shook her head. “I hope he enjoys those prison showers.”

Brooke scooted forward in her seat. “When do you think you’ll be coming back?” she asked. “I mean, you are coming back, right?”

“Doctor Howard says in a couple of weeks,” Regina replied. “Honestly, I’m kind of ready to go. I mean, I know that me coming here was a good thing, but this place isn’t really... I don’t know. Homey.”

“I’m sure.” Emily glanced around. “It’s nicer than I thought it would be, though. I figured something more in line with a scary movie.”

Regina frowned. “Why?”

“Because she wanted to watch some old horror film that was on TV last week, about some angry spirits that took over an asylum and killed a bunch of teenagers.” Brooke rolled her eyes. “She didn’t sleep for two days.”

“Did too!” Emily shot back.

“Dude, you looked like death at breakfast the whole weekend.”

“Shut up.”

Regina smiled. “It’ll be really nice to be back. Except... you know. I’m still sorry, for kicking you out of your room.”

Brooke shrugged. “I’ll be fine.”

“Still, I-” Regina winced. “Ouch.”

Emily frowned. “You okay?”

“Yes.” Regina looked down and poked her stomach. “Stop it.”
Brooke smirked. “Stop what?”

“He’s kicking me. Ouch.” Regina poked the baby again. “Hey. Cut it out.”

“Ooh, can we feel?” Emily asked, leaning forward.

“Yea, of course.”

Emily and Brooke quickly slid over to the couch, each of them sitting on one side of Regina. They both laid a hand on her belly, quietly waiting.

“Oh! I felt him!” Brooke said excitedly.

“Where?” Emily frowned, moving her hand around. “I don’t feel anything.”

“I do.” Regina grimaced. “It’s on her side.”

Emily moved her hand next to Brooke’s. “Oh, wow,” she said in awe. “Damn. He does kick hard.”

Regina nodded, looking down at Brooke and Emily’s hands as they pressed into her belly. “I... uh...” she swallowed. “I want to keep him.”

The other two girls looked back up at her. “You do?” Emily asked.

“Yea.” Regina nodded.

“You...” Brooke paused, as she considered her words. “Regina... are you sure? I mean, with everything...”

“Nobody would blame you if you wanted to...” Emily paused. “I don’t know. Put him up for adoption, or something.”

“I know. Miss Amber has brought it up a few times.” Regina quickly wiped her eyes. “I know it’s... kind of a shitty situation. I just...” she shrugged. “I can’t help it. I love him. He’s not even born yet, and I love him.”

Brooke and Emily traded glances.

“You don’t have to tell me it’s stupid.” Regina glanced back down at her stomach. “Trust me, I know.”

“It’s not stupid,” Brooke chastised her. “It just...” she sighed. “I was kind of looking forward, to sleeping through the night.”

Regina snorted in amusement. “Sorry.”

“You know what?” Emily asked. “It doesn’t matter. If you want to keep him, you should.”

“I do. I really do.” Regina glanced at her. “I’ll figure something out. For money, and school, and... whatever.”

“WE’LL figure something out,” Brooke corrected her.

Regina blinked. “Huh?”

“She said WE’LL figure it out.” Emily smirked. “We’re in this together remember?”
“You guys don’t have to do that,” Regina objected. “It’s my choice, and I’m sure a lot of people will tell me that it’s not a very smart one. You guys don’t have to do this with me.”

“We know.” Brooke nodded. “We’d be pretty shitty friends if we let you do it alone, though.”

Regina blinked several times, moisture collecting in her eyelashes as her lips trembled. She glanced back and forth between Brooke and Emily, unable to speak as she struggled to keep from crying.

“Although if this kid does start keeping me awake at night,” Emily added, “you two bitches are on your own.”

Regina coughed out a laugh, as Brooke rolled her eyes.

“I... uh...” Regina paused, sniffing. “I don’t know what to say.” Her voice broke, as she glanced at the two of them. “Thank you.”

“Hey, it’s...” Brooke’s voice trailed off, as she looked back at Regina’s stomach. “Holy crap, that was a big one.”

“Ow.” Regina winced, wiping her eyes before she poked her stomach again. “Cut it out, kid. We’re having a moment.”

“Dude, you need to start him on soccer practice as soon as he can walk.” Emily grinned. “He’s gonna be a natural.”

Regina smiled. “I was thinking more like an NFL kicker,” she said. “Pretty sure they get paid more.”
Steph: New Family

November 2019. Concurrent with ch 62 of EtL.

“You okay?”

Steph exhaled slowly, as she looked out the window of her aunt’s car. “I’m fine.”

“Are you?” Amanda had an amused expression on her face. “Because I’m pretty sure that if we put a pedal under your foot, you could probably propel the car there by yourself. Or power a small house.”

Her leg was definitely bouncing up and down like crazy. Steph willed herself to stop before she looked back at Amanda. “Sorry.”

“Little nervous?”

Steph scoffed. “What gave it away?”

“Don’t worry,” Amanda assured her. “Michael’s been telling them all about you. They’re stupidly excited to meet you.”

“So you guys told me.” Steph looked back towards the windshield as they took a turn. “Still.”

“Hey.” Steph turned, noticing the smile on her aunt’s face. “What’s your concern?”

“Oh, Jesus, I don’t know.” Steph leaned back into the passenger seat. “That they won’t like me because they’ll think I’m an interloper? Because I’m gay? Because I’m an atheist? Because they won’t actually believe that I’m Michael’s kid and I’m trying to steal your guys’ money?”

Amanda snorted in amusement. “Well, I can assure you that they won’t hate you because you’re gay. None of them are homophobic. On the contrary, your uncle Frankie’s best man at his wedding was gay.”

Steph blinked. “Didn’t he get married when he was in the Navy? I thought that wasn’t allowed.”

“That was your uncle Joshua,” Amanda corrected her. “Frankie’s best man was one of his friends from their apprenticeship.”

“Okay, add that to the list.” Steph sighed. “They’ll hate me because I can’t keep their names straight.”

“You’re meeting them for the first time. They’re all very nice people, and they will forgive you.” Amanda nodded. “Being an interloper is silly, they’re not going to hate you for that. And your father and I don’t have enough money for someone to put this level of effort into conning us out of it.”

Steph turned back to face her. “And me being an atheist?”

“... maybe save that one for later,” Amanda allowed. “And the fact that you’re a Seahawks fan.”

“Ah, fuck.” Steph closed her eyes with a grimace. “They’re all Forty-Niner fans, aren’t they?”

“Why do you think I asked you to forgo the Seattle beanie?” Amanda smirked. “I meant to ask; why
do you wear one all the time? Is it just for the look?”

Steph shrugged, as she fiddled with her fingers. “I, uh... it’s stupid.”

“I’m sure it’s not.”

“It really is.”

Amanda looked back at her. “Do you not want to talk about it? Is it, you know, a medical thing?”

Steph rolled her eyes. “I do not have a bald spot, or a huge scar.”

“So...”

Steph sighed. “It was something I tried, when I was ten or eleven,” she told her. “I saw a woman do it on TV, and I thought she looked really pretty, so I figured I’d give it a shot. I put it on in the morning when I was getting ready for school. My mom asked why I was doing it, since it was April, and I told her it was something I was trying.”

She paused. “And... my mom actually told me that it looked good on me.”

“Well.” Amanda glanced at her. “I mean, she’s not wrong. It suits you.”

“I... yea. Her approval just... I don’t know. I didn’t get a ton of praise from her when I did stuff right, so hearing her actually like something I did meant a lot.” Steph looked back at her aunt. “I’m not sure how pathetic that is.”

Amanda pressed her lips together, as she kept her eyes on the road. “Steph, you know I didn’t think very highly of my sister before she left, right?”

“Yea.”

“Have you picked up on the fact that I’m pretty furious at her, for not telling me where she was? Or that I had a niece?”

“Little bit.”

“Then I don’t have to tell you what I think of her behavior as a mother, do I?”

Steph smirked. “No.”

Amanda sighed. “Look, Steph, of everything your mom did, I think the worst of it was not telling you that you had an entire family who would have loved and supported you, if they had known you existed. Everybody at your grandmother’s house was incredibly happy when Michael told them about you, and they are all eager to meet you.”

Steph licked her lips. “... I’m still nervous.”

“I know.” Amanda slowed, as she took one more turn. “There it is.”

Following her gaze, Steph examined the light-blue house in front of them. It was definitely one of the larger lots she’d seen in California, with nicely-trimmed hedges in front and a pair of massive trees in the backyard. Several cars were lined up in front of it, along with a pair of motorcycles. “Who else rides besides Michael?” she asked.

“Your Aunt Tricia’s husband, George.” Amanda looked at her. “Are you ready? Or do you want me
“No.” Steph exhaled slowly. “Let’s do this.”

“They’re gonna love you,” Amanda assured her again, as they parked on the street. “Seriously, Steph, don’t worry about it.”

Her assurances didn’t help Steph as much as she would have liked. Her heart was pounding as she slowly got out of the car, adjusting her shirt as she closed the door behind her.

*It’ll be okay. Steph squared her shoulders as she followed Amanda up the walkway. If shit goes south, I can always get a taxi, or an Uber, and just-*

The door to the house was flung open just as her feet touched the top of the porch steps. Steph blinked and found herself wrapped in a bone-crushing hug. She gasped in surprise as she looked down and saw nothing but a head full of grey hair.

“You’re here!” the old lady squealed, and though Steph hadn’t thought it was possible, the hug actually got tighter. “Oh my goodness! It is so nice to meet you!”

“Hi,” Steph managed to push out, looking at Amanda with wide eyes.

Amanda smiled, as she reached over and laid a hand on the woman’s shoulder. “She can’t breathe, Nana. You’re squeezing too hard.”

The woman immediately let go and stepped back, letting Steph finally get a good look at her. She was almost exactly what Steph would have expected to see in the dictionary under the word Grandma; curly white hair, wrinkles across her face, glasses perched on her nose, and a floral shirt paired with jeans under a red apron.

“Just look at you!” She immediately reached up, cupping Steph’s cheeks and examining her closely. “Oh my God, you have your father’s exact eyes.”

“Um... th-thank you,” Steph stammered. “It’s, uh, nice to meet you, Mrs. Thompson.”

“Oh, don’t call me that, sweetie,” her grandmother chastised. “Everyone calls me Nana. Even my kids. ‘Mrs. Thompson’ makes me sound like an old lady.”

Steph snorted in amusement, unable to stop herself as she smirked. “Sorry.”

“Goodness, you’re so tall, too!” Her grandmother looked her up and down, the wide smile not leaving her face. “I don’t think I’m ready to have an adult grandchild. I’ll need you to slouch a little bit when we go inside, dear.”

Amanda chuckled behind her. “How’s dinner coming, Nana?”

“That depends on how long your husband wants to lollygag with the smoker.” She gave Amanda an exasperated look. “I did tell him to come by earlier. Him and Joshua are still fiddling with it.”

“I’m sure it’ll be ready in time,” Amanda assured her. “Josh, at least, knows what he’s doing. Why don’t we get Steph inside, so everyone else can meet her?”

Steph’s heartrate shot back up, as she looked towards the open door. It must have showed on her face, because Amanda reached out and took her elbow, guiding her towards the door. “Try to relax,” she whispered. “It’ll be fine.”
“Uh huh.” Steph swallowed. “Okay,” she breathed as they walked inside behind her grandmother, who led the way down a very short hallway and into a living room.

Steph walked in and froze, her eyes widening as the sheer number of people.

She’d figured there would be a large group. She knew that Michael had three siblings, all of whom were married and had kids; she’d even counted them in her head, earlier, and reached the estimate of about a dozen people.

She still wasn’t ready to see them all in person.

It seemed like seven or eight kids were clustered around the TV, watching a movie; their ages looked like they ranged from three or four to eleven or twelve. Seven other adults were behind them, sitting on couches and chairs while they spoke quietly.

Oh, fuck.

Too many people.

I’m not ready for this.

She unconsciously tried to take a step back and ran into Amanda by accident. But before she could say anything, a surprisingly sharp whistle blew from her grandmother’s lips. All the conversation stopped as everyone’s head swiveled toward them.

“She’s here!” Her grandmother announced. “Everyone come meet your new niece!”

When she later tried to remember the next couple of hours, most of it was a blur. As soon as her grandmother had announced her, she’d practically been swept up by the crowd of relatives.

She remembered stammering out her introduction, as she received WAY more hugs that she would have figured from the adults, while the kids crowded around and looked at her with wide eyes.

She remembered Amanda eventually getting her into a seat on the couch, and one of the men asking her if she wanted a beer. An open bottle was placed in her hand almost as soon as she finished nodding.

She remembered mixing up her uncles again. Frankie with his salt-and-pepper goatee, and Joshua with a full beard that trailed halfway down his chest, both laughing as her face turned a bright shade of red.

She remembered trying to keep all of the women straight, and only successfully remembering Tricia. Frankie and Joshua’s wives, Natalie and Kelly, looked so similar with their blonde hair that she gave up hope and tried to avoid their names while she spoke.

She remembered fielding dozens of questions from everyone. Where was she from? Where did she work? Where did she go to college? The kids even crowded around her to ask their own questions. How old was she? Was Uncle Michael really her dad? Where did she live? Did she really draw stuff for a job? Did she really work on video games?

She finished her beer. The empty bottle was immediately swapped out with a new one. She finished that one, too, and received another. Her new family questioned her non-stop, and she tried to keep up.
One of the kids, her four-year-old cousin named Marcy, looked up at her from the ground with innocent eyes. “Do you have a boyfriend?” she asked curiously.

Steph felt a twinge, with a brief moment of panic. Just like she’d had when she met Michael at the bar. “I, uh... I’m afraid not.”

Marcy didn’t avert her gaze. “Why?”

“Well, I...” Steph swallowed nervously, as she looked at the child. “I’m gay.”

The child blinked. “Like Uncle Joey?”

“Who?”

Frankie chuckled. “One of my best friends,” he explained. “He’s gay, too. Him and his husband live next door. Marcy and his daughter Iris are best friends.”

“Oh, right.” Steph exhaled slowly. “I remember Amanda mentioned him. Your best man, right?”

“That’s right.” He nodded. “We graduated our trade school together. Great guy.”

The morning continued, and she was bombarded with more questions. After a while she started to feel a little worn out, and excused herself to the bathroom. Once inside, she quietly locked the door and sat on the edge of the tub, running her hands over her face as she took several deep breaths.

Okay. They don’t hate me.

But holy fuck are they excited. Steph put her hands in her lap, itching at her thumbs. I can’t remember the last time I talked so much about myself.

Her mother had certainly never asked so many questions. And they seemed to already know a lot about her. Even her favorite beer; she frowned as she remembered that a seasonal Octoberfest Lager that she loved had been put into her hands, the kind she’d told Michael was the reason she was always happy when fall arrived. Which meant they’d actually gotten her some.

I can’t believe he remembered that. It was so off-hand.

She felt herself getting emotional, and immediately tried to force it back down. She wiped the beginnings of moisture from her eyes, as she took several more deep breaths.

The sound of a door opening drew her attention to the open window, and she heard voices float through. “... think they’re ready yet?” she heard Amanda ask.

“Hang on.” Steph recognized Joshua’s voice, as he opened something. “Almost. Another half hour, and the birds should be good.”

“I thought they would be finished by two?”

Joshua sighed. “They would have been, if the GCFI hadn’t tripped this morning. We didn’t realize it until we went to change the chips out. I figure we lost about an hour of cooking.”

“You didn’t know a breaker had popped?” Amanda sounded amused. “You’re a terrible electrician.”

“Yea, yea.” Steph heard something close... the smoker door, she realized. “Hey, how do you think Steph is doing? She seem alright to you?”
“She seems okay.” Amanda paused. “Maybe a little overwhelmed, meeting everyone all at once. She was really nervous the whole way over.”

“Hm. I guess it would be a little nerve-wracking,” Joshua conceded. “Your sister never told her anything about us?”

Amanda sighed. “She didn’t even know I existed,” she replied. “My sister told her that she was the only family Steph had.”

“Christ,” Joshua muttered. “Any idea what she did that for?”

“I have no idea. If I see her again, I might ask her, between curb-stomps.”

Steph’s mouth twitched upwards, in a small smirk.

“That’s terrible,” Joshua lamented. “How’s Mike been taking it?”

“He’s... putting on a good face.” Amanda sighed. “You know he always wanted kids. And finding out that he had one this whole time, and that she was deliberately kept from him...” her voice trailed off.

“Little upset?” Joshua offered.

“I’m sure he is. But he won’t talk about my sister. Refuses to even acknowledge what she did. He just wants to get to know Steph.” Amanda snorted. “The night after we met her, in San Francisco, he was up late Googling her. Trying to figure out who she was, so he could really get to know her.”

Steph’s heart twisted. He was?

“And?”

“He spent about an hour telling me what he found. Her Facebook, LinkedIn, everything. He spent another hour going through her online portfolios, showing me everything she’s drawn. She’s an incredible artist.”

That’s... Steph felt her eyes getting wet again. I can’t believe he really- wait. Portfolios? Plural? She frowned in confusion. I only have the one on my LinkedIn profile.

Oh.

Oh, shit. Her stomach dropped in horror. Please tell me he didn’t find it.

“What kind of stuff DOES she draw?” Joshua asked. “She said she did concept art, but she never specified.”

“I mean, she does work on video games, so a lot of it is what you’d expect. A bunch of soldiers, monsters, machines, a lot of fantasy and sci-fi stuff,” Amanda explained. “Michael couldn’t stop laughing about this one picture, though, of a T-Rex trying to get a cat off of its head.”

Oh my God. Steph dropped her burning-hot face into her hands. My estranged father found my old DeviantArt page.

I wonder if it’s crass to commit Seppuku in the house of a relative I just met?

Someone knocked on the bathroom door. “Uh, one second!” Steph called as she hastily flushed the toilet and turned the sink on, cupping water in her hands and rubbing her face before she unlocked
The little girl from before, Marcy, was waiting for her outside. She looked up at her as Steph opened the door. “Are you okay?” she asked in an innocent voice.

“Yea,” Steph assured her. “Yea, I’m okay.”

Marcy studied her carefully. “Were you crying?”

“Oh.” Steph quickly wiped off what little water was left on her cheeks. “It’s just...”

She didn’t get a chance to finish as Marcy walked forward and hugged her, the girl’s head barely coming up to her waist.

Steph couldn’t help but giggle. “What are you doing?”

“Mommy says we’re supposed to hug people when they cry,” Marcy said simply.

“Well, your mom is right.” Steph rubbed the girl’s shoulder. “But I was just washing my face. I wasn’t crying.”

“Okay.” Marcy slowly let go. “Nana’s talking about you.”

“Really?” Steph grinned. “What’s she saying?”

“She’s telling Uncle Josh and Aunt Kelly to stop being badgers.” She paused. “I think.”

Steph chuckled. “That’s funny,” she said. “Go ahead, Marcy, the bathroom’s all yours.” She paused. “And thank you. For the hug.”

Marcy smiled. “You’re welcome, Cousin Steph.”

She blinked, as she watched the child walk into the bathroom and close the door, her emotions bubbling up again.

_I’m Cousin Steph now._

_Damn it. She quickly wiped her eyes again. Not cool, kid._

“Dear God, Thank you for your amazing power and work in our lives. Thank you for your goodness and for your blessings over us. Thank you for your great love and care...”

Steph kept her head bowed respectfully, trying not to fidget as her grandmother stood at the head of the adult table and said Grace. Though she desperately wanted to start eating.

_I am so hungry._

When she’d sat down between Amanda and Joshua, her eyes had almost burst out of her head at the meal they had laid out. Between the multiple turkeys, bowls of mashed potatoes, vegetables, stuffing, and all the rest of the food, she was seconds away from digging in before her grandmother had everyone bow their heads and link hands. She tried not to squeeze her uncle’s and aunt’s hands too tightly, as she peeked at the dishes in front of her.

“...help us to set our eyes and our hearts on you afresh...”
There MUST have been a shorter prayer. Steph smirked inconspicuously. Whatever happened to “rub-a-dub-dub, thanks for the grub”?

“... and thank you, God, for bringing our Steph to us for this blessed meal...”

Ah, hell. Steph felt her face getting red. I’m an asshole.

“... in Jesus’ name, Amen.”

“Amen,” Steph muttered in unison with everyone else, as she slowly picked her head up and let go of her aunt and uncle’s hands. She noticed a few of the others smiling at her and squirmed uncomfortably, not used to the attention.

*Almost miss Mom drinking herself into a stupor, and polishing off the leftovers by myself.*

*Almost.*

Whatever. Time to finally eat.

“Okay, then!” She looked back at her grandmother, who was still smiling. “Who wants to go first and say what they’re thankful for?”

... so goddamn close. She withheld a pained grimace. *Shit, I don’t even know what to say. Should’ve Googled something touchy-feely.*

“I’ll go first,” Michael offered. Steph instantly bit her lip nervously, as he looked at her. “I, uh... Steph, I’m just incredibly grateful that I met you,” he told her. “You’re pretty awesome, and I wish we’d met sooner. But I’m thankful that I got to meet you, period.”

Her feelings hit her hard as he sat back down, and tried to formulate a response in her head, but her emotions were getting the best of her. She swallowed, trying to get past the lump in her throat, but Frankie stood up next to him before she could reply. “I’ll... you know what? I’ll second that.” He shot her a smile. “It’s been great to actually meet you, Steph. Welcome to the family.”

*Dammit.* Steph swallowed again, as Frankie sat and his wife, Natalie stood and smiled as well.

She tried very hard to keep her emotions in check as the adults went down the line and all said similar things about how happy they were to meet her.

And she tried very hard not to think about how it was the most familial support she’d ever gotten, and it was from people she’d known for less than six hours.

She tried to ignore the tears welling up in her eyes, hiding them by keeping her gaze on her plate. The mucus loosened behind her nose as she tried desperately not to cry, or breath through it, not wanting to let the others know how emotional she was getting.

It was a far cry from eating takeout Chinese food with her mother while they watched TV and ignored each other.

*Keep it together, Steph...*

She was so focused that she barely registered Joshua stand up next to her. She blinked rapidly, as she looked at him. “I don’t know how I can follow all that,” he lamented, smiling at her. “Like they said, Steph, it’s so great to have a chance to get to know you. I’m really glad you’re here, and...” he stopped, tilting his head as he looked at her. “Are you okay?”
Steph swallowed. “Uh huh,” she croaked, failing to keep her voice from cracking as she sniffled.

She felt a tap on her shoulder, and turned to see Marcy beside her. Steph didn’t get a chance to ask what she wanted before the girl reached across and gave her a hug, pressing the side of her face into Steph’s shoulder.

Her breath exploded from her lungs in a sob as Steph leaned her head onto Marcy’s and closed her eyes. After a couple of second, she felt Amanda’s arms around her, too, followed by Joshua’s. She desperately snorted, trying to keep snot from running down her face, as she cried silently.

“Nuh-uh,” she heard Amanda say quietly, as she heard the other adults start to get up from their seats. “Give us a minute.”

_Oh, God damn it._ Steph buried her face in Marcy and Amanda’s hair as her face turned red. _Now I’m making a fucking scene._

“Nana-”

“I heard what she said.” She listened to her grandmother snip back at Michael. “I’m taking grandma’s prerogative. You sit down.”

Steph lifted her head, looking through blurry eyes as her grandmother walked around the table towards her, eventually laying a hand on her shoulder. “There now, dear. Are you okay?”


“I know, sweetie. It’s okay.” Her grandmother smiled. “How are you feeling?”

“I don’t...” Steph snorted back again. “I’m sorry. I didn’t... there’s too many...” she sniffled, as her voice cracked again. “I don’t know what to do, and I’m so sorry...”

“That’s all right.” Her grandmother rubbed her shoulder. “What do you need?”

Steph glanced back at the others, her face reddening further as everyone stared at her.

“Can we just eat now?” she blurted out. “I don’t know what to say, everything looks amazing, and I’m really, really hungry!”

Everyone immediately started laughing.

“Well, you heard her!” Her grandmother gestured towards the food. “Start eating!”

“It’s been a really long time since I felt that embarrassed.”

Amanda smirked, as she sat next to Steph on the back porch. “When was the last time?”

“When one of my best friends walked in on me in a... let’s just call it a compromising position.” Steph drank more beer, tilting her head back as she took several gulps. “I didn’t mean to start crying like that. I don’t think I can face anyone.”

“Oh, stop it.” Amanda rolled her eyes. “They love you. I’ve been telling you that all day.”

“I know. I believe you.” Steph sat back. “I’m just... I didn’t mean to make a scene.”

Amanda reached over and patted her knee. “You mean your crying, or your fourth plate of food?”
“... it was REALLY good.”

“It was.” Amanda took a sip of her own beer. “Nana said she’ll put her corn bread and mashed potato recipes in her will. We’re just hoping she follows through.”

Steph snorted as she let out a chuckle. “How much shit do you think I’ll get for all this?”

“If your grandmother has anything to say about it? None.” Amanda grinned. “And she takes her role as matriarch seriously, if you haven’t noticed.” She looked at the door. “You want to go back inside? The game will be starting any second.”

“Yea,” Steph sighed. “I do want to watch San Francisco lose.”

“I wouldn’t-”

“I won’t say anything out loud.”

Amanda smiled as she got up and led the way back inside. Steph followed closely behind her as they walked into the living room, and saw that her seat on the couch was still unoccupied.

“There you are.” Michael smiled, as she sat next to him. “How are you doing?”

“Okay.” Steph sipped her beer. “... sorry. For before.”

“Nothing to apologize for.” Michael nodded at the TV. “You gonna be okay listening to us cheer for the Forty-Niners?”

She shrugged. “Nobody’s perfect.”

“Excuse me?” Her Aunt Tricia turned to her from the opposite couch; her and the other adults had all put on their red and gold jerseys. “Are the Forty-Niners NOT your team?”

Steph smirked. “I was advised not to discuss my football team until the next holiday.”

She laughed with the others, settling back into the couch to watch the game. She was about to take another drink of her beer as Marcy appeared in front of her. “Can I watch too?” she asked, looking up at Steph expectantly.

“Um.” She blinked, not quite sure what the girl was asking. “Yea, sure.”

Marcy immediately climbed up into her lap. Steph froze as the girl turned around, leaning into her as she focused on the TV.

Okay. We’re doing this now.

Steph looked at the other adults, but none of them seemed to notice, or care. They continued to watch the opening of the game and talk amongst themselves, as Marcy curled into the crook of her arm.

Crap. All right, don’t break the toddler. Steph swallowed. Doesn’t matter how much they love me, there’s no coming back from that.

“Well, go ASK her.”

She turned her head and saw Frankie’s wife standing with two of the older kids. Steph frowned, as she tried to remember their names.
“But-”

“Kristen, Lucas, don’t be shy,” Natalie told them. “You have a question, then ask your Cousin Steph. Go on now.”

They both looked over at her, then made their way over until they stood next to the arm of the couch. Steph smiled at them widely. “Hey guys. What’s up?”

“So...” The girl, Kristen, bit her lip. “You make video games, right?”

“I help make video games,” Steph clarified. “I design the content.”

“What does that mean?”

“I draw out the characters, and machines, and all the elements of the game, so that the animators have something to go off of,” she explained. “The writers give me the information, and I bring it to life.”

Lucas nodded. “But... how is the GAME made?”

Steph frowned. “What do you mean?”

“The...” his face twisted, as he tried to think of the words. “The game. How you move, and jump, and shoot, and do everything.”

“You mean, like, programming all the mechanics?” Steph asked.

They both nodded fiercely.

“I, uh... I’m actually not sure,” she admitted. “That’s another team that does all that. I’ve met a few of the programmers, but I’m not quite sure how they do everything.”

“Is it a lot of typing?” Kristen asked. “Like, writing code?”

Steph tried to remember what she knew of the other departments. “There’s a little bit of coding,” she agreed. “A lot of their work is with the graphics engine, but we buy the rights to use that from another company. THOSE guys write most of the code.”

Lucas frowned. “What’s a graphics engine?”

“The... thing that generates the graphics that you guys see.” Steph winced. “I’m really sorry, guys, I didn’t go to college for that. My focus is mostly on the art.”

“You went to college for video games?” Kristen asked with wide eyes.

Steph laughed. “That would have been awesome. My degree is in Graphic Design.” She took another sip of her beer, maneuvering her arm so she didn’t push into Marcy. “The programmers have different degrees.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Steph looked up in thought. “Animation, game design, computer science, interactive-”

“Game design?” The two kids latched onto those words, as they stared at Steph. “What’s that?”

“It’s learning how to make a video game, and put everything together.” Steph grinned. “You learn
how to do a lot of different things.”

“Is it a hard degree?” Lucas asked.

“Well, all degrees are hard to get,” Steph replied. “They-”

“But all degrees are WORTH IT.” She blinked, and her grandmother practically materialized behind Lucas and Kristen. “It’s a lot of hard work, to get a good job like your Cousin Steph.”

The kids’ faces fell, and Steph got the feeling that they’d heard the incoming lecture before. “We know, Nana,” Lucas muttered. “We’re going to college.”

“You’re damn right you two are.” Her grandmother ruffled their hair. “Do you want an awesome job like your Cousin Steph?”

“Yes,” they both said in unison.

Her grandmother turned to her next. “Would you have gotten your awesome job without a degree?”

Steph quickly shook her head. “Nope.”

“And there you go.” Her grandmother let go of the kids. “If you two want to make those video games you guys love so much, you need to go to college.”

“Yes, Nana,” they groaned.

Next to her, Michael chuckled. “Look at you, raising the bar for all the other grandkids,” he joked. “They’re not gonna like you for much longer.”

“And who’s saying she’s not raising the bar for the grown-ups, too?” Her grandmother turned an eye towards Michael and the others. “I wouldn’t mind if there was more than one person in the family who had a degree.”

“I have three state-accredited contracting certifications,” Frankie pointed out from his seat.

“Did any of them come from a college?”

The other adults snorted in amusement, including Steph, as Frankie rolled his eyes. “No, Nana.”

“Then hush.” She smiled at Steph. “Your grandfather would have been so proud, if he’d met you. His biggest regret was not finishing school.”

Steph frowned. “What did he do?”

Her grandmother looked at the wall. Steph followed her gaze and noticed an older photo of a man with a thick head of grey hair, standing beside a younger version of her grandmother. “Well, after the war in Vietnam ended, he left the Navy and worked in a shipyard,” she explained. “He spent most of his life as an underwater welder. He always wanted to go back to school and become an engineer.”

She gestured at the other adults. “But then we had your father, and everyone else followed. Money was tight, and we couldn’t afford to put your grandfather through college classes while raising four children.”

“Oh.” Steph bit her lip, as she looked back at the photo of her grandfather. “That sucks.”

“Ah, he enjoyed the hell out of his job,” Joshua assured her. “He could talk for hours, about all the
broken hulls he fixed. Dad was one of the best in the business.”

“Still.” Her grandmother smiled. “I’m so happy that you got an education, Steph. And that you used it to get a job you love.”

_Dammit._ Steph averted her gaze. _Don’t cry again. You just finished recovering from last time._

“YES!!”

The outburst from Frankie made everyone jump. “What?” Michael asked.

“We just scored the first touchdown!!” Frankie pumped his fist, as he kept his eyes on the TV. “Did you guys not see that pass?!”

Next to him, Tricia rolled her eyes. “There was a moment, you moron. You missed it.”

“Yea, yea. Nana getting on us about not going to college. Heard it before.” He threw her a smirk. “Oh, and my niece is better than me for having a degree. At least that’s a new one.”
November 2019. Concurrent with ch 62 of EtL.

Regina came back just in time for Thanksgiving, right after Brooke’s birthday. By that point she was well into her third trimester. Jane produced a new wardrobe of maternity outfits for her, and Regina had made herself at home on one side of the couch. Brooke and Emily had essentially become her servants, much to her chagrin.

“I can still walk around,” she informed them as Emily got up to get her a drink. “I’m not confined to my seat.”

“Tell it to your shoes,” Emily countered. “You could fit into them when you left.”

Regina rolled her eyes. “You know, that’s normal when you’re pregnant.”

“Yea, well, so is having people bring you shit.” Emily smirked as she walked into the kitchen.

“Speaking of shoes.” Regina looked at Brooke’s feet; she had been wearing her new flip-flops for almost a week straight. “You know it’s getting way too cold for those, right? It’ll start snowing soon.”

“We’re inside,” Brooke told her. “And that doesn’t change the fact that they’re cute as hell.”

Regina shook her head. “When you get frostbite and your toes fall off, don’t come crying to me.”

Brooke leaned forward in her chair. “Hey... you’re still doing okay, right?”

“Yes. I’m fine,” Regina assured her. “You guys are good to go help Jane, you know.”

“Jane said she didn’t need our help.” Brooke shrugged. “She did this by herself last year. Honestly, I don’t think she wants us getting in her way. The few times we’ve tried, we couldn’t really keep up.”

Regina smiled. “Really? A proper daughter from an Elder’s family isn’t up to par in the kitchen?”

“By this point, I think we’ve established that I’m a terrible daughter,” Brooke reminded her. “Although my lack of kitchen skills is far from their top concern at the moment.”

“True.” Regina cocked her head. “They’re not still, you know, trying to get you back, are they?”

“No.” Brooke shook her head. “Miss Amber said they filed an appeal, but Megan got it shot down. They didn’t have any new arguments strong enough to consider. So the game is over, as far as the court is concerned.”

“Good.” Regina nodded. “I’m really glad that you didn’t have to go back. I was worried about you.”

“Yea, me too.” Emily appeared, handing Regina a glass of water. “Though it would have been nice to have my own room again.”
Regina winced. “Sorry.”

“Not your fault, dude.” Brooke shrugged. “Besides, you’ll need the extra space soon enough.”

A knocking drew their attention, and the three of them turned to the door. “Pete must be back,” Emily mentioned as she stood.

Brooke looked at the clock on the wall. “Jeez, I forgot he was gone. The grocery store isn’t that far away.”

Emily shrugged as she opened the door. Pete stood on the other side. And behind him was a woman Brooke didn’t recognize, in nice jeans and a white blouse. Her brown hair was styled in a short bob around her face, and a large green military-style duffle bag was thrown over one shoulder.

She smiled as she saw Emily, who gasped. “What’s up, Snooze?”

“SADIE!!” Emily threw her arms around the other girl’s shoulders. “Holy CRAP! You’re back!”

Sadie? Brooke stood, looking at them with raised eyebrows as the brunette returned Emily’s hug. Oh, shit, the girl who was here before me!

“Dude!” Emily turned her head to look at Pete, not letting go of Sadie. “What the hell?! Why didn’t you tell me she was coming?!”

“Because I wanted to see the look on your face,” Sadie commented as she released Emily. “Damn, Snooze, you got tall.”

“I did not get- dude, shut up.” Emily pushed her shoulder. “I’m still the same size.”

“Nah, you definitely grew a few inches.” With a big grin, Sadie held her hand at the top of Emily’s head, then quickly moved it down to her chin. “Yea, at least three or four.”

“Oh, whatever.” Emily hugged her again. “Jesus, it’s good to see you again.”

Emily quickly introduced Sadie to Brooke and Regina. Pete went to go help Jane in the kitchen, leaving the girls alone to talk.

“How’s the Marines?” Emily asked as they sat down. “Everything you thought it would be?”

“Meh.” Sadie leaned back, crossing her legs. “Some good people, some idiots. Learning a lot, working too hard, not getting paid enough.”

Brooke smirked. “What do you do?”

“I’m a Combat Engineer,” she answered. “Been learning how to make roads, buildings, infrastructure, the whole nine yards. And how to demolish all of it.” She grinned. “They put a lot more emphasis on the last part.”

Emily leaned forward. “Have you been in training this whole time?”

“Most of it.” Sadie nodded. “Everything else has been fieldwork. We’re preparing to go to Afghanistan next year.”

“Wow,” Regina said in awe. “That’s... I don’t even know. Are you scared?”
“Little bit.” She shrugged. “But enough of that. How are you doing?” she asked, looking at Emily. “You look a lot better than when I left. You’re not still skipping classes, are you?”

Emily rolled her eyes. “Jesus, you sound like Miss Amber. No, I am not skipping classes.”

“Good.” Sadie glanced at Brooke, a smug look on her face. “I had to drag her to class a couple of times. Snooze was a terrible little delinquent.”

“Dude, I haven’t skipped a class for over a year.” Emily crossed her arms. “Can we please talk about something else?”

“Yea, how about this nickname?” Brooke looked at Sadie. “Why do you call her Snooze?”

Emily groaned, as Sadie smiled. “Because when she first got here, she kept waking me up at all hours with her sniffling. I was supportive, at first, but after the third night of no sleep, I told her that I was going to punch her like a snooze button if she didn’t calm down.”

“It wasn’t a good time for me,” Emily muttered.

“No, it wasn’t.” Sadie’s grin fell, as she looked back at Emily. “You really do look a lot better.”

“Thanks.”

Sadie looked back at Brooke and Regina. “You guys are both from First Light too, right?”

They nodded.

“How long have you guys been out for?”

“A few months,” Regina replied.

“A little over a year,” Brooke answered. “I called Miss Amber last October.”

Sadie sighed, uncrossing her legs and leaning her elbows onto her knees. “It’s been two or three years for me,” she said quietly. “It was still kind of hard to come back.”

“Why did you?” Regina asked. “Not to be rude or anything. But... I don’t know if I want to be anywhere near here, after I leave.”

“I don’t have any other family.” Sadie shrugged. “After Miss Amber picked me up, she tried to talk to my parents, and they said that no daughter of theirs would ever be a dyke.”

Brooke looked at her in horror. “I’m so sorry.”

“I’m not.” Sadie shook her head. “They weren’t really great parents to begin with. Jane and Pete were more of a family to me then they ever were. Pete was actually the one who made me think about the military.” She chuckled. “Though he tried to convince me that the Army was the better option.”

The other three snickered.

“Anyway.” Sadie looked back at Emily. “Like I said, I’m heading to Afghanistan in a few months. And I did tell you I’d come back to visit. I figured taking a few days over Thanksgiving would be the best chance I had before you graduated from Blackwell, since getting leave over Christmas is a nightmare.”
Sadie turned back to Brooke. “You said your last name was Scott?”

She nodded.

“Like Elder Scott?”

“He’s my grandfather.”

“Wow.” Sadie shook her head. “Between you and Elder Caulfield’s kid, those guys are batting a solid five hundred.”

Brooke smirked. “We met her, actually.”

Sadie raised her eyebrows. “Max Caulfield? Really?”

“She came back to talk to all of us in January, and make sure we knew that we could survive outside of the church.” Brooke cocked her head. “Did you know her?”

“No. Just of her.” Sadie shrugged. “I figured the stories about Elder Caulfield killing her were fake. But I never thought she’d poke her head up again.”

“She did. We’ve actually texted a few times.” Brooke patted the phone in her pocket. “She’s been really helpful. Especially when my grandfather was suing to get me back.”

Sadie blinked. “Your grandfather was what now?”

“Well, you know, the perfect little angels of the Elders aren’t supposed to do things like run away from home.” Brooke rolled her eyes. “So he sued the state, trying to tell them that I was a pathological liar for saying that I was forced to sign a marriage license at the age of seven. CPS had to get a lawyer to kept me in foster care.”

“Damn.” Sadie leaned back in her seat. “That’s... really, really fucked up.”

“Language!” Jane called from the kitchen.

“Oh, right.” Sadie sighed. “I forgot. That’s a thing, here.”

Emily snickered. “Welcome home, Jarhead.”

“Yea, I’ve been around Marines for too long.” Sadie turned her attention to Regina. “So. How far along are you?”

Regina narrowed her eyes. “What, do you think I’m pregnant or something?”

Sadie sat frozen for several seconds, a look of horror coming over her face. They watched her try to come up with a response, as her mouth opened and closed, but nothing came out.

Until a snort broke through Regina’s composure. Her, Brooke, and Emily dissolved into laughter.

“You should see the look on your face!” Emily cackled.

“That is SO not funny.” Sadie sat back, placing her hand over her heart as her cheeks colored. “I thought I had just committed the ultimate faux pas. I was about to go into cardiac arrest.”
“I’m sorry.” Regina smiled. “But you can’t pass up an opening like that.”

“Uh huh.” Sadie folded her arms. “I don’t like you anymore.”

“Yes, you do,” Emily quickly corrected her. “We are encouraging her to use her sense of humor as much as possible.”

“Even when her jokes aren’t funny.” Brooke smirked at Regina. “But that was hilarious.”

Sadie shook her head. “I’m glad you two think so.”

“I’m at seven months,” Regina finally answered. “It’s a boy. My OB/GYN said I’ll probably deliver after Christmas.”

“Ah.” Sadie smirked. “Too late to claim as a dependent on your taxes.”

“Given where we’re living, he would probably go on Jane and Pete’s tax return,” Emily reminded her.

“Fair enough.” Sadie bit her lip. “Is he, you know... why you left?”

The room got very quiet. Brooke turned to Regina, watching the girl shift in her seat. Emily started very subtly running the tips of her fingers across her chest, just below her neck, in a ‘cut it out’ motion.

“Sort of,” Regina finally said quietly.

“Oh.” Sadie noticed Emily’s motion and grimaced. “Sorry. I guess I shouldn’t ask.”

“No, it’s... fine.” Regina rested her hands on her belly and sighed. “Doctor Howard said I should talk about it. But I’m not ready to yet.”


“No, she’s still there,” Regina assured her. “I see a different therapist.”

“Hey, how are YOU doing?” Emily interrupted. “It must be nice to get away to the other side of the country, where you don’t have to deal with First Light. Do you talk to anyone about it?”

“Mm.” Sadie pursed her lips. “A couple of my squadmates. And there’s a really cool chaplain attached to our unit that I talk to sometimes, about what I went through. But I don’t really bring it up.” She shrugged. “I just tell people that my parents were fundamentalist assholes who didn’t take kindly to having a lesbian daughter.”

Brooke leaned forward. “Yea, I was wondering about that. I thought gay people weren’t allowed to serve in the military. Is it a problem?”

“Not really.” Sadie shook her head. “They repealed that law a few years ago. And the rank-and-file guys don’t give a crap anyway. The Marines I work with are pretty much my best friends now. And most of them have never even heard of First Light of Christ.”

“Wow,” Brooke said in awe. “That’s surreal. Like, it’s such a big thing in this part of the country, but outside of Oregon, most people have no idea who they are.”

“Yea, that blew my mind a little bit when I left.” Sadie crossed her legs again. “It would probably blow theirs, too, to realize that most of the country doesn’t care about them.”
Regina smiled. “If we could all be so lucky.”

“What about a GIRL-friend?” Emily asked with emphasis, wiggling her eyebrows. “You found a life partner yet?”

Sadie huffed, as she shot a glare at Emily. “Literally all I’ve been doing since I graduated boot camp is training. I don’t know what makes you think I have time to meet girls.”

“What about the other Marines?” Emily continued in a teasing tone of voice. “Or do you not want to meet your girlfriend at work?”

“Only eight percent of the Marines are female,” Sadie countered. “And most of those aren’t in combat jobs like mine. There are only a few female Marines in my unit, and I don’t really interact with them. Also, as far as I know, none of them are gay.”

“Hm.” Emily didn’t lose her smirk. “Sounds like a bunch of excuses to me.”

“Whatever, Snooze.” Sadie rolled her eyes. “You’re lucky Pete says I’m not allowed to beat you up anymore.”

The four girls kept up the conversation for another hour, before Jane announced that dinner was ready. Then the six of them spent almost another hour at the table, eating and talking. Sadie was mostly chatting with Pete about her training, and he hung on to every word, asking the occasional question.

Sadie took the couch when they went to bed that night. Brooke took the air mattress, which resulted in her waking up early; something that always happened, since she couldn’t sleep as well as she did on the real bed.

She left the bedroom, intending on quietly grabbing something to eat from the kitchen, and found that she was not the only one awake. She tip-toed down the stairs to see Sadie doing push-ups on the floor of the living room, still wearing the olive-green t-shirt and sweatpants she’d gone to bed in.

“I didn’t think anyone else would be up,” Brooke mentioned as she got to the foot of the stairs.

Sadie looked at her and grinned, not breaking form as she continued her exercises. “I’ve been waking up at five in the morning for months,” she grunted, finally stopping and standing upright. “It feels wrong to sleep in at this point.”

“Wow.” Brooke shook her head. “I don’t even want to think about waking up that early.”

“Yea, it’s not for everyone.” Sadie wiped her forehead really quick, then started doing squats, throwing her arms out as she bounced up and down. “Then again, neither is being a Marine.”

“Can’t argue with that.” Brooke looked at the kitchen. “Uh, I was gonna grab some cereal. Do you want some?”

Sadie paused, then stood back upright. “Know what? Sure. I’m on vacation.”

Brooke chuckled as she walked into the kitchen, retrieving the milk from the fridge. Sadie opened the pantry and immediately went for the boxes on the door. “Jane doesn’t really move anything around,” she noted as she set them on the table.

“No, not really.” Brooke fixed herself a bowl, sitting to eat as Sadie followed suit. “How long did
you live here, before?”

“About a year.” Sadie picked up her spoon and toyed with it, as she stared into her bowl. “I left the month after Jen and Sara were killed.”

Brooke remembered the two girls who’d been beaten to death. And realized that Sadie spoke about them with some familiarity. “Did you know them?” she asked.

“... yes,” Sadie sighed. “They, uh... they didn’t deserve what happened.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thanks.” Sadie shook her head. “I’m guessing you had an arranged marriage?”

Brooke nodded.

“Me too. I was supposed to get married the winter after I left. I thought at first that I might be able to get myself out of it, but then I heard...” she paused. “My parents said some pretty bad things, about Jen and Sara. So I figured that it wasn’t an option.”

“Do you...” Brooke hesitated, as she stirred her cereal absently. “Hate them?”

Sadie hummed, seeming to think over her answer as she had a few more bites of her cereal. “I’m not sure,” she admitted. “I know they don’t love me anymore, after what I did.”

“What, run away?”

“There was a little more to it than that.” Sadie looked away. “I don’t know. I feel like there isn’t really a solid answer to your question. If they approached me and tried to reconnect... I’m not sure if I’d turn them away or not.”

“Even after what they said?”

“People change.” Sadie shrugged. “I’d like to think they would too, eventually.”

“Hm.” Brooke looked back to her cereal, scooping some into her mouth.

“Do you hate your family?” Sadie asked.

Brooke swallowed. “My grandfather, mostly. He paid a sham of a psychologist to get on the stand and lie about me in court, so he could try to get me back.” She glanced back at Sadie. “And my dad, too. He was apparently the one who bribed the city clerk and had my marriage license notarized, to make me think it was legit.”

“Wow.” She paused. “What about your mom?”

“I don’t know.” Brooke shook her head. “When I saw her, at court, she seemed really broken up about me going back to foster care. I thought it was just an act, but... when I think about it, she sounded pretty sincere.”

They ate in silence for a few minutes.

“If you could take the opportunity to really ruin your family’s life, do you think you would do it?” Brooke asked out of the blue.

Sadie blinked. “Um... huh. I don’t know.”
“Like, really fuck them up.” Brooke looked back at her. “Stuff that would send them to prison, level of life ruination.”


Brooke bit her lip and didn’t answer, at first. “If I tell you something, will you keep it a secret?”

“Of- wait.” Sadie narrowed her eyes. “You didn’t kill anyone, right?”

“No.”

“Then yea, sure.”

Brooke checked behind them, making sure nobody was on the stairs before turning back. “I have dirt on my grandfather,” she said in a low voice. “Before I ran away, I stole proof that First Light is using shell corporations to launder their dirty money. Proof that has my grandfather’s signature on it.”

Sadie stared at her with wide eyes. “Whoa.”

“I know. I’m pretty sure that if I gave it to the right authorities, my grandfather would probably go to prison. Maybe my dad, too.” Brooke nodded. “And I’m ninety-nine percent sure they have no idea that I’ve got it.”

“How did you manage that?”

“My grandpa had it set aside to shred,” Brooke explained. “I made copies, the night before I left, and switched them with the originals. If he didn’t look at it beforehand, then he probably didn’t realize he was destroying photocopies.”

Sadie leaned back in her chair slowly, turning to face the wall. Brooke could see her absorbing what she’d been told. “... huh.”

“I was saving it, just in case the judge told me I had to go back to the church,” Brooke continued. “But since he ruled in my favor... I don’t know.” She sighed. “Part of me wants to give it to someone. Maybe Miss Amber.”

“Yea.” Sadie looked back at her. “I mean, no. Don’t.”

“Really?” Brooke raised her eyebrows. “Why?”

“How old are you again?”

“Seventeen.”

“That’s why.” Sadie leaned forward. “You and I both know that the church doesn’t care for teenagers who buck the system. Do you want to bet your freedom that your family won’t try any more stupid shit?”

Brooke silently contemplated that statement for several seconds. “... no.”

“I wouldn’t, either.” Sadie sat back. “You’ve got every excuse to screw over your family. But there’s no reason you have to do it now. Wait until you’re certain that you’ll be free of their bullshit, then do it.”

“Hmm.” Brooke mused over Sadie’s statement. “That’s definitely a smarter idea.”
“Exactly. Keep your head down, stay off their radar, and try to forget about them. Those fuckers are bad news.” Sadie tilted her head. “Has Emily told you that her brother threatened to kill her?”

Brooke shook her head. “I... heard that she might have gotten a death threat. She never told me, though.”

“Well, don’t tell her that I spilled the beans. A couple of months after she got here, she sent her whole family letters through the CPS office, trying to explain why she did what she did. I told her it was a bad idea, that nothing good could come of it, but she wanted to try anyway. She thought that one of them might empathize with her.”

Sadie scratched her neck as she sighed. “Almost none of them wrote back. Her mom, dad, older sister, younger brother, and grandparents were radio silent.” She paused. “Her older brother was the only one who replied. He basically said that she was dead to them, and if he ever saw her again, he’d make sure she was dead to everyone, for the shame and humiliation she caused their family.”

Brooke shuddered. “Shit.”

“I know. Emily took it pretty hard.” Sadie glanced back at the stairs. “I let her sleep in my room for a couple of nights, because she started having nightmares.”

“She still does,” Brooke said quietly.

Sadie raised her eyebrows. “Really?”

“A few, since I’ve been here.” Brooke followed Sadie’s gaze to the stairs. “I’ve told her to come to me, when she does. I usually let her sleep in my bed.”

“Christ.” Sadie bit her lip. “I’m... really glad you’re there for her. Someone should be. That was my only hang-up about leaving, that she wouldn’t have any friends. She doesn’t make them easily, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“I picked up on that.” Brooke smiled. “She was really there for me, too, when I first got here. She helped me through some rough shit. I didn’t know she had her own problems for a couple of months after I met her.”

Sadie smiled back. “You two seem like really good friends.”

“She’s my best friend,” Brooke said simply. “I’d probably been in a loony bin without her.”

“Good.” Sadie nodded, taking another bite of her cereal. “What about Regina?”

“I mean, she’s our friend too. We promised we’d help with her kid, once he’s born. She definitely needs it.”

Sadie nodded. “That... sounds really complicated.”

“I know.” Brooke slouched in her chair. “We’re still working out the logistics. Emily and I have talked about taking a gap year, to work and save some cash for Regina and college.”

“Sounds smart. Would you guys stay here?”

“I mean, I kind of have to.” Brooke shrugged. “I won’t turn eighteen until five months after I graduate high school. Jane and Pete don’t have a choice but to look after me. But we haven’t specifically asked them.”
“Well, you probably should.” Sadie leaned forward. “But those two are amazing. I can’t imagine they would say no.”

“We will.”

Sadie nodded. “Where do you guys want to go to school? Here in Oregon?”

“Yea.” Brooke nodded. “We’re looking at OSU.”

“For what degree?”

“I don’t have a clue.” Brooke sighed. “I’m sure Emily will want to do something science-y. Regina’s still a year behind us, so she’s got plenty of time. But I have no idea what I want to be when I grow up, and that kind of worries me.”

“You’re only seventeen,” Sadie reminded her. “You’ve got plenty of time, too.”

Footsteps on the stairs drew their attention, and they both turned as Emily came into view. “Why the fuck are you guys up so early?” she grumbled, as she ambled into the kitchen.

“Couldn’t sleep.” Brooke smirked. “Why are you?”

“I was hungry.” Emily looked at the cereal they were eating. “You two know there’s still half a pumpkin pie in the fridge, right?”

“It’s seven in the morning,” Sadie countered.

Emily stared at her, blinking. “... so?”

Brooke stood, moving her cereal to the side. “You make a convincing argument. I’ll grab more spoons.”

Chapter End Notes

There. All three stories are caught up. Everything from here on out will be in chronological order.
She had absolutely no idea why she was so nervous.

Victoria felt a plethora of emotions, as she drove towards the coffee shop. Apprehension, for Kate; she knew what talking to her mother brought out in her wife, but her father was a wild card as far as she could tell. Contempt, certainly, towards the man who’d let his wife call the two of them horrible names while almost cancelling their wedding day.

But nervousness. She had no idea why she felt that particular emotion.

*Maybe because it's the first time I’m meeting one of my wife’s parents,* she thought in amusement. *We never really did the whole “are you worthy of my daughter” thing.*

*Of course, if he tries that now, I’m going to rip off his head and shit down his throat.*

“Vicky, you’re going a little fast,” Kate piped up.

She realized that her wife was right; the speedometer had her at fifty-five in a thirty-five. Easing off the gas, she brought her speed back to a reasonable level. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Kate smiled at her. “I’m not really one to pass judgement, I guess.”

“Not after that little piece of mail we got this week.” Victoria looked at her in exasperation. “You realize that I can’t take the fall for this one. I’ve got too many points on my license to just pay off the fine again; I HAVE to tell the DMV that it was you.”

“Again?” Lynn piped up from the back seat, sticking her head between Victoria and Kate’s shoulders. “Wait, how many speeding tickets have you gotten?”

“Yes, Kate,” Victoria said with a smirk. “Tell your sister how many speeding tickets you’ve gotten.”

Kate shot her a look. “I said I was sorry.”

“I accept your apology. Now confess your sins to your little sister.”

She sighed. “Four,” she admitted.

“FOUR?!” Lynn looked at her with wide eyes. “ Seriously?!”

“Yes,” she muttered. “I didn’t realize I was going so fast on the four-oh-five again.”

“Eighty-nine miles an hour,” Victoria lamented.

Lynn snickered. “I didn’t know your Volvo could even go that fast.”

“It wasn’t in the Volvo.” Kate thumbed towards Victoria. “I was taking her car.”

“Ah.” Lynn looked at Victoria. “How fast does this thing go?”
“Couldn’t tell you. Never been higher than seventy-five.”

Lynn’s eyebrows shot up. “For real? A sleek little car like this, and you’ve never put the hammer down on the road?”

“No. I brought this car because I like the look of it, and it’s a smooth ride. I didn’t buy it to race against the highway patrol. Am I taking this left, or the next one?”

“The next one.” Lynn pointed. “And then the second right after that. I don’t know, if I had a car like this? I’d take it to an abandoned piece of road, TOTALLY cut loose, and see how fast I could get it up to.”

“Well, I guess it runs in the family.” Victoria smirked as she took the turn. “In any case, your sister is falling on her sword this time. Like I said, I can’t; those points stay on your license for five years.”

“Okay.” Kate sighed. “I’ll pay the fine.”

Victoria looked at her. “Well, don’t make it sound like you’re trying to build Rome in a day. Just put it on the Amex.”

“No way.” Kate shook her head. “I’m not using your family’s money to pay for my mistakes. I can cover it with my salary.”

“Sweetie, it’s adorable, that you think my parents will care.” Victoria paused. “So... your dad.”

Kate looked at her. “What about him?”

“What’s he like?”

Her wife blinked. “I... wow. You’ve never asked about him before.”

“Babe, present company excluded, I generally don’t think highly enough of your relatives to care about them,” Victoria reminded her. “But if I’m going to meet your dad and keep a civil conversation with him, then I’d like to know a little bit about who he is.”

Kate hummed. “Well... he’s not my mother.”


“In order; he’s a therapist, he met my mother at church when he was in college, he is religious, and not that I’m aware of.” Kate shrugged. “I’ve never heard him say anything like my mother does about me being gay. Granted, Mom doesn’t often let him get a word in edge-wise... but I have to believe that if he wants to meet, he doesn’t entirely agree with her.”

“I can tell you that when Mom got off on her tangents, he never supported her,” Lynn piped up. “He just went ‘mm-hmm’ and ‘yes dear’. He never offered anything original.”

Victoria pursed her lips. “So, he’s got a spine like a wet noodle.”

“It... might be more accurate to say he doesn’t have one at all,” Lynn said, a guilty look on her face. “If he really did get in a fight with Mom about you two, then it would be the first time I’ve ever seen them disagree.”

“Ah.” Victoria nodded. “What kind of therapist is he?”
“I don’t think he specializes,” Kate answered. “I know he’s part of a larger practice. But I don’t know much more than that. He never talks about his work.”

“He’s probably bound by HIPAA,” Victoria said, as she took another turn. “If he DID talk about his work, that would be a cause for concern.”

“There.” Lynn pointed to a coffee shop ahead of them. “That’s him.”

Victoria followed her finger as she parked, and saw her father-in-law. He looked a lot older than she remembered from the pictures she’d seen, as he sat in his chair and stared into his coffee.

She squared her shoulders as they got out of the Audi, Kate working the folding passenger seat so Lynn could slide out. Victoria fixed her father-in-law with a glare as he looked up to see them.

Try something, fucker, she thought venomously. I will break you right here in public. I don’t give a shit what Kate says.

Her hand automatically found Kate’s as they walked towards the coffee shop. He stood to meet them, as they got close. “Hi, Lynn,” he said cautiously.

“Hi, Dad.” Lynn stopped a few feet away, folding her arms. “Where’s Mom?”

“Still with your Aunt Cathy,” he replied. “She... doesn’t know I’m here.” He looked at his other daughter. “Hello, Kate.”

“Hey, Dad.” Kate had a flat tone of voice, like she was as apprehensive as Victoria felt. “This is my wife, Vicky.”

She tensed up, as Kate’s father looked at her.

Give me a fucking excuse. I BEG you.

He smiled and extended his hand. “Richard Marsh. It’s nice to meet you.”

Victoria had to struggle to maintain her composure. After a couple of seconds, she returned his handshake. “Hi.”

... God dammit. Way to stay ferocious.

They all sat down, Victoria making it a point to sit facing Kate’s father. It meant she sat at an angle, but she wanted to make sure she was between Kate and her dad in some way. Lynn sat across from them, scooting in just as the waitress came up to them. “Can I take your orders?”

Victoria curtly ordered a bottle of water, while Kate got her usual Earl Grey tea. “Medium coffee, please,” Lynn finished.

Richard raised his eyebrows. “I didn’t know you were drinking coffee.”

Lynn shrugged. “My roommate got me into it.”

“Oh.” Richard smiled. “How are you liking Cal Tech?”

“It’s great. Having a blast.” Lynn folded her arms again. “Isn’t trying to avoid the big issue a red flag or something?”

He sighed. “Sort of. I just wanted to make sure you were doing okay, sweetie. I haven’t seen you in months.”
“You haven’t seen Kate in years,” Lynn shot back.

“I know.” Richard looked at Kate with a pained expression before he turned back to Lynn. “We knew when your sister was leaving home. She went through the process of preparing, and packing, and moving out. I was mentally ready when she left.” He paused. “I wasn’t ready for you to run away yet. I thought we’d have more time.”

Lynn sighed. “I’m fine, Dad.”

“Okay.” He turned back to Kate. “It’s... really good to see you, Kate.”

Victoria watched her wife fold her arms, mirroring her sister. “Honestly, Dad, I’m not sure I can say the same.”

“I understand.” Richard looked back at his coffee. “I really am sorry, Kate. For... well.” He exhaled slowly. “Not seeing what was happening right under my nose.”

“Which instance?” Kate asked. “Because Mom did a lot of things that I’m angry at her for. And I know it might not be fair, Dad, but I blame you for not noticing a lot of it, too.”

He looked at her. “All of them. Everything.” He shrugged. “I know it’s a cop-out, but I really had no idea what your mother was doing.”

“Not even when she spent ten years shoving me into Chris at every opportunity?” Kate countered. “You’re not blind, Dad. You couldn’t have missed that.”

Richard rubbed his face, before he answered. “I honestly thought that was a problem that would resolve itself,” he allowed. “Everyone could see that you and Chris weren’t interested in each other. I figured your mother would eventually let it go. And then once you came out to us...”

He sighed heavily. “I really am sorry, Kate. I handled that whole conversation terribly.”

“You didn’t even say anything,” Kate said frostily. “And then you lied to me about Grandma Louis. You told me that she was dying!”

“I believed your mother,” he admitted. “I never thought to question her. She told me that Grandma Louis had been having medical issues, but didn’t want a lot of people to know about them. She said that your grandmother only told her and your Aunt Cathy, and asked them not to tell anyone else.”


“I thought so, too. That’s why I didn’t question her.” Richard looked back at Kate. “I swear, if I had known she was lying about her mother having a terminal illness, I would have said something sooner. Certainly before Christmas Day.”

“And then afterwards?” Kate fired back. “When Mom tried to get me dropped from classes? Or told me that I was disowned? Or called Vicky a whore? You weren’t there for any of the times she screamed at me over the phone?”

Richard sighed, as he hung his head. “I was,” he admitted. “For some of those phone calls. I didn’t know she tried to have you dropped from your classes, or said you were disowned.”

Kate’s glare didn’t soften. “And when she continuously insulted my wife?”
“I... can’t make excuses for not stopping your mother.” Richard looked back up at her. “I really am sorry, Kate. I thought your Mom would eventually accept who you were.”

“I think that ship sailed when she tried to cancel my wedding,” Kate pushed out through gritted teeth.

“I know that now.” Richard nodded. “That’s why we had such a big fight. I haven’t seen or spoken to your mother in almost a month.”

Kate blinked. “Really?”

“I’ve tried to call, but she won’t answer.” Richard sighed. “I mean to go see her in person, after the holidays.”

“What for?” Lynn asked. “To divorce her?”

“No.” Richard looked at her. “I still love your mother. I’m hoping we can get through this, and she can see that she’s ruining her relationships with all of her children. I want her to go to counselling with me, so she can try to change.”

Kate tilted her head. “You really think Mom will change?”

“I don’t know,” Richard admitted. “But I want to try. Anyway, like I was saying... I should have gotten involved sooner. I can see that now.” He looked at her with a very guilty expression. “I am so sorry, Kate. And you,” he added, facing Lynn. “I should have done better.”

“Yes. You should have.” Kate paused, exhaling slowly as her hand found Victoria’s. “Do YOU have a problem with me being married to Vicky?”

Richard hesitated, looking at Victoria. “It’s... not what I expected,” he admitted. “Before you told us you were gay, Kate, I just assumed you were quiet about your social life because of your mother. But if being married to Vicky makes-”

“Victoria.”

Richard blinked at the interruption from his daughter. “Huh?”

“I’m the only one who gets to call her by a nickname.” Kate squeezed her wife’s hand. “Everyone else calls her Victoria.”

Victoria maintained her expression, though she felt a hint of amusement. Definitely gonna ask where this is when it comes to Chloe.

“Oh. Um... sorry.” Richard paused, before he continued. “Kate, if being married to Victoria makes you happy, then that’s good enough for me. All I’ve ever wanted is for you girls to be happy.”

Kate took a deep breath, letting the air out through her nose slowly before she started speaking again. “Where’s Jessica?” she asked.

“Right now? Probably practicing in her room.” Richard looked down at his hands. “She barely speaks to me either. It seems like all she’s done for months is go to school and play the violin.”

“Because I left?” Lynn asked quietly.

Richard looked at her. “It’s not your fault,” he assured her. “I just think she hates that everyone’s fighting. I’ve tried to talk to her, and help her through it, but I’m not sure how much she’s really getting.”
Kate bit her lip. “Is she... okay?”

“Well, if nothing else, she’s really improving on the violin.” Richard smiled. “A few people from music schools went to see her play, at her last recital. USC and San Francisco actually invited her to come visit them next year.”

“Wow.” Kate let herself smile briefly. “That’s... pretty cool. I’m glad to hear it.”

The conversation gradually eased back, as Kate, Lynn, and Richard made tense small talk. After an hour or so, Richard let them know that he had to go, and paid the bill for all of them. Kate thanked him, and stood to go use the bathroom.

As soon as she was inside, Victoria, who had said very little, turned her full attention to Richard. “I don’t trust you,” she said to him.

Richard faced her, listening. So did Lynn.

“I don’t believe that you didn’t know everything your wife was doing,” Victoria continued, glaring at him. “I think you just turned a deaf ear to it, because it was easier to pretend that your wife had everything under control instead of having a difficult conversation with your daughter. And if it was up to me, we wouldn’t be here.”

Kate’s father bit his lip. “I understand.”

“Yea, I don’t think you do. You might be her dad, but I’m her wife. And that bitch you married made her cry more times than I can count.” Victoria leaned forward onto the table. “Kate’s an incredible person, for wanting to rebuild a relationship with you. I just want to make sure you know that I, on the other hand, will have no problem burying you and your fucking wife to protect her.”

Richard looked properly chastised, as Victoria wrapped up. Lynn, too, had elevated eyebrows as she looked between the two of them.

“I don’t know if it means much coming from me,” he said, “but it feels good, that Kate found someone who cares about her like you do.”

Victoria folded her arms, not relenting on her glare. “You don’t know the half of what I’m willing to do for her.”

“No, I suspect not.” Richard nodded. “Nor do I think I want to be on the wrong side of your ire.”
Steph: Christmas

December 2019. Concurrent with ch 63-66 of EtL.

“You’re doing a really shitty job at that.”

“I know.” Steph released the torn wrapping paper, glaring at the video game in front of her. “I should’ve brought those gift bags instead.”

“Gift bags are for cheaters.” Rachel sat down across the table from her. “Gimme that thing.”

Steph pushed it towards her. Rachel immediately discarded the torn wrapping and unrolled some fresh paper. Steph watched, impressed, as the scissors in Rachel’s hand glided effortlessly through the sheet. “I think you’ve done this before.”

“We run a charity at work, to collect toys for foster kids.” Rachel quickly folded the paper, using the scissors to trim the excess as she flipped the video game over. “We wrap everything we get, and I’ve gotten pretty good at it. Pass the tape?”

“Here.” Steph handed her the dispenser. Rachel pulled out a couple of pieces, laying them down and producing a perfectly-wrapped present. “Yea, you’re way better at that than I am.”

“Want me to do the rest?”

“Please and thank you.”

Rachel smirked as she reached over, grabbing a new video game. “Way to go overboard with kid’s presents,” she remarked as she started wrapping it. “Aren’t these things, like, fifty bucks a pop?”

“Sixty, if you buy them retail.” Steph got up, walking to the fridge and grabbing a new beer. “I can buy them at cost through one of the guys at work, though. Perk of the job. You want another one?”

“No, I’m fine.” Rachel finished with the second game, setting it aside. “What about these action figures?”

Steph grimaced, as she sat back down. “Those I definitely cheated on,” she admitted. “We get them for free. Promotional products from Hasbro.”

“Way to save money,” Rachel remarked dryly, as she laid the action figure box down on the paper. “Cheapskate.”

“Hey, there’s EIGHT kids there,” Steph reminded her. “I had to cut corners somewhere. I’m just happy their parents said the toys were okay.”

“Eight kids? Okay, I’m with you.” Rachel nodded. “What about the adults?”

Steph shrugged. “Michael and Amanda told me not to worry about my aunts and uncles,” she said. “I guess they decided a while ago not to give each other presents, since the kids get kind of expensive. They’ll usually just trade off nights of babysitting or something.”

Rachel frowned, as she looked at Steph. “You’re still getting your dad something, right?” she asked pointedly. “I mean, I’m not gonna tell you what to do, but you should probably get him at least a
LITTLE gift.”

“Of course I did.” Steph looked at her, miffed. “Come on.”

“Just checking. What did you get him?”

“Well, it’s already wrapped. I had the print shop put gift wrap on it, for an extra few bucks.” Steph reached over and retrieved her laptop, clicking on a desktop file and turning it towards Rachel. “I drew this for him, and then had it enlarged and framed.”

Rachel looked at the laptop for several seconds. “... I think it froze.”

“Son of a...” Steph turned it back and started messing with it. “I need to replace this piece of crap,” she muttered, force-closing a couple of applications. After a minute or so, she turned it back. “There.”

Rachel blinked in admiration as she studied the drawing. “Holy shit.”

Steph squirmed. “You think it’s good?”

“Sometimes I forget how amazing of an artist you actually are.” Rachel pushed the laptop back. “He’s gonna love it.”

“I hope so.” Steph shrugged. “Like, I’m sure even if he hates it, he won’t say anything. But I really do hope the first Christmas present I give him isn’t a shitty one.”

“Relax, it’s not.” Rachel finished taping up the last gift, setting it with the rest of the pile. “What did you get your mother?”

Steph sighed. “Nothing.”

Rachel’s eyebrows arched. “Really?”

“We had a pretty big argument last week.” Steph leaned onto her elbows, glancing down at the table. “She finally called, asking me why I never wished her a happy birthday. And I asked her why the fuck she never told me who my dad really was.”

“Oh.” Rachel studied her carefully. “And... what did she say?”

“I didn’t get an actual answer.” Steph looked back at her. “She just flipped out, asking how I knew his name, and who he was, how dare I look for him, why wasn’t she good enough, a whole bunch of bullshit. She never gave me any kind of reason for ghosting him. I kept trying to get one, but she just wouldn’t stop yelling at me for... I don’t even know.”

“Jesus,” Rachel exhaled. “What did YOU say?”

“Just that when she came up with a good answer, she could let me know. Until then, she can enjoy the company of husband number five.” Steph smirked. “Who is lasting a lot longer than I thought he would.”

Rachel looked at her, a worried expression on her face. “Are you... okay?”

“Honestly... better than I thought I’d be,” Steph admitted. “We don’t really talk anyway, so it’s not like much has really changed. I just want to focus on getting to know my dad, and Amanda, and the rest of that side of my family anyway.”
“Good.” Rachel slowly smiled. “I really am happy for you, that you found a family that actually cares about you.”

Steph smiled back. “... thank you.”

“Yea.” Rachel leaned back. “Now, it’s been over eighteen months since my last visit, and we’ve got the Christmas Party tomorrow. Are you going to drag me to your bedroom soon, or what?”

“Christ, woman.” Steph smirked. “At least let me finish my beer before you insist that I tear your panties off.”

Rachel tilted her head. “And what makes you think I’m wearing any?”

“... know what?” Steph set the bottle down. “The beer will still be here in the morning.”

“AWESOME!!”

Steph snickered, as she watched Kristen look at her gift with excitement. “Your mom said you’ve been asking for that one.”

“Heck yea! The Eevee Pokémon game!” Kristen squealed, as she ripped open the case. “Mom, can I have my Switch?”

“Ah, excuse me.” Natalie folded her arms. “Are you forgetting something?”

“Oh.” Kristen jumped up and ran over to Steph, hugging her. “Thank you, Cousin Steph.”

“You’re welcome.” Steph patted her back. “Have a blast, kid.”

“Please put me down.”

Marcy giggled from the corner of the room. She squeezed the grey plush toy Steph had gotten her again, listening to the as it spoke. “Excuse me, you’re squishing me,” the turret warbled, eliciting another round of laughter.

“This is cool.” Marcy walked over to Steph, smiling. “What is he?”

“He’s a turret, from a game called Portal.” Steph explained from her seat on the couch. “Do you like it?”

“Yea. He’s funny.” Marcy reached up and hugged Steph. “Thank you.”

“Illegal operation,” the turret declared in a sing-song voice, as it was crushed between Marcy and Steph.

Next to her on the couch, Frankie frowned as Marcy walked away, still squeezing the toy. “Why does it sound so weird?”

“It’s... just how it is.” Steph scratched the back of her head. “It doesn’t really make sense, if you haven’t played the game.” She looked at him. “Don’t let her lose that, by the way. They only made a limited run of them, and you won’t find any more if it goes missing.”


“I think that was the last one.” Amanda looked around, from her seat on the floor next to the tree.
She had been in charge of handing out the presents to the kids, who had slowly dispersed; Steph could see Kristen and Lucas on the Switches in the kitchen, as they started their new Pokémon games. Amanda was now surrounded by torn wrapping paper. “Yea, I don’t see any more.”

“Well then.” Her grandmother got up from the easy chair in the corner, stretching quickly. “Be right back.”

Steph looked over at Michael, who was still admiring the framed picture she’d given him. Tricia was next to him, studying it over his shoulder. “Steph, how long did this take you?” she asked.

“A few days,” she replied. “Mostly on the motorcycle.”

“It shows.” Michael smiled. “It’s absolutely spot on. Did you take a picture, or something?”

“I, uh, lifted it from your Facebook,” Steph admitted.

Tricia pointed to a spot on the drawing. “Isn’t that the dent from where Josh dropped the drill on it?”

“It totally is.” Michael looked at his brother. “Holy crap, I almost killed you that day.”

“Yea, yea.” Joshua rolled his eyes. “That is seriously an amazing picture, though.” He smiled at Steph. “You’ve definitely got your old man’s talent, kid.”

Steph blushed fiercely. “Thanks,” she muttered. “It wasn’t that—”

“Oh, wait!”

Everyone turned to look at Amanda, as she stood and reached behind the tree. She pulled out a large gift bag. “I missed one,” she said. “Oh, and there’s another. And another...”

Steph watched her pull four gifts from behind the tree, and she felt a sinking feeling of dread as each one was produced. Oh, no, they didn’t.

She looked at Amanda, who had a big smile on her face. “... I hate you so much.”

“Aww.” Her aunt deposited the four gift bags in front of her, placing the smallest on her lap. “Merry Christmas, Steph.”

“No, no, I... God damnit, I didn’t get anything for—”

“Yea, we made sure you didn’t,” Michael told her. “We don’t get stuff for the adults, remember?”

“I AM an ad—”

“You’re also a grandchild.” Her grandmother re-appeared, placing a large, thin box down next to the couch. “And we’ve got twenty-five years of Christmases to make up for, dear.”

Steph tried to form an argument, as she looked at the presents in front of her. “But I—”

Her grandmother reached towards the gift bag in front of her, tipping it over. A box fell out into her lap. “Oops.”

She stared down at the boxed set of Game of Thrones, as everyone else chuckled. “We thought you’d like that one,” Frankie mentioned. “Nat and I have been watching it when the kids go to bed. It seemed like a show you would be into.”
“... it’s my favorite show,” Steph said quietly, as she looked at the box in front of her. She felt her eyes start to get moist, as she blinked rapidly.

The others gifts were equally amazing. The second one she opened was a huge slow-cooker (“We remembered you said you hadn’t gotten one yet, and we found it on Black Friday.”)

After that was a huge stereo system, complete with a dock for her iPhone (“You seem like you listen to music while you work, and this one is really good.”)

When she opened the cardboard box from her grandmother, she couldn’t stop staring at the framed blue-and-green jersey. “But...” she looked up at her grandmother. “How did you know I was a Seattle fan?”

“I saw it on your Facebook page,” she said simply, with a broad smile.

“You’re a Seahawks fan?!” Joshua asked incredulously.

“She grew up in Oregon, you idiot,” Tricia countered. “And of that statement, the most shocking thing to you wasn’t that our mother has a Facebook account?”

“That is a good point.” Amanda looked over at her. “When did you make a Facebook account, Nana?”

Her grandmother shrugged. “You four took all the good ideas,” she said. “I didn’t know what to get her, so I decided to do some research.” She looked back at Steph. “I hope you like it, I saw that you had his jersey on in one of your pictures.”

“I love it.” Steph sniffled, as she ran her hand on top of the glass over Richard Sherman’s autograph. “Thank you.”

Michael’s and Amanda’s gift didn’t make her less emotional. She opened the final gift bag and pulled out a white box. Her mouth gaped as she read the label. “... oh my God.”

“Yea, we watched you beat the crap out of your old one after Thanksgiving.” Amanda smirked. “While calling it some names that would have made a sailor blush. We figured a new one was in order.”

Her heart pounded, as she held the box of a new MacBook Pro. “But... no, guys, this is too-”

“It’s not too anything,” Michael said. “I’m sure you’ll put it to good use at work.”

“But I-”

“Artists who make bad guys for blockbuster video games need bad-ass laptops,” Michael told her. “Besides, twenty-five Christmases is a lot of money to save.”

She was still sniffling when she finally stood, hugging everyone in turn. “Thank you,” she murmured to Joshua.

“Yea, well, if I’d known you were a Seahawks fan, we would have gotten you a Joe Montana jersey,” he chortled.

Steph smirked as she hugged him, wiping her eyes behind his back. “Kindling makes for good presents, too.”
He laughed as they broke apart, and Steph hugged his wife. She made sure to thank them all profusely, especially her grandmother.

Until she got to Michael. Once she let go of Amanda and got to him, she delivered a punch to his chest.

The fist ricocheted off her dad’s muscles, but he still acted like he took the full force of the blow. “Ouch!” he yelped, amusement in his face. “What was that for?”

“You didn’t let me get anyone anything!”

The others laughed behind her, and Steph tried to ignore them as she wiped her eyes and concentrated on being angry. “Everyone else got to be nice, and sweet, and I’m an asshole because I didn’t have anything to give back!” she exclaimed.

Michael couldn’t keep the grin from his face. “Steph you’re not an ass-”

He was interrupted as Steph punched him again, her fist bouncing harmlessly off Michael’s shirt. “I want to be nice too!” she sniffled, trying to keep a scowl on her face. “I can give people good presents! I want my new family to like me, not think that I’m some kind of ungrateful brat who can’t even-”

She was getting ready to punch Michael a third time, but she was interrupted as he stepped forward, wrapping her in a tight hug.

“Nobody thinks you’re ungrateful,” he assured her, as he rested his chin on top of her head. “And everyone here already likes you, Steph. You don’t have to prove anything to anyone.”

Steph hated that she could feel herself crying, as she sniffed into Michael’s shirt. “It’s my first time here for Christmas,” she sniveled. “I just wanted to give back.”

“You don’t have to give back,” he told her. “Nobody here cares, Steph. You gave back by finding us, and joining the family like you should have a long time ago.” He hugged her tighter. “We’re all so happy that you’re here. I can’t tell you what it means to have met you, kid.”

She whimpered, finally hugging him back.

“I told myself I wasn’t going to cry this time,” she sniffled.

“Sorry, kid.” Michael rubbed her back. “You’re part of the family now. You’re allowed to.”

_Goddamn it. She could feel the others staring at her, even if she couldn’t see them. Say something heartwarming!_

“I...” She sniffed deeply. “Thanks... Dad.”

Michael hugged her tighter. After a few seconds, Steph loosened her grip, but he didn’t. “Um...”

He shook his head above her. “In a minute,” he whispered.

“Holy shit, you made him cry,” Steph heard Joshua chortle. “I haven’t seen him do that since he broke his leg during-”

WHACK!!

“OW!!”
Steph couldn’t help but snicker, as her grandmother spoke up. “Joshua Gabriel Thompson, you be quiet and let your brother have his moment,” Steph heard her snip. “One more word, and you’ll get another one.”

Michael chuckled too, as he sniffed deeply. When he finally let go of her, Steph saw him rub his eyes really quick. “Not cool, kid,” he told her quietly.

“Hey, man, you started it.”

Chloe: What do you think of this one?

Chloe: <apt.html>

Max: That’s pretty nice. And expensive.

Chloe: They’re all gonna be more expensive than the studio, babe. But we can afford it.

Max: Is there a studio in that building?

Chloe: Not one that’s free. It’s a pretty popular building. All that’s left is the two-bedrooms.

Chloe: Really look over it, because I can’t find anything that I feel better about putting you in that doesn’t cost an arm and a leg.

Max: I mean... I do like it.

Max: Plus, I’m sure Steph wants her couch back.

Chloe: Want to go see it in person after work?

Max: Yea. Let’s do it.

Brooke: So... is there a rule that says foster kids can’t get jobs?

Miss Amber: No. Why?

Brooke: Emily and I want to get find something we can do after school, so we can help Regina get stuff for the baby.

Miss Amber: You guys don’t have to do that. Regina will qualify for financial aid. And technically, Jane and Pete will accept responsibility for the baby, too, which means the support they get from the state will increase.

Brooke: Yea, we looked into that. The aid only covers food and basic stuff. She’s going to need more than that, and it’s expensive.

Miss Amber: That’s incredibly sweet of you both. But there won’t be a lot she needs help with.

Brooke: But there will be something she needs help with, right?

Brooke: I know kids go through diapers like crazy, and I know they’re not cheap.
Miss Amber: Well, if you and Emily want to, there’s certainly nothing stopping you.

Brooke: Sweet.

Miss Amber: But don’t tell a lot of people where you’ll be working, okay? I don’t want First Light to be able to find you.

Brooke: We’ll be careful.

Dana: What are you all doing this weekend?

Courtney: Um... nothing?

Victoria: I think we were going to see a movie or something.

Taylor: I have a date on Friday.

Dana: Can you guys be in Vegas by Saturday evening?

Victoria: ... are you kidding me?

Dana: No.

Taylor: Are you guys fucking eloping? Is that what’s happening right now?!

Dana: Yep. We were talking over lunch, and we figured out that we’re never going to get this thing done if we keep screwing around.

Dana: So we said ‘fuck it’.

Dana: We’re in the car right now, driving south. We’re gonna get there tomorrow afternoon.

Courtney: What about your guys’ parents?? And Trevor’s groomsmen?

Dana: My parents are driving down too, they’ll get there the day after we do. His can’t make it, so we’re gonna live-stream it for them. And his best man is booking a flight right now.

Taylor: Holy shit, you’re really doing this? This isn’t a joke?

Dana: This is not a joke. And I will totally understand if you guys can’t make it. I know it’s short notice, and I know how expensive plane tickets are.

Courtney: Fuck that. I’ll take a couple days off and drive down too. I’m not missing my chance at being a Maid of Honor.

Victoria: Agreed. Though I think Kate and I will fly.

Taylor: ... I can’t. I don’t have enough spring for a last-minute ticket.

Dana: Are you sure? I really want you there.

Taylor: Positive. I just had to drop a few grand for a down payment on a new car. My savings is wiped out, and my credit card can’t take that kind of hit.
Dana: Shit. I am so sorry.

Taylor: Dude, I so want to go. I’m sure it’ll be a blast.

Victoria: Okay, Dana, part of our wedding gift to you is going to be Taylor’s plane ticket.

Taylor: For real?!

Victoria: You think I’m gonna let you miss out on this? No chance.

Dana: YES!!

Taylor: Oh my God, I love you. And I will pay you back as soon as I can.

Victoria: Do you need help with a hotel room?

Taylor: If it’s only for a couple of days, I should be fine.

Courtney: Don’t worry about it. You can bunk with me.

Dana: Trevor and I found some pretty good rates at a motel right off the strip. I can send you guys the info.

Courtney: Much appreciated!

Jake: Do you know what phomo is?

Chloe: No. Why?

Jake: A waitress at Saint Mark’s just ditched her shift. Apparently the manager denied her request for the week off the schedule, but she up and left anyway to go to some music festival.

Jac: The hostess said the girl has an extreme case of phomo. But I didn’t ask when she meant, because I didn’t want to look stupid. Also, I didn’t want to pry because it kinda sounds like a medical problem.

Chloe: ... do you mean FOMO?

Jake: Maybe?

Chloe: Why did you put a ph in front of it?

Jake: I don’t know, it was young adult slang, and it felt appropriate. What is it?

Chloe: Fear Of Missing Out.

Jake: Missing out on... what?

Chloe: Whatever cool thing is happening that your friends are going to.

Jake: Seriously? Our waitress just lost her job because she was afraid of missing a music festival that takes place every year?
Chloe: It would appear so.

Jake: That might be the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.

Chloe: Didn’t Max tell me a story about some guy who got fired because he wouldn’t take off his tail?

Jake: ... okay, fine. But this is definitely in the top ten.

Amanda: Frank and Natalie want your address.

Steph: What for?

Amanda: To send a card. You’re invited to Marcy’s birthday party.

Steph: Really?

Amanda: Apparently your little cousin was quite insistent that you come.

Steph: ... wow. I don’t even know what to say.

Amanda: You don’t have to go. Frank said it’s mostly going to be kid’s activities, and you’ll probably get bored.

Amanda: But he says if you do, he’s got a case of beer you can help kill. Or you can play video games with Lucas and Kristen.

Steph: I mean, any of those options sound like fun, honestly.

Steph: Why does Marcy want me to go?

Amanda: You may have a little admirer. Natalie said she’s asked a few times when they’ll see you next, and apparently she now wants to be an artist like cool Cousin Steph.

Steph: ... well, fuck. Now I kind of have to go, don’t I?

Amanda: I mean, you don’t HAVE to. You can always just say you’re busy or something.

Steph: No, I’m not gonna do that. I’m sure I’ll have fun. What do they have for the kids?

Amanda: Frank usually hires a performer or something, I think it’s a princess this year. And he’s probably gonna get a bounce house, plus the normal cake and ice cream.

Steph: HE’S GETTING A BOUNCE HOUSE?!

Amanda: ... does that mean you’re going?

Steph: HELL YES!!

Kate: Would you mind apartment-sitting for a couple of days?

Lynn: Sure. Where are you guys going?
Kate: Las Vegas.

Lynn: Ooh. Little weekend away in Sin City?

Kate: One of Vicky’s friends decided to elope last-minute. We’re flying out Friday night, and we’ll be back on Sunday evening.

Lynn: Still sounds like fun. How is Vegas?

Kate: I’ll have to tell you after I get back.

Lynn: You’ve never been?

Kate: No. Why would I?

Lynn: Because it’s America’s playground? Where anything goes? You’re telling me you and your uber-wealthy wife have never gone for a few days of debauchery?

Kate: Okay, once again; it is NOT my money to spend, it’s Vicky’s.

Lynn: Must be why your name is on the Amex.

Kate: And do you REALLY want to know what kind of debauchery I’d get up to with my wife?

Lynn: No. No no no. Dear God, please, no.

Kate: That’s what I thought :)

Max: What is this?!

Max: <cigs.jpg>

Chloe: ... they’re not mine?

Max: They’re in our apartment! And they’re not mine!

Chloe: They were left over from the last renter?

Max: The last renter taped a BRAND-NEW pack of cigarettes to the underside of the sink, and they happen to be your brand?!

Chloe: ... yes?

Max: That all would have been much more convincing if you didn’t end your sentences in question marks, sweetheart.

Chloe: Really?

Max: WHAT DO YOU THINK

Chloe: It’s a hard habit to kick! I’m trying! Sometimes I need one to de-stress!

Max: De-stress from what?! You tell me every day that your job was fine!
Chloe: I DON’T KNOW, MAX

Chloe: MAYBE THE DEAD CAT THAT WAS LEFT ON OUR DOORSTEP

Max: ...

Max: I’m sorry.

Chloe: No, Christ, don’t do that.

Chloe: I’m sorry. It’s not your fault. I shouldn’t have said that.

Max: It’s mostly my fault.

Chloe: No, it’s not.

Max: Do you really worry that much?

Chloe: I don’t stop worrying, babe. I love you. And if those fuckers ever got their hands on you, I don’t know what I’d do.

Max: ... the cigarettes help?

Chloe: A little.

Max: Fine. I’ll leave them on the counter.

Chloe: I promise to start cutting back more.

Chloe: Still love me?

Max: Yes :)

Max: Still love me?

Chloe: You know it :)

James: Timothy Watson had his day in court.

Jake: How’d that go?

James: Oh, he got in an argument with the judge. His stance being that, as a homosexual, Maxine doesn’t actually count as a human being to threaten.

David: ... that sounds like a poor strategy.

James: Especially to a judge who has a gay nephew. The dressing-down he received will be the stuff of legends.

James: Ultimately, he was given a thousand-dollar fine.

Jake: Couldn’t have happened to a nicer man.
David: No jail time? Community service?

James: Not for a first offense. It was a pretty steep fine, you have to admit.

Jake: Did Max’s father defend him?

James: He did not. He does a lot of general legal work like wills and powers of attorney, but Ryan only goes to court for Elders, or when the case is high-profile.

James: For most of everything else, the parishioners are on their own.

David: How many legal issues do the parishioners have?

James: Not as many as you’d think. They might be homophobes with a 1950’s world view, but they generally stay out of trouble.

Jake: With all the stories, it doesn’t seem like it.

James: Don’t get me wrong, I’m sure there’s more going on than we know about. But of the five thousand or so parishioners, only a couple hundred have really crossed our radar.

James: How’s Maxine doing?

Jake: So far, so good. Her and Chloe are in a new apartment under an LLC, and all their mail is being forwarded to a PO box.

David: No new threats from First Light?

Jake: Not since she changed her number. Did you call in your favor with the SFPD?

David: Yes. They put their address on the city’s House Watch list. If something gets called in, they’ll route the closest two units and a supervisor.

James: What if they have to vanish again?

David: Then Chloe will use the cash to get them to a nearby motel, and call someone from her new burner phone.

James: Not Stephanie again? Or Penny, or Victoria?

David: The reporter found her when she went to Steph’s. And anyone who does their research on her will know about her connection to the other two. The motel we picked is known to accept cash for a room without asking for names, so she should be safe there.

Jake: ... gross.

David: I don’t like it either, but it’s the best option.

David: Besides, I’m confident that the two of them can take care of themselves.

Rachel: I’m being followed.

Stacy: Are you sure?
Rachel: Positive. A black Honda Accord, plate 942FQL. They followed me across town, and now they’re watching me eat McDonalds from the parking lot.

Stacy: Then come back to the building. I’ll have Watson run the plate later.

Rachel: I was on my way to get Liz and Cole Fisher. The ADA wants to do their interviews this afternoon, remember?

Stacy: ... damn it. I forgot that was today.

Rachel: What do you want me to do?

Stacy: Gimme a minute.

Stacy: They still in the lot?

Rachel: Yep. I’m eating as slow as I can, but I’m on my last few fries.

Stacy: When you leave, head towards Harrisburg, then turn left onto Park. There’ll be a cop car waiting to pull them over when you go past the Home Depot.

Rachel: You called Watson?

Stacy: I did. He’s sending the unit over right now.

Rachel: Awesome. I’ll call you later.

Victoria: You guys make it to Vegas yet?

Dana: Almost. We’re a couple hours from the city.

Victoria: Perfect. I’ve been thinking about this “motel” thing.

Dana: Are you actually going to stay with us? In a motel? With no room service or breakfast buffet?

Victoria: ROFLMAO

Victoria: God, no, are you kidding me? I wouldn’t be caught dead at a Best Western.

Dana: But that would have been hilarious. I can just imagine you huddling in a corner, trying to avoid all the rest of the poors, while your wife tries to coax you out of the room like you’re a scared little millennial.

Victoria: As made-for-TV as that sounds, Kate and I will be in a hotel suite, thank you very much.

Victoria: So will Courtney and Taylor. We reserved a room for them, too. And your parents.

Dana: Seriously? Dude, we were going to pay for their room with ours!

Victoria: Yea, I was getting to that. You’re not spending your wedding night in a motel. I love you too much for that.

Victoria: <reservation.msg>
Dana: What’s that?

Victoria: Your confirmation to the Penthouse at Caesar’s Palace.

Dana: The WHAT

Victoria: Told you Taylor’s ticket was only part of our wedding gift :)

Dana: No. No way, dude. I told you back in high school, when we all had that talk, that I would never risk our friendship by ever taking advantage of your family’s wealth. I’m not letting you do this just because you can afford it.

Victoria: This is not you taking advantage of me. This is us giving you and Trevor a wedding present.

Dana: No way! I don’t know what that suite costs, but I know it’s more than we make in a month!

Victoria: Yea, this is really going to bankrupt me.

Dana: Dude, no!!

Victoria: Dude, yes. I will be very offended if you turn down my gift.

Victoria: You and Trevor are not starting married life in a discount motel room. End of story.

Dana: ... only so not to offend you.

Victoria: Uh-huh.

Dana: Thank you so much.

Victoria: You’re welcome.

Chapter End Notes

Now that all the stories are caught up, I can do mass texting chapters again!!

There won't be as many as EtL, though.
Brooke: Coffee Shop

January 2020. Concurrent with chapter 67 of EtL.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me.”

Brooke did her best to put on a pained expression, though she really wanted to throttle the blonde customer sitting in front of her. “I really am sorry, ma’am.”

“This is a goddamn BAGEL shop.” The woman in business attire folded her arms angrily. “How the fuck can you stand there and tell me with a straight face that you’re out of garlic bagels? Are you really that incompetent?”

I need this job. I need this job. I need this job.

“Again, ma’am, I am SO sorry,” Brooke emphasized. “We have lots of other choices; can I get you a cinnamon-raisin bagel? Or a blueberry? Maybe a muffin?”

“No. I want a fucking garlic bagel with cream cheese. If I wanted a fucking cinnamon-raisin or blueberry bagel, I would have told you that instead.” The blonde customer fixed her with a steely glare. “How long will it take to make one?”

Brooke tried not to let her frustration show. “We can’t make any today, ma’am. We don’t have the ingredients we need to-”

“I’m sorry, is THAT the best goddamn excuse you can come up with?!” The woman snapped. “You don’t have the ingredients? You mean fucking GARLIC? How about you take your lazy ass to the Whole Foods down the street and go BUY some?!”

Other customers were starting to stare at them, as Brooke tried to keep a low voice. “Ma’am, I can’t-”

“No, of course you can’t,” the woman replied disdainfully. “If you could put together such a simple solution, you’d have higher ambitions that working at a fucking coffee shop with the rest of the retards.”

I swear to God, they’ll never find her body.

“Is there ANYTHING else I can get you?” Brooke asked emphatically. “Coffee? Tea? A pastry?”

“How about some fucking competence?” The woman snorted. “Can you get some of that? Or are you not qualified to do that either, you simple-”

“I beg your pardon.”

Both of them turned to see Brooke’s manager, Dawson, looking at the blonde customer. By then they had most of the coffee shop’s attention. “Is there a problem, miss?”

“Yes, there is.” The woman fixed him with an angry look. “Your fucking idiot of a waitress won’t bring me a garlic bagel.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but our supplier sent us the wrong ingredients this morning,” Dawson explained
slowly. “I’m afraid that we’re unable to make garlic or jalapeno bagels today.”

“Then why don’t you send your fucking drone to the grocery store to GET some fucking ingredients?” The woman motioned towards Brooke. “She clearly isn’t smart enough to do anything more complicated.”

Brooke ground her teeth and imagined the sound her notepad would make if she shoved it down the customer’s throat, though she kept her expression neutral.

“First of all, ma’am, we’re not allowed to use ingredients that don’t come from our suppliers,” Dawson explained. “Secondly, even if we were, we can’t buy them at a grocery store for liability reasons. And thirdly, I do not appreciate you insulting our waitress, who is only seventeen years old and still in high school.”

“I don’t fucking care.” The women shot another glare at Brooke. “She might as well get used to it, since she’s clearly not intelligent enough to be anything but a servant.”

“Quite frankly, it doesn’t matter. She’s no longer serving you.” Dawson reached over and took the woman’s coffee from the table in front of her. “None of us are. You’re no longer welcome here.”

“I was drinking that!”

Dawson deposited the coffee cup in the nearby trash can. “Not anymore. Get out.”

“You can’t kick me out! I’m a customer!”

“I can, as a matter of fact. We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone,” Dawson stated. “And as of right now you’re trespassing. Leave, or we’ll contact the police.”

By that point, the entire coffee shop had stopped and was watching them. The blonde glared at the manager, her face turning red. “Who the FUCK do you think you’re talking to?!”

Dawson turned towards the counter. “Emily, please dial nine-one-one.”

Brooke watched as Emily, standing behind the counter and failing to hide her smile, picked up the cordless phone next to her and pressed four buttons before holding it to her ear.

“FINE!” The woman stood in a huff, glaring at all of them. “I am going to RUIN this shithole on Yelp! You’re going to get shut down by this time next week if this is how you treat paying customers!”

Everyone silently watched her storm out, the door slamming shut behind her.

“Thank you for coming!” Emily called after her.

The statement broke the tension, and several other customers started cracking up with laughter. Dawson even had a small smile on his face, as he looked at his other employee. “Really?” he asked, exasperated, as Emily put the phone down.

“You told us, on day one, that we were supposed to do that whenever someone left,” Emily reminded him.

“I did, didn’t I.” Dawson shook his head. “Well, for clarification, when we kick someone out, it’s not required.”

“Got it.” Emily grinned. “I will remember for next time.”
“I’m sure you will.” Dawson looked back at Brooke. “You okay?”

Brooke shrugged. “Somebody’s gonna have to try harder than that to get under my skin.”

“Good.” He nodded. “Go ahead and take a couple of minutes. I need to go send an email to the DM, to let her know that she can expect an angry review.”

“Make sure she knows that we thanked her for coming!” Emily called after him, as he walked away. Dawson didn’t respond as he entered his office. “Seriously, are you okay for real?” she asked in a lower voice. “That woman was a grade-A bitch.”

Brooke smirked. “Like I said, have to try harder than that.” She glanced around the shop, examining the other customers. “You got any more French roast? I think man-bun is going to want another cup.”

Emily sighed. “I’ll make another pot.”

Walking back onto the floor, Brooke paused at a table to remove someone’s trash. This job is not doing anything for my faith in humanity, she thought bitterly. This kid better become an astronaut, or an NFL quarterback, for how fucking expensive Regina’s baby shit is.

Jane and Miss Amber had been able to get some of the baby stuff Regina needed, but there was still a lot of stuff she was missing. So the week prior, Brooke and Emily had gotten jobs at the café down the road from Blackwell. They planned to work until they were out of their foster house. So far they’d been able to purchase the crib and a play pen Regina wanted; they were currently saving for a car seat.

Brooke finished clearing the table before approaching her next one. “Can I get you two a refill?” She asked the older couple.

“No, we’re good, thank you.” The woman smiled. “And good job, by the way.”

“For what?”

“Not ramming that bitch’s teeth down her throat,” the man replied.

Brooke snorted in amusement before she could stop herself. “Well... thank you,” she said sincerely. “It took a little bit of willpower.”

“I understand.” The woman shook her head. “I was a waitress for ten years. That was back in the day, though, when you could sneeze on the customer’s food and get away with it.”

Brooke smiled. “Did it a few times, did you?”

“No, of course not.” The woman winked. “I would never.”

She couldn’t help but laugh.

“Anyway, we’re all set.” The man pulled out his wallet and retrieved a couple of twenties. “Keep the change, sweetheart.”

“Oh- no, no, you guys,” Brooke stuttered. “You don’t have to do that.”

“No, we don’t,” the woman agreed. “But you deserve a reward for not making that girl eat her coffee cup.”
Brooke hesitated, wanting to protest. But the desire to help Regina won out. “Thank you so much,” she said sincerely. “This really helps more than you know.”

“Even better, then.” They both smiled, as they left.

_Huh._ Brooke glanced back at the cash in her hand. _I guess I can keep a little faith in humanity._

“Not a bad afternoon’s work.”

“No kidding.” Brooke discretely felt the wad of cash in her pocket, their share of the tips from the day; it amounted to a little over a hundred bucks. “And we don’t get our paycheck until next Wednesday.”

“That’ll be helpful.” Emily frowned, as she looked back at the road. “Where’s Jane? She’s usually not this late.”

“I’m sure she’s on her way.”

Emily nodded, stretching her feet out in front of her as they waited on the bench for their foster mother to pick them up. “Too bad Jane can’t get us here on the weekends,” she grumbled. “Maria was telling me that that’s when they make the good tip money.”

“Hmm.” Brooke shoved her hands deeper into her hoodie pockets, trying to stay warm against the January chill. “Maybe once we get Regina the car seat, we can start splitting the cash.”

“Splitting it?” Emily frowned. “How? She’s gonna need the money, even when she’s got everything, for diapers and shit. Jane’s not gonna be able to help out THAT much.”

“We need to spend some money to make some more money,” Brooke told her. “If we split the cash we make, we can spend half of it on baby stuff, and save the other half for a car.”

“That’s...” Emily trailed off, as she looked away and thought. “... huh. That might be a good idea.”

Brooke nodded. “It’ll take a while, but if we get a couple thousand together, we can probably find a decent beater. Something that can get us to work on the weekends.”

“But we’ll have to pay for gas and insurance,” Emily pointed out. “And we’re still minors, in the eyes of the law. Whatever insurance company we go with will charge an arm and a leg.”

“Mm.” Brooke leaned back, looking up in thought. “We might be able to afford it with the extra hours, though. Depends on how much upkeep the baby needs.”

“Sounds like we need to do more research.” Emily paused. “Speaking of which, I looked at apartments near Corvallis yesterday.”

“Oh, yea?”

Emily winced. “You’re not gonna like it.”

Brooke sighed. “How bad?”

“A three-bedroom goes from between fifteen hundred and two thousand a month.”

“Two-” Brooke blinked, staring at Regina. “You’re fucking with me.”
“And that’s just the rent.” Emily rubbed her hands together. “We can probably throw an extra few hundred on top of that for electricity, water, internet... and we haven’t taken into account the fact that we don’t have any furniture.”

“Son. Of. A. Bitch.” Brooke closed her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose under her glasses. “I didn’t even think about that.”

“Me either, until last night. We can save a little bit,” Emily added. “But only if we go down to a two-bedroom.”

“How much?"

“Rent would drop to between a grand and fifteen hundred.”

Brooke opened her eyes and looked at her. “... I was really, REALLY, looking forward to having my own room again.”

“Yea.” Emily planted her elbows on her knees as she leaned forward. “Well, you know all the really famous and successful people had shitty beginnings.”

“Then I guess we’re going to become A-List actresses, at the rate we’re going.” Brooke looked back at the road in front of them. “We need more money.”

“We’ll get it,” Emily assured her. “We just have to be patient.”

“I know.” Brooke glanced back at the road. “There’s Jane. Finally.”

They watched her car pull up much faster than they were used to, Jane’s window already down. “Get in!” she yelled. “Quickly! We’ve gotta go!”

“Huh?” Emily and Brooke blinked as they stood. “Why?”

A piercing scream sounded from the backseat, startling both of them as they saw Regina laying down in the back seat, screaming in pain as she clutched her stomach. “That’s why!” Jane yelled. “Let’s go! We have someplace to be!”

Brooke sat on her chair in the waiting room, slowly counting the money. “One hundred and four dollars,” she finished, sliding it back into her pocket. “Plus the eighty-seven we got yesterday.... one hundred and ninety-one bucks.”

“That should be enough,” Emily said distractedly, as she worked her phone. “I’ll bet we can find one on OfferUp or something.”

“You’re not supposed to buy used car seats.” Brooke leaned back in her chair. “Maybe we can get Jane to loan us a few bucks, if we promise to pay her back.”

“Sounds good.” Emily turned the phone so Brooke could see the screen. “What do you think?”

She looked over and saw a picture of a beat-up sedan. It had several dents, the paint was very discolored, and she could see the tears in the fabric of the upholstery. “What in the world is that?”

“An early two-thousands Nissan.” Emily took the phone back. “Owner’s willing to let it go for fifteen hundred.”

“Is he going to pay US?”
“Ha ha.” Emily kept scrolling. “It looks like that’s the threshold price, for a reasonable car that seats four and runs well. Which... isn’t too bad, I guess.”

Brooke smirked. “That thing looked one bad paint job away from being in that Mad Max movie.”

“No it didn’t, don’t be so dramatic.”

The sound of a throat clearing drew their attention, and they both looked up to see Jane standing in the hallway. “Are you two done?” she asked.

They both stood. “How’s Regina?” Emily asked immediately. “It’s been hours. Is she okay?”

“She’s fine.” Jane smiled. “So is the baby.”

Brooke relaxed. “She delivered?”

“About half an hour ago.” Jane nodded. “She wants to see you two.”

“He’s so tiny.”

Brooke and Emily crowded around Regina’s bed, looking at the baby in her arms. Brooke poked at the boy’s little fists with her finger, the child involuntarily grasping at it. “Good grip, too,” she added.

“I know, right?” Regina sounded tired, but she kept a smile on her face. “God, you should have heard him when he came out. He was so loud.”

Emily smirked, as she stood over them. “You do remember what I said, right?”

“If he starts keeping you awake at night, we’re on our own.” Regina smirked back. “I don’t believe you, though.”

“You think you know me so well.” Emily leaned down until she was shoulder-to-shoulder with Brooke. “He is cute as shit,” she acknowledged.

“Language,” Brooke reminded her.

“Shut up. Miss Amber and Jane aren’t in here.”

“No, just the baby.”

“Oh, no, how will I ever live with myself for corrupting a child who can’t even comprehend-”

“Wow, you two are going to be really mediocre godparents,” Regina interrupted.

The two of them stopped talking and looked at her, blinking in silence. Brooke spoke first. “We’re going to be what now?”

Regina squirmed. “I mean... I hope so?”

“You... seriously want us to be godparents?” Emily asked. “I mean, we’re not really-”

“You guys brought his crib and carrier,” Regina countered. “And you’re saving for his car seat. I can’t tell you what it means to me, that you’re willing to do this for us. And I’ll never be able to thank you two enough.” She glanced down at her son. “I figured, you know... godparents is probably the least I can do.”
Brooke and Emily looked at each other, and then the baby.

“Well... wow.” Brooke swallowed. “Um. So... godparents get to hold the baby, right?”

Regina smirked. “I was wondering if you’d ever ask.”

Brooke sat down on the bed, slowly accepting the baby as Regina passed him to her. He immediately started squirming as she cradled him close. “Shh, it’s okay,” Brooke cooed as she bounced him slowly. “It’s okay, little... uh...”

“Oh, yea.” Emily looked at Regina. “What’s his name?”

“Aaron,” Regina answered. “I named him after the psychiatrist, back at the hospital.”

“Cool.” Brooke nodded, as Aaron settled down in her arms. “Aaron’s a good name, kid. You’ll be alright.”
February 2020. Concurrent with ch 68 of EtL.

“Seriously, Vicky, go get your shower. Everyone else is ready.”

Victoria sighed as she looked around the apartment. Her wife wasn’t wrong; her and Max were in nice outfits, though Chloe still maintained her punk-ish look as she worked the stove. She, on the other hand, was still wearing jeans and a t-shirt. *Guess if the party’s in my honor, I should at least throw on some khakis.*

“Fine.” She stood upright, sparing a second glance at the bluenette making the beer-cheese dip she insisted was necessary. “Don’t let Chloe burn down the kitchen.”

“I heard that.”

“You were meant to.”

Victoria heard Max snicker as she closed the door behind her. She turned on the shower and stripped, heaving a deep sigh as she waited for the water to heat up before she got in.

*Twelve weeks for results.*

*God, this anxiety is going to kill me.*

*Stop it.* Victoria shook her head as she got in the shower.

*It’s done.* Months of studying, years of classes, hundreds of pages of written essays, cases of Red Bull... all fucking over.

*Or at least it had better be.* She shuddered involuntarily as she stepped under the water. *I REALLY don’t want to have to take that exam again.*

As soon as she’d finished her last day of the Bar exam, she’d come home and immediately collapsed into bed. Kate had to bribe her to dinner with more of the shrimp pasta, which she had decidedly improved upon since her first attempts; Victoria would never tell her mother, but Kate’s recipe was now better than hers.

And now her real chance to unwind; the celebratory party.

*Get-together, really.* Victoria smirked, as she grabbed her body wash. *Six people is hardly a party.*

*Shit, Chloe and Max are only here because we’re letting them crash in the guest bedroom.*

*Otherwise it’d just be me and Alyssa trying to override Kate and get Lynn drunk.*

*Well, I’m sure Chloe will help us with that, too.*

“Vicky!!” She picked her head up, as she heard Kate’s voice. “I can’t find the keys to my Volvo! I’m gonna take your Audi!”

“What?!” Victoria yelped over the running water, dropping the bottle back on the shelf. “Oh, no! No way! Wait until I get out! I’ll go get the booze!”

“There’s no time, Vicky! And you just got in the shower! It’ll only be a few minutes! I’ll be right back!”
God damn it!!

“Kate! Come on!” Victoria yelled. “Do NOT take my car!”

“Can’t hear you! Leaving! Love you!”

“KATE!! GET BACK HERE!!”

Too late. She listened to her wife laugh as the bedroom door slammed shut.

“Son of a...” Victoria twisted the knob, turning the water off and jumping out of the shower. She strained her ears, but didn’t hear anyone talking in the other room.

Shit, she’s probably already left.

Damn it, Kate. Despite her irritation, she was slightly amused as she dried herself quickly and got dressed. She’d put her foot down three weeks prior, after getting ANOTHER speeding ticket in the mail, and told Kate that she didn’t want her driving the Audi anymore. She knew Kate still snuck drives with it, of course; she wasn’t stupid.

She should’ve just accepted my offer to buy her one, if she loves it so much.

Once she was dressed, she pushed the door open. The apartment was empty, save for Chloe stirring the pot on the stove. “They’re gone,” the bluenette reported absently.

“Yea, I figured.” Victoria closed the bedroom door. “How long ago?”

“A few minutes. If you sprint, you can probably catch them in the parking garage.”

“No. I’m confident that my wife can drive three blocks to the liquor store without going over the speed limit.” Victoria walked over to the kitchen island and leaned her elbows on it. “How’s the cheese?”

“Done, I think.” Chloe turned the stove off and shifted the pot to a cold burner, as she checked her watch. “The others should be here soon, right?”

“Alyssa will be here any minute. Lynn will probably be a little late; she’s catching an Uber. What about the eggs?”

Chloe gestured to the plate beside her, where a couple of dozen hardboiled eggs sat. “Your wife was going to make the topping before she ran off. Hopefully she gets back before Alyssa and Lynn get here.”

Victoria heaved a sigh. “Not really much of a party, is it?”

“Hey, you got booze, food, and friends.” Chloe smirked over her shoulder. “Good enough for me.”

“Suppose I can’t argue with that.” Victoria nodded. “So, how’s the new apartment?”

“It’s... secure.” Chloe covered the pot of cheese dip before she turned to face Victoria. “Definitely more so now that our actual names aren’t on the lease. Thanks again, by the way, for hooking us up with your lawyer friend.”

“Eh.” Victoria shrugged. “He owed me for letting him use my notes, and I don’t think I ever would’ve collected.”
“Still.” Chloe leaned back against the counter. “I feel a lot better, now that First Light will have a hard time finding us.”

Victoria hummed. “I bet. Have you guys heard anything from Arcadia Bay?”

“Not since we moved.” Chloe shook her head. “I know we haven’t heard the last from those cocksuckers. I just hope it takes them a long time to poke their heads back up from the sand.”

“Me too,” Victoria agreed. “What have you-”

The sound of a violent crash from outside interrupted them, and they both turned towards the open balcony door. “Hell was that?” Chloe asked, frowning, as she pushed herself off the counter. “Was that from outside?”

“Shit, I think it was.” Victoria straightened upright. “Did someone just get into an accident?”

They both made their way out the door, Chloe beating Victoria to the railing. She leaned over, looking sideways into the parking lot. “Oh, fuck, someone T-boned another car!”

Victoria leaned over past Chloe and saw the two cars; one older model blue sedan, sitting in the middle of the lot. And the other silver car, that had been pushed through a brick wall.

A very familiar silver car.

Her blood ran cold. “That’s my Audi.”

Chloe whipped her head around. “What?!”

“That’s my Audi!” Victoria shoved away from the railing as she sprinted towards the apartment door. “That was my car! KATE!!”

The rest of the night happened in flashes.

Victoria flying down the stairs, taking them two or three at a time. She could hear Chloe right behind her, as they raced towards the ground floor without speaking.

Running past the lobby attendant, barely noticing him on the phone, and shoving through the door. Sprinting down the road, past the other sedan, yelling her wife’s name.

Leaping over the destroyed wall, scrambling around debris before she got to the driver’s side of the car. Banging on the window, trying to get Kate to move, watching blood drip down the side of her wife’s forehead. Chloe was on the other side, screaming Max’s name while pulling on the passenger door, one foot planted on the side of the car as she tugged as hard as she could.

After what felt like an eternity of pounding and pulling on the door, she felt an arm wrap around her chest and bodily yank her away from the car. She barely registered the cop holding her back, as she struggled to get free while he yelled that she needed to get out of the way of the firefighters. Next to her, she saw another cop restraining Chloe, practically wrapping her in a full nelson while the bluenette screamed.

Continuing to struggle against the officer, to get back to her wife, before a familiar face appeared. Alyssa, grabbing her arm and helping the cop, yelling that she needed to calm down, and she wasn’t helping. That got her to stop, thought she was still sobbing while leaning against the two of them.

Sparks flying, as the firefighters used a huge circular saw to dismantle the car around her wife. On
the other side, EMTs managed to pry Max’s door open with a crowbar, putting a neck brace around her before carefully placing her on a gurney. Chloe vanished into the back of the first ambulance as it rolled away.

Kate finally being pulled from the wreck, wearing her own neck brace, the firefighters gently placing her on a backboard while the EMTs worked feverishly. They quickly applied splints to her arm and leg before loading her onto a second gurney.

Victoria tried to follow them, but Alyssa and the cop held onto her. She caught something about the EMTs needing more hands, and she couldn’t ride in the ambulance. Alyssa helped guide Victoria to the back of a cop car, to follow them to the hospital.

As she walked past the second car, she caught a brief glimpse of the driver; a blonde woman screaming at the police officers as they stood around her car. She didn’t get a look at her face before Alyssa pushed her into the back seat of the officer’s car.

Next thing she knew, they were at the hospital. Alyssa guided her inside, one hand on Victoria’s shoulder, the other holding her phone to her ear as she spoke to Lynn. Victoria numbly identified herself as Kate’s wife to the doctor, who quickly ran through Kate’s injuries.

She didn’t get most of it. All she picked up were phrases like ‘compound fracture’, ‘tibial shaft’, and ‘orthopedic surgery’.

Finally, she got to Kate, but it was only for a few minutes. She saw her wife covered in bandages, a breathing tube down her throat, before she was whisked away into the operating room. Alyssa guided Victoria to a chair in the waiting room, then took her phone and had her unlock it. Victoria half-heard her explain that she would call her parents, before stepping away.

Half an hour later the elevator doors opened, and Lynn came sprinting out, sliding into the waiting room and asking about Kate in a high-pitched voice. She broke down crying in Alyssa’s arms, and their friend sat her down in a seat next to Victoria. The two of them unconsciously grabbed each other’s hands as Victoria started crying again with her.

The sun was just starting to peek through the windows when the surgeon came back out. The three of them immediately leapt to their feet as he calmly explained that Kate’s leg and arm were badly broken, and he’d had to install a metal brace to keep the bones aligned. Unfortunately, they’d cut the surgery short after Kate’s blood pressure had dropped dangerously low; they would start again tomorrow.

The doors to the waiting room practically flew open, and Victoria turned to see her parents walk inside, followed by a man in a suit. She recognized the look on his face; someone desperate to please her father. A couple of other people walked behind him, completing the entourage.

*That was fast. He must have taken the jet straight from Seattle.*

Her mother had an incredibly worried look on her face, as she wrapped Victoria in a hug. Her father only looked determined. “How’s Kate?” he asked immediately.

The doctor blinked. “Who are you?”

“Her father-in-law.” He looked at the doctor. “Are you the doctor taking care of her? How is she?”

“I’m sorry, sir, I can only-”

“She needs more surgery.” Victoria’s voice was broken, as she held onto her mother tightly for
support. “Daddy, someone crashed into her, her arm and leg are broken really bad, and they had to cut her out of my car!”

“Your daughter-in-law is receiving excellent care,” the man behind her father assured him. “Doctor Strauss is one of the best orthopedic surgeons in the country.”

“What about Max?” Lynn asked.

The man blinked. “Who?”

“Max?” Derek turned to Lynn. “Max was with her?”

“She was in the passenger seat.” Lynn sniffed, as she held onto Alyssa. “Her arm is broken too. She’s somewhere in the hospital with Chloe.”

Derek turned to the man, who Victoria assumed was an administrator. “Where is Max Caulfield? Is she okay?”

“I... well, the other girl is still in the emergency room. She’s scheduled for surgery-”

“When?”

The doctor stepped forward. “Miss Caulfield will be brought to the OR within the next couple of hours.”

Derek looked at him, then back at the administrator. “Max means as much to us as my daughter-in-law does,” he told the administrator. “I trust she’ll receive the same standard of care?”

“Of course.” The man nodded vigorously. “We’ll bring her to a private room as soon as possible.”

“There’s the matter of the other girl,” a woman behind him piped up. “She’s not family, but she’s refusing to leave. The charge nurse wants to call security and have her-”

“Miss Price goes where Miss Caulfield goes,” Derek stated. “Is that a problem?”

“No, sir, absolutely not.” The administrator shook his head. “We’ll take care of it.”

She couldn’t avert her eyes, as she stared at Kate morosely.

Her wife had multiple IVs going into her arms, and the breathing tube was still down her throat; the nurse had told them that it was required, while they kept her sedated. What scared her the most was the metal brace around Kate’s leg, with rods sticking through her skin to immobilize the broken bones. Her left arm had been wrapped in a full cast all the way to her collar bone, and was slung around her chest.

Lynn sat next to her and sniffled. Across the room, Alyssa sat next to her parents as they watched Kate sleep. Nobody moved or spoke for hours.

The doctors came back in the late afternoon, explaining that they wanted to take Kate for another round of X-Rays. In the meantime, the police wanted to speak to her and Chloe.

The two officers met them all in the hallway, after the nurses wheeled Kate away. “Is this about the accident?” Victoria asked quietly.

“Mrs. Chase...” the female officer looked at her partner. “We don’t think it was an accident.”
Chloe looked just as ragged as Victoria felt, as she furrowed her brow. “Excuse me? Fuck do you mean, it wasn’t an accident?”

“We found pictures of you standing next to your Audi in the other driver’s car.” The officer opened a folder and showed them a wrinkled photo, of Victoria leaning on the hood of her car and smiling. “The other driver had your license plate written down, as well.”

“That’s from Facebook,” Victoria said hollowly. “I posted that when I got the car a few years ago.”

“Wait, hang on.” Derek folded his arms. “What are you saying?”

“We believe the driver was targeting your daughter’s Audi.” The officer put the photos away. “Detectives reviewed your building’s security footage, and noticed that the driver seemed to be lying in wait; it looks like they were idling in the parking lot for most of the day.”

Her mother laid a hand on her chest, eyes wide. “Someone did this on purpose? Why?!”

The other officer brought up his phone. “Do any of you recognize the driver?”

Chloe shook her head. Lynn gasped, her hands flying to her mouth as she stared in horror. Victoria saw red flash across her eyes, as she clenched her fist.

“That’s my wife’s fucking mother.”

The officer’s eyebrows shot up. “Her mother? Are you sure?”


“... okay.” The officer lowered his phone. “Miss Chase, can you tell us why your wife’s mother might want to kill you?”

Victoria sighed, as she relaxed her hand. “Can we sit? This is going to take a while.”

By the time she’d finished, Kate had been brought back to the room. The surgeon explained that her blood pressure was back where it was supposed to be, so they had scheduled a second surgery for the next morning.

As the sun started to dip back below the horizon, a nurse came to see them. “I’m very sorry to bother you, Mrs. Chase,” she said quietly. “But there are a couple of people who are asking to see your wife.”

Victoria peeled her eyes away from her wife to look at the nurse. “Who?”

“One of them says that he’s her father. And there’s another young wo-”

“Under NO circumstances are they allowed to be anywhere near my wife.” The force with which she said those words surprised even her. “I don’t even want them on this floor. And just to remind you, I’m her legal spouse.” She glared at the nurse. “If I see a trace of them, I’ll sue everyone I can think of, starting with you.”

The nurse blinked. “... yes ma’am,” she said meekly, slowly retreating.

Victoria turned back to her wife, ignoring the looks from Lynn and her parents.
Rachel: Any updates?

Steph: Not really. Max is still kind of out of it, but she’s awake.

Rachel: Kate?

Steph: Still unconscious. No change.

Rachel: Fuck. I really wish I could come down.

Steph: You wouldn’t be able to do anything if you did. Nobody here is worried about it.

Steph: How’s things up there?

Rachel: Things got a little hectic when we picked up the kids. The family they were living with heard them sneaking out of the house, and tried to chase my car. The girl wound up losing her backpack.

Steph: Wow. Are they okay?

Rachel: They are now. They gave full statements, and we put them in a secure home.

Steph: ... together?

Rachel: They both insisted on it.

Steph: And the parents?

Rachel: The boy’s father raised eight kinds of hell, trying to get him back. But he said we could keep the dyke.

Steph: What a lovely man.
Alyssa: Okay, so the good news is that Chloe did not leave the burner on before her and Victoria ran out.

Lynn: Oh, good. She was worried about that.

Alyssa: Well, her neighbor said they did leave the door open. She saw it the next day, and closed it for them, but it was unlocked when I got here. Nothing’s been messed with, though.

Lynn: It is a secured building. I don’t think Victoria was really worried about a burglar.

Alyssa: Yep. Unfortunately, they were right about the smell. The eggs and cheese definitely turned.

Lynn: How bad was it?

Alyssa: Like a porta-john near the taco stand at the end of the music festival.

Lynn: ... what a visual.

Alyssa: I threw everything out and opened a few windows. I also plugged in an air freshener I found in their bathroom.

Lynn: Victoria says thanks.

Alyssa: NP. Does Chloe want me to get their stuff together for them?

Lynn: She said it would be awesome if you did. And to please grab their toiletries from the guest bathroom, because she can feel her teeth rotting from all the coffee.

Alyssa: THAT’S a visual for you.

Victoria used her fork to push the food around her tray absently.

It was ten days after the accident. Max and Chloe had already left, as had her parents and Alyssa. She was basically alone with Kate and her wife’s family. Kate had been brought back into surgery that morning, to reconstruct another part of her leg, and Victoria had elected not to spend several hours alone with her father-in-law. So she’d fled to the hospital cafeteria, for terrible food, in an effort to avoid Richard.

Not that I have anything to say to him. Victoria exhaled slowly. If he hadn’t already filed for divorce, I would have thrown his ass back out by now.

... Christ, I hope she’ll be okay.

It’s a simple procedure. Just some pins. Max had a couple of them, and she was discharged after a few days.
She sighed again. *Her bone was only broken in two places, though, not six or seven.*

*Fuck it. I am so not hungry right now.*

She stood and picked up her tray, dumping the whole thing in the trash. Then she left, making her way back towards Kate’s room.

Victoria was halfway through the hospital’s large lobby when she noticed Kate’s other sister on a couch. Jessica sat quietly, eyes in her lap as she picked at her fingers. Her violin case sat at her feet, and a bottle of water was next to her.

*You should go talk to her.*

She hesitated, as she stared at her younger sister-in-law.

*And say... what? Lynn said she’s got some kind of disorder. She didn’t exactly look put-together the other day.*

*Then again, If I grew up in the same house as that fucking cunt, I’d have a condition, too.*

*Okay. It’s not her fault. Try to be a little less of a bitch and go say something.*

Victoria rolled her shoulders as she walked over to Jessica, who didn’t notice that she was there until she sat down. Her sister-in-law looked at her with a surprised expression, blinking silently. “Hey, Jessica,” Victoria greeted.

“... hi,” the teenager replied quietly.

“Are you okay?”

Jessica shrugged. “Yea.”

“You sure?” Victoria looked her up and down. “You, uh, seem like you’re chewing on something.”

“Not really.” Jessica looked back at her lap and reached into her pocket. “I just wanted to get out of the room.”

Victoria watched her produce a small orange bottle. She frowned as it rattled. “What’s that?”

“My pills.”

“Your anxiety medication?” Victoria racked her brain, trying to remember the conversation she’d been a part of before Christmas. “You take Ativan, right?”

“Yea.” Jessica nodded. “Sometimes.”

Victoria tilted her head. “Do I make you anxious?”

Jessica glanced at her nervously. “... I know you don’t like my dad and I.”

“I don’t- I mean, that’s not-” Victoria paused, inhaling slowly. “I don’t hate your dad, Jessica. And I certainly don’t hate you.”

“You didn’t let us upstairs when we got here.”

*... figured that was going to come up at some point.*
“Well... I should have.” Victoria shook her head. “I wasn’t thinking straight. I was worried and scared, and I had just found out what your mom did...” she hesitated. “I lashed out at you two, because you guys were an easy target. And I shouldn’t have. That was kind of shitty of me, and I expect that when Kate finds out that I did, she’ll have some very angry words to say to me.”

Jessica’s mouth twisted in a half-smirk. “I don’t think Kate knows any angry words.”

Victoria snorted in amusement. “Try smoking a cigarette in front of her before you say that.”

They both snickered, and Victoria was glad to see Jessica relax a little bit.

“Well, you shouldn’t.” Victoria leaned forward to catch her eye. “What happened is not on you, Jessica. The blame is entirely on your mother.”

Jessica shrugged. “My dad said my mom is going to prison,” she stated.

“Yea, she is.”

“Do you think she’ll eve get out?”

Victoria shook her head. “No. The crime they’re charging her with carries a life sentence.”

Jessica exhaled slowly. “Okay.”

“... is it?” Victoria looked at her carefully. “Are you... okay?”

“Yes. It’s fine,” Jessica nodded, and slipped the pill bottle back in her pocket. “I just don’t really want her to come home.”

“You don’t?”

Jessica shook her head as she scratched her arm.

Victoria wanted to press the question, but she opted to change the subject. “By the way, you’re a really amazing violinist,” she complimented. “That song you played was incredible.”

“Thanks.”

“Seriously, I don’t think you get how big of a compliment my mom gave you,” Victoria continued. “She’s a fanatic for older music, and Last Rose of Summer is one of her favorite pieces. If my mom says you’re the best, she’s comparing you to some of the most famous violinists in the world.”

Jessica blinked. “Really?”

“Yep. And she’s seen pretty much every big name in classical music. She’s even had a few private performances.” Victoria nodded. “And my parents don’t compliment just anyone, you really have to earn it.”
“Oh.” Jessica’s face flushed. “... thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Victoria hesitated. “You think you can forgive me for being an asshole before?”

Jessica nodded.

“Thank you.” Victoria looked back at the elevator. “I don’t really want to go back upstairs, either. How about we just chill here for a little bit?”

“Sounds good to me.”

Chloe: How’s Kate doing?

Victoria: Better. She’s sleeping a lot, though.

Chloe: So’s Max. She conks out ten minutes after she takes a pain pill.

Victoria: Is her arm still hurting?

Chloe: Not as bad as it used to, but yea. She only takes the pills when she need them.

Chloe: Kate?

Victoria: She’s still on IVs. They’re going to start weaning her off in a couple of days.

Chloe: Is she going to have to do physical therapy?

Victoria: The doctor doesn’t think so. Her muscles weren’t too badly damaged, and he did a really good job of putting her leg back together. She’ll just be in a cast for a while.

Chloe: Good to hear.

Chloe: What about bitchface?

Victoria: Still sitting in the county lockup. Our lawyers spoke to the ADA who’s prosecuting her, and they were assured that all possible charges are being pursued.

Chloe: You know what would be a shame, is if someone kneecapped her while she was in there.

Chloe: Hint, hint.

Victoria: ... this isn’t something we should discuss over the phone.
“You’ve put a lot of thought into this.”

Brooke and Emily nodded. Regina sat next to the two of them on the couch, a baby monitor in her hand; Aaron was down for his nap. She was mostly silent, watching Brooke and Emily speak to Jane and Pete; they’d figured it was time to discuss what they’d been planning for months.

“We’ve been crunching numbers, but we just don’t have the money,” Brooke explained. “ Barely enough for a car, never mind furniture, a security deposit, first month’s rent... it’s a lot.”

“And we know CPS will stop making support payments when I turn eighteen in a couple of months.” Emily fidgeted. “I can pay some rent, to make things-”

“Oh, the hell you will.” Pete waved his hand. “You’re not that expensive, Emily. And you need the money more than we do.”

Jane leaned forward. “But you guys ARE going to college,” she emphasized. “That is the plan, right?”

“After this year.” Brooke nodded. “We’re gonna start putting cash aside in savings. Whatever’s left after the bills for the car and whatever Aaron needs.”

“We’ll move when we have enough for the apartment and furniture,” Emily added. “At least a couple of beds. None of us want to sleep on the floor, and Brooke and I never want to see an air mattress again.”

Jane smirked. “No, I bet not.”

“How much have you saved for a car?” Pete asked.

“About twelve hundred,” Emily answered. “We’re keeping an eye on Craigslist, to see what comes-”

“No, don’t buy a car on Craigslist. That’s too much money to gamble with.” Pete shook his head. “One of the guys at the VFW runs a dealership. Next time I see him, we’ll talk and see what he can do for you girls. I’m sure he can get you in something decent.”

Emily sighed in relief. “Thanks, Pete. I, uh, was a little nervous about some of those listings.”

“You’re welcome. Also, if you give me some notice, I can probably get you to the coffee shop on weekends.” Pete nodded. “Just let me know.”

“So the answer is yes, girls.” Jane nodded, too. “We’re okay with you two staying here for a little while after you turn eighteen to save money.”

Brooke and Emily both relaxed, the relief evident on their faces. “Miss Amber won’t give you any grief, right?” Emily asked.

“Miss Amber is not the boss of us.” Jane smiled smugly. “We’re not under any kind of obligation to kick you girls to the curb. Besides, there are other foster homes they can put teenagers into.” She
glanced at Regina. “You’re going to live with them?”

She nodded. “Once I graduate,” she added. “I might take a gap year too, though. Get a job and save some money like them, until I’m in a good place financially.”

“I think that’s smart.” Pete thumbed upstairs. “He’ll get expensive, I’m sure.”

“Thank you so much,” Brooke said sincerely. “We really, really appreciate it.”

“Of course.”

“I’m so sorry, Miss, but we don’t have any garlic bagels.”

Brooke braced herself for the onslaught of insults; it was the next weekend, and Pete had driven her and Emily to the coffee shop to work a long shift. Unfortunately, Dawson had told them that morning that their supplier had screwed up again.

“Oh. Well, that’s too bad.” The woman looked back at the display case. “Can I get an onion bagel instead? With extra cream cheese?”

“Sure thing.” Brooke smiled, relieved, as she jotted down the order. “Anything else? Coffee, juice, soda?”

“I suppose some orange juice would be nice.”

“Coming right up.”

Brooke made her way back to Emily, once again working the register. “Onion bagel, extra cream cheese, and an OJ for table four,” she said quietly.

“Okay.” Emily’s fingers flew over the screen as she put in the order. “Hey, I counted our tips on my last break. We’re at a hundred and twenty already.”

“No shit?” Brooke’s eyebrows flew up. “Wow. That’s more than we make after school, and we’re gonna be here for another four hours.”

“I know.” Emily grinned as she turned and started putting the customer’s order together. “I like this weekend shift. We keep this pace up, we’ll have enough for that car without Pete’s help.”

Brooke smirked, remembering the old hatchback Pete had found them at the dealership. It was going to cost them the full fifteen hundred they’d budgeted for, including registration. Pete had promised to help out if they were short, but they’d both agreed that they were asking for a lot already. “Hope so. I’d really like to avoid owing Jane and Pete money.”

“Me too.” Emily turned back around, placing the bottle of juice next to a bagel and extra cream cheese packets. “Off you go. Give them that good service with a smile.”

“Shut up.” Brooke rolled her eyes, as she took the order back to the woman. Turning, she saw a table with trash and immediately started clearing it, grabbing everything and bringing it to the trash can.

She was halfway there when she heard the bell above the door go off right behind her. “Welcome to Early Bird!” Emily called.

Yay, more potential tips!
Brooke dumped everything in the trash can and smiled as she turned to the new customer. “You can sit wherev-”

Her brother Henry stared back at her.

She froze, eyes wide as her heart rate tripled. Her mind raced, as she tried to comprehend that her older brother, who she’d last seen the night before she ran away, was in the coffee shop with her.

Henry, for his part, looked at her with narrowed eyes. He was dressed sharply, more so than she’d ever seen him; he wore a well-fitted suit and tie, with dress shoes, and had a nice-looking watch on his wrist. When he spoke, his words seemed to be forced through gritted teeth. “Hello, Brooke.”

Brooke took an involuntary step backward. “Stay away from me.”

“Is that really how you’re going to greet your brother? After so long?” He stepped closer. “Or is Dad right, and you really have forsaken your family?”

Panicking, she reached behind her for anything to grab onto and only found a stool. She threw it forward, the chair crashing to the ground in front of them as she backed up again. “I said leave me the f-FUCK alone!” she stammered, her voice high.

Henry stepped over the chair nonchalantly. “I don’t think Grandpa would appreciate your language, Squirt.”

Brooke started hyperventilating as she hit the counter, running out of space to move as Henry continued towards her.

She caught a blur out of the corner of her eyes, as Emily vaulted over the counter. Her friend landed and immediately moved between them, brandishing a large knife from their kitchen. “You take one more step and I’ll cut your balls off,” she snarled menacingly, as she pointed the knife at Henry.

That finally made him stop, as he looked Emily up and down. “Miss Parker. I guess we know where Brooke learned her behavior.”

“FUCK you,” Emily snapped. “And my last name isn’t Parker, motherfucker.”

“Whatever you say,” Henry shrugged. “It doesn’t matter, I’m not here for the two of you. I’m looking for Regina McCalmon.” He tilted his head. “She lives with you, doesn’t she?”

Brooke tried to melt into the background, as she stayed as far away from her brother as she could. Emily simply glared back at him. “Never heard of her.”

“I find that hard to believe, given the fact that the two of you were seen in the hospital visiting after she gave birth two months ago.” Henry craned his neck to look behind them. “Is she working here too?”

“I SAID we have no idea who the fuck you’re talking about, you hard-of-hearing cockbag,” Emily spat. “Now get the fuck out.”

Henry hummed. “What about you, Brooke?” he asked. “Do YOU know where I can find Regina McCalm-”

The door to the back office flew open, and Dawson strode into the cafe, a determined look on his face. “What the hell is going on?!” he exclaimed.
Henry turned to face him. “I’m just trying to order coffee. Your waitress is threatening me with a knife.”

“He’s my brother,” Brooke gasped, her voice still in a high pitch. “Dawson, you have to get him out of here. He needs to go, he can’t be here, you have to make him leave!”

Dawson looked between them. “Okay, Emily, put down the knife.”

Emily didn’t move, maintaining her glare as she pointed the knife with a steady arm. “No.”

“Emily, put down the knife right-”

“He’s from First Light of Christ,” she stated loudly, looking around the shop; by then, all the customers had frozen, and were watching the scene play out. Two girls had their phones out and seemed to be recording. “He’s hunting for a sixteen-year-old girl who ran away after the man she was forced to marry and his father raped her. Somebody needs to call the police, right now.”

Henry pressed his lips together, as two of the customers immediately pulled out their phones and started dialing. “Your slander will be noted,” he said, finally turning on his heel and stalking out of the shop.

Emily exhaled, as she lowered the knife. “Mother fucker.”

Dawson blinked as he looked at them. “What the hell just happened?”

Brooke’s legs finally gave out, and she slid down the counter until she was sitting on the floor. She stared at the door and gasped for air as Emily looked at her. “Brooke?”

“I-” Brooke swallowed, hard, as she started trembling. “I th-thought he was going to try to t-take me b-b-back...”

“Okay, Brooke, sit tight.” Emily pulled her phone out. “I’m calling Jane and Miss Amber.”

Jane arrived first. Dawson and Emily had put Brooke in a booth away from the door, where the teenager spent most of time fidgeting with her fingers. Her foster mother made a beeline for her as soon as she arrived, sitting across from her and making sure she was okay.

Miss Amber arrived five minutes later. She glanced over and saw Brooke sitting with Jane, so she made her way towards Emily, who was back behind the counter. They conferred quickly, Emily explaining what had happened. Miss Amber’s phone appeared in her hand, and she stepped back outside to make a phone call.

Brooke sighed. “I think they’re going to take me out of your house,” she said to Jane.

“Sweetie, if your brother was looking for Regina here, then he doesn’t know where you live.” Jane shook her head. “You’re not going anywhere. Just relax and let Miss Amber work.”

Her social worker came back a few minutes later and gestured to Emily. Another teenager replaced her at the register as they joined Brooke and Jane at the table. “Your brother showed up at CPS a couple of minutes ago,” she reported. “He got there just as I was calling.”

Brooke frowned. “Why?”

“To drop off legal paperwork for Regina.” Miss Amber shook her head. “I’m sorry, I can’t say more than that.”
“What, is he working for Caulfield or something?” Emily asked.

“It certainly seems like it,” Miss Amber agreed. “He wouldn’t be the first assistant Ryan hired from the church.”

Brooke frowned. “Wait, if he’s trying to serve Regina, why didn’t he just go to CPS first?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he really did think she worked here with the two of you.” Miss Amber shrugged. “It could be that he wanted to disrupt your routine. Which he did rather well, I’m afraid.”

“What does that mean?”

Miss Amber smiled sadly. “I know you girls are trying to save money, and help out Regina. But I highly doubt that you two will still have a job after this. My guess is that next time you see your manager, he’s going to give you your last paychecks and then let you both go.”

“Why?!?” Emily asked incredulously.

“Well, you held a knife on a customer, caused a rather exceptional disruption, and there’s now a potential liability issue of having employees that are enemies with an entire cult. Oregon is an employment-at-will state, so any of those reasons will suffice.”


“Language,” Miss Amber scolded.

Jane leaned forward. “Don’t worry about it, you two,” she reassured them “It’s an after-hours and weekend job. You’ll find another one.”

“Besides, I don’t want First Light knowing where you two are employed,” Miss Amber added. “It’s for the best.”

“Fine.” Emily crossed her arms. “Why won’t you tell us what First Light wants with Regina?”

“Because it’s not your business. Regina is free to tell you, if she chooses, but I’m not.” She glanced behind them. “And there he is.”

They both looked over their shoulder to see Dawson. To his credit, he had a very dejected look on his face, as he held two envelopes. “I just got off the phone with the district manager,” he explained sadly. “I’m really sorry, girls, but we can’t keep you on.”

“We figured.” Miss Amber nodded at the envelopes. “Are those their last checks?”

“For their full shift, and the one they were scheduled to work tomorrow. And their shares of the tips from today.” He extended the envelopes towards them. “I need the aprons back, too.”

Brooke and Emily stood up, untying their aprons and handing them to him. “Appreciate the job anyway,” Brooke said morosely.

“Yea.” Emily sat back down heavily. “Thanks.”

When they finally got home, Regina was in her room upstairs.

Brooke’s old bedroom had undergone a dramatic change since she’d given it up. The once-clear room was now full of furniture; a crib sat in one corner, a changing table stood beside it, and Jane
had brought in an extra dresser for Aaron’s clothes. In one corner, though, was the large rocking chair Pete had gotten from one of his friends at the VFW. When Brooke and Emily walked in, Regina was sitting in the chair, rocking Aaron gently as the baby slept.

She only had eyes for him. She didn’t look up, as Brooke and Emily sat next to her on the foot of her bed, waiting silently. After a few minutes, Regina made eye contact, and they could see the red, irritated skin around her eyes and nostrils.

“My husband’s mother is suing for custody,” she said quietly.

Brooke and Emily shifted, their eyes going wide.

“She wants to take him away.” She sniffed deeply, rubbing her nose again. “Her argument is that it’s not in his best interest to grow up with a mother who’s a child in state care.”

Brooke could practically feel Emily vibrate in anger. “That fucking bitch,” she seethed.

“I-” Regina’s voice caught. “I don’t know what to do.”
“They fixed that quick.”

Victoria followed Kate’s gaze, as she looked at the repaired brick wall. “Yea, my dad mentioned that he was going to put a contractor on it as soon as he could,” she said as she drove the rental car into the parking garage. “Said that the people who live in this building pay a lot of money not to look at rubble.”

“I bet.” Kate yawned as she squirmed to try and get comfortable. It was difficult, due to the rigid cast on her leg, which forced her to sit at an angle. “These pills are making me sleepy.”

“How’s the pain?”

“Not too bad.” Kate glanced at her. “I’m pretty hungry, though. I might be getting the munchies.”

Victoria snickered. “I don’t think you’re on those kinds of painkillers.”

“Like you would know.”

“Well, we’ll get you some food in a few minutes.” Victoria pulled into their parking spot. “Alyssa said she put a couple of those frozen pizzas you like in the freezer.”

“Buffalo chicken?”

“Yep.”

“Yay.”

Victoria couldn’t help but smile as she got out of the car, pulling the collapsible wheelchair from the back. She got it set up just as Kate pushed her door open and started to lean out of the car.

“Hey.” Victoria quickly scurried over, grabbing Kate’s arm. “You’re supposed to wait for me.”

“I was just opening the door.”

“You’re trying to get out. Doctor Strauss said you have to stay off your feet for the next few weeks.” Victoria wrapped her hands around Kate, cradling her.

Kate blinked as Victoria physically lifted her from the car, shifting her into the wheelchair. “Um... have you been working out?”

“That was a lot harder than it looked,” Victoria breathed, as she closed Kate’s door. “Maybe we’ll start you off with a salad instead of pizza.”

Her wife raised an eyebrow. “Are you calling me fat?”
“No. I’m calling you heavy.”

“There you go.”

Kate sighed, as she settled into her seat on the couch. Victoria pulled over the ottoman, gently placing both of her legs onto it before draping a blanket over her. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Do you want another pillow?”

“Yes please.”

“Okay.” Victoria grabbed a pillow and gently slid it under the cast on Kate’s right arm. “You want your pizza? Or do you want me to order something?”

“Pizza is fine.” Kate smiled at her. “You don’t have to hover, Vicky. I’ll be okay.”

“I know you will be.” Victoria took Kate’s uninjured hand, squeezing gently. “But you almost weren’t. Please let me hover and take care of you.”

Kate bit her lip, as Victoria let go of her hand. “Yea. Okay. Um…” she squirmed. “Have you heard anything about… you know…”

Victoria tilted her head. “Your mom?”

Her wife nodded.

“The ADA is charging her with attempted murder.” Victoria sat down next to Kate on the couch. “That normally carries a life sentence by itself. But he’s also charging her with two counts of assault and battery for you and Max, as well as charges for mayhem, property damage, and stalking.”

“Mayhem?” Kate frowned. “What’s that?”

“Disfigurement.” Victoria looked at Kate’s cast. “The surgeon operated on your leg, babe. And Max’s arm. He left scars behind on the both of you, and it’s her fault.”

Her wife blinked. “That… doesn’t really seem important, in the grand scheme of things.”

“It’s not. The ADA is tacking on everything he can think of. That way, even if he can’t get her for attempted murder, he’ll have her for the other charges, which he can prove with his eyes closed.”

Victoria squeezed Kate’s arm again. “Even if your mom doesn’t get life in prison, she’ll get put away for enough years that it won’t matter.”

“… ah.” Kate nodded slowly.

“Are you okay?” Victoria examined her wife’s face carefully. “What are you thinking about?”

“A lot, I guess.” Kate pursed her lips. “She, uh… can’t try to claim insanity, could she?”

Victoria scoffed. “She could try. But it won’t work.”

“Why not?”

“In order to claim insanity, you have to not understand what you’re doing, or not understand that it was wrong.” Victoria explained. “Your mom definitely knew what she was doing; she proved that when she printed out those photos from Facebook. And a psychiatrist would have to testify that she
didn’t know right from wrong, as a result of a mental disorder that your mother probably doesn’t have.” She paused. “And, even if by some miracle it DID work, she would get sent to a state-run mental hospital for the rest of her life instead of jail.”

“... okay.” Kate nodded. “Can you put the pizza in? I’m hungry.”

Victoria frowned. “... was that it?”

“Yep.”

“And... you’re not, like, depressed or anything, right?”

Her wife looked back at her. “Vicky, my mother was trying to kill you. She almost killed Max. I just wanted to make sure that she was never getting out of prison, and that we can live the rest of our lives without having the worry of her popping up like a herpes sore.”

Victoria smiled. “She’s not, babe. I promise.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” Victoria stood from the couch with their plates. “Do you want something to drink?”

“Can I have another coke?”

“Sure thing.” She went back to the kitchen, depositing the plates into the sink. She was just opening the fridge when Kate’s phone went off on the table next to her, and her wife grunted with the effort to grab it. “Who is it?”

“Max.” Victoria closed the fridge to see Kate slowly typing out a text with her one good hand. “She’s asking how I’m doing.”

Victoria placed the can of soda on the end table. “How’s SHE doing?”

“Sounds like she’s good.” Kate winced. “Can I have the coat hanger, please?”

“The doctor says you’re not supposed to scratch with that thing.”

“His arm doesn’t itch like mine does. Please give it to me.”

Victoria smirked as she reached over, retrieving the bent wire coat hanger Kate had been using as an arm scratcher. Her wife took it and stuck it underneath the cast, her face melting into bliss as she scratched at a spot. “Ooh, that feels nice.”

“I’ll bet it does.” Victoria smiled, just as her phone started beeping in her pocket. She retrieved it and silenced the alarm. “Time to take some pills.”

Kate’s face fell, as she set the coat hanger aside. “How many this time?”

“Three,” Victoria answered, as she checked the label on the alarm. “I’ll go get them. Be right back.”

She walked into their master bedroom to get Kate’s medication. Let’s see... anti-inflammatory, antibiotics, and her pain medication, she thought as she retrieved each pill. And to think, statistically, I was the one more likely to develop a pill-popping problem.
Victoria smirked as her phone jingled in her pocket. She pulled it out to read the text from Chloe.

**Chloe:** Vic Vic Vic

“Oh, Jesus Christ.” Victoria scowled, as she glared at her phone. “I’m gonna kill this girl.”

**Victoria:** Wow. I didn’t think it was possible, but when you say it like that, I hate it even more.

**Chloe:** Cool story, brah, but I need you to do something for me.

“OH MY GOD OH MY GOD OH MY GOD!!”

The outburst almost made Victoria jump out of her skin. “Kate?!?” she exclaimed. “Babe, are you okay?!”

“VICKY!!” Kate screamed. “COME HERE!! COME HERE!!”

She frowned as she typed out a quick text to Chloe, then raced back into the living room. Her wife was practically vibrating as she waved her phone around with one good hand. “OH MY GOD!!” she screamed.

“What?!” Victoria asked. “Kate! Why are you-”

“MAX GOT ENGAGED!!”

“She WHAT?!”

Victoria snatched Kate’s phone and looked at the picture of her friend’s cast. Very prominently, a sliver ring with a blue stone was around her finger. “Holy shit!!”

“I know!” Kate reached for her, excitedly waving her hand around “Gimme gimme gimme!”

Victoria tossed her the phone back before pulling her own phone from her pocket.

**Victoria:** DID YOU PROPOSE TO MAX?!?!

**Chloe:** And there it is.

**Chloe:** In my defense, I tried to give you a heads-up.

**Victoria:** HOLY SHIT! That is so awesome!

**Victoria:** I want to see a better picture of the ring!

“Woah.” Victoria admired the picture Chloe sent her. “Babe, look at this!”

Kate craned her neck as she texted Max furiously. “Oh my God! That is so pretty!”

“I know!” Victoria sent a couple more texts before she frowned. “Hang on.”

**Victoria:** Wait, what did you need from me?

**Chloe:** Well, here’s the thing. I don’t really like a lot of people. I mean, at all. I mostly tolerate others. With some obvious exceptions; Max, you guys, Jake, Penny, Steph, Rachel, etc.

**Chloe:** And I knew Max would never be able to choose a Maid of Honor between Steph and
Rachel, so I claimed Steph before Max could get to her, because I do like her. But not enough to be my MOH. And I want my mom as my other bridesmaid.

**Chloe**: So I was REALLY hoping you could step up here, as my Maid of Honor. Pretty please.

“OH MY GOD MAX WANTS ME TO BE A BRIDESMAID!!” Kate screamed. “VICKY!! MAX WANTS ME TO BE A BRIDESMAID!!”

“Good for you, sweetie.” Victoria grinned, as she held up her phone. “Chloe wants me to be her Maid of Honor.”

“What?!” Kate looked at her with wide eyes, as Victoria texted back. “Seriously? Did you say yes?”

“I did.” She paused. “But I’m gonna see if I can get something out of it.”

**Victoria**: I only have one condition.

**Chloe**: I’m not gonna stop calling you Vic.

“... fuck.”

Chapter End Notes

You might have gotten two notifications for this chapter. Because I accidentally uploaded it to EtL by mistake. Sorry, we all suck sometimes.
Rachel drove to the foster house, keeping half an eye on her passenger. The black-haired girl in the other seat stared morosely at the dashboard as she cradled her duffle bag. It had been over an hour since they’d left the CPS office, and she hadn’t said a word.

“We’re nearly there.” Rachel smiled. “You okay, Patricia?”

The teenager nodded silently, her eyes not leaving the front of the car.

“I’m really sorry about Muffin,” Rachel lamented. “The home you’re going to has a cat, though. Actually, they have two of them.”

Patricia shrugged.

Rachel tried another angle. “Do you have any questions?” she asked. “About the foster house, or what’s going to happen?”

The teenager finally glanced at her. “They’re going to arrest my brother, aren’t they?”

*Crap. Talk about backfiring.*

Rachel bit the inside of her cheek, but she was temporarily saved from answering as her phone rang from her pocket. She pulled it out, checking the screen before sending it to voicemail. “Would you feel upset if they did?” she finally asked.

“I don’t know.” Patricia turned back to the front of the car. “Maybe.”

“Why maybe?”

The teenager sighed. “He’s nice. Sometimes. I know he’s... my friends told me that he scares them. When he lived with us, they didn’t want to come over.” She looked back at Rachel. “But he was nice to me.”

“I’m sure he was.” Rachel nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“Was he the one that killed Muffin?”

“I don’t know, sweetie.” Rachel glanced at her. “Possibly.”

“I think he did.”

“Why?”

“He hated her.” Patricia sniffed. “Mom didn’t get her for me until after he moved out. When he came back to visit, he tried to pick her up, and she scratched his hands bad.” She wiped her eyes. “Even when she was a kitten, she had really sharp claws. But Damon was the only person she ever scratched.”

*Guess cats have good instincts,* Rachel mused, keeping her face even as she listened.
“Ever since, whenever he saw Muffin, he always shoved her away. And called her by bad names. He kicked her, once.” Patricia looked back at Rachel, and she could see moisture in her eyes. “What did they do with Muffin, after they found her?”

Shit. They probably tossed her in the closest dumpster.

“I don’t know,” Rachel said evasively. “I’m sorry, sweetie, I didn’t think to ask.”

“Mm.” Patricia turned back, wiping her eyes again. “What about my parents? Are the police going to arrest them, too?”

“It’ll depend on what they find out.” Rachel took another turn. “I’m really sorry, Patricia. But... you did do the right thing, when you told us what you heard. I know it might not feel like it, but it’s true.”

“... okay.”

Rachel reached the end of the cul-de-sac and pulled into a driveway, turning the car off. “We’re here.”

Patricia looked up at the two-story house. “This is it?”

“Yes. You’ll be here for at least a few days,” Rachel explained as she unbuckled her seat belt. “Once the police finish their investigation, we’ll make a decision on what to do with-”

“I don’t want to go back.”

Rachel paused mid-sentence. “Why not?”

“The boy my family wanted me to marry is allergic to cats. And Muffin always slept in my bedroom with the door closed.” Patricia sniffled again. “I think my parents took her while I was asleep. After they gave her to me when she was a kitten.”

... fucking sociopathic motherfuckers.

“Okay.” Rachel nodded. “We still have some work to do before we make that determination, sweetie. Let’s get you inside.”

The door to the house opened as they were walking up the steps. The foster father, Will, smiled warmly. “Hey, Rachel!”

“Good to see you, Will.” Rachel smiled as she laid a hand on the teenager’s shoulder. “This is Patricia Merrick.”

“Nice to meet you, Patricia.” Will shook her hand gently. “Come on in. Alice is just finishing lunch.”

Rachel left their house an hour later, after getting Patricia settled in. The first thing she did as she got in her car was return the phone call.

“Detective Moore.”

“Hey, Crystal. It’s me.” Rachel started her car, holding her phone to her ear with her shoulder. “Sorry I didn’t answer, I was driving Patricia to the foster house.”

“Is that where you are right now?”
Rachel frowned. “Yea. I’m just leaving. Have you guys arrested Damon yet?”

“Yes. We did.” Crystal paused. “Rachel... you should get down here.”

“Where?”

“I’ll text you the address. There’s something you need to see.”

She arrived at the house, surprised at the number of police cars in front of it. Three cruisers and two SUVs were parked on the street, lights flashing up and down the block as several officers conversed amongst themselves outside.

Oddly, there was not a single spectator. Rachel looked around as she got out of her car. It was a First Light neighborhood, but all she could see were police officers. And all the curtains that faced the street were closed. She felt extremely unsettled.

“Help you?” the officer drawled as she approached the police tape.

“Rachel Amber, with Child Protective Services.” She produced her ID lanyard from her pocket. “Detective Moore asked me to come by.”

The cop looked at her ID, then at her face. “Shit, you’re one of them,” he muttered. “Christ.”

“One of them?” Rachel asked, confused. “What does that mean?”

“I’ll let Moore tell you.” He lifted the tape for her. “Follow me, please. And don’t touch anything once you get inside.”

Rachel trailed him as he led her into the house. She took a second to look at the front door, admiring the smashed handle from the battering ram the police had used. But as soon as she walked inside, a horrible smell overtook her. “Jesus!” she gasped, covering her nose.

“Good, you’re here.” The state police detective who worked in the office above hers appeared, straightening her blazer. Her long blonde hair was done up in a bun, and she had rubber gloves on her hands. “You okay? Where’s Patricia Merrick?”

“She’s at her foster house. And I’m fine, except for the stench.” She slowly lowered her hands, her nose wrinkling at what smelled like a combination of body odor and rotten food. “It’s fucking awful in here.”

“Yea, it looks like the men who lived here didn’t clean the house very often. We opened some windows to air it out; you should have smelled it when the entry team breeched the door.” Crystal nodded. “So... Rachel, we need you to look at something, and not freak out about it. We have to know how accurate it is, so we know how concerned to be.”

“Okay...” she frowned. “What?”

“Over here.”

She followed Crystal down a hallway, stopping as she got a look inside a bedroom. Her attention was drawn away from the single bed to the wall beside it, where it appeared that nails had been driven into every stud.

And hanging from almost every nail was a gun. Pistols of every kind hung by their trigger guards in several neat columns. Closer to the corner of the wall were rifles, each sitting horizontally on two
nails. There were long rifles with scopes, slightly shorter shotguns, and a few that looked like military M-16s. Another officer stood in the middle of the room, scribbling on a clipboard as he examined the firearms.

“Christ,” Rachel breathed. “What the fuck? Why are there so many goddamn guns here?”

“Yea, it’s pretty impressive.” Crystal turned back to peek in the room beside her. “They’ve got a bigger armory then we do in the field office.”

Rachel glanced at her. “Are these... legal?”

“Most of them. There are a couple that are going to spell trouble for these guys. Right, Larry?”

The officer with the clipboard looked up and nodded. “Two of those AR-15s have short barrels,” he affirmed. “And neither of them have NFA markings, which means they probably don’t have permission to do that.”

“Short barrels?”

“Rifle barrels have to be at least sixteen inches long per federal law,” he explained, pointing at two of the military rifles; Rachel noticed that they were indeed shorter than the rest. “You can make a short-barreled rifle legally by doing some paperwork for the ATF. But you’re supposed to mark the gun with your name and city. Those don’t have that, and I can’t find any paperwork for them. We’re checking the serial numbers now, but when they come back as not being in the system, those boys are in for some serious charges.”

“So if you were worried about them getting off, you don’t have to anymore,” Crystal added. “But that’s not why I called you down here. Come on.”

Rachel managed to pull herself away and followed Crystal around the corner, getting her first look into the living room. It was very sparsely furnished; a folding card table overflowed with plates and beer bottles, a ratty couch sat facing a television, and a couple of stools sat around the kitchen island, which was covered in more beer bottles and paperwork.

The walls were what drew her attention, though. Lines had been drawn with markers, segmenting the walls into columns. And at the top of each makeshift column, near the ceiling, was a name and a photograph.

Her eyes immediately noted the picture from her driver’s license on the opposite wall.

“... oh my God.”

“There’s more in two of the bedrooms.” Crystal glanced around. “We have rooms like this back at headquarters, for our organized crime unit. It’s a little scary to see something like that in this neighborhood.”

Rachel ignored her, as she walked up to her portion of the wall. Below her smiling face was a bunch of hand-written information.

**RACHEL DAWN AMBER**

**BORN:** July 22nd, 1993

**DESCRIPTION:** 5’5” tall, 125 lbs, hazel eyes, dark blonde/brown hair. Tattoo of Asian dragon on her right calf.
FAMILY: James Amber (father), Rose Amber (mother), Stephanie “Steph” Gingrich (GF?)

ADDRESS: Crown Springs Apartments, 1480 Cernan Drive, Unit 25B (one bedroom, one bath, 1,232 sq/ft). Second floor, south side, three windows visible from sidewalk. Reserved parking spot 152.


OCCUPATION: Social Worker, CPS

EDUCATION: Arcadia Bay High School (2012), Oregon State University (2017), BA, MSW, GPA 3.95

KNOWN ASSOCIATES: James Amber, Stacy Hemmingway, Megan Weaver, Maxine “Max” Caulfield, Chloe Price


Frequents the Starbucks on 5th and Cernan in the mornings before work. Eats out infrequently (McDonalds on Laurel, or Subway on Grand), usually cooks at home. Occasionally shops at Target on 7th and Main. Gets groceries at the Albertsons on Park and Thompson. Commonly wears flannel shirts & jeans, dresses formally for court. Usually wears a blue feather earring on her left ear.

PHONE AND/OR LAPTOP SHOULD BE RECOVERED AT ANY AVAILABLE OPPORTUNITY – MAY CONTAIN LOCATIONS OF FOSTER HOMES WITH KIDNAPPED CHILDREN


“Holy shit.” Rachel looked at Crystal with wide eyes. “How do they have this stuff? And a list of all their teenagers I’ve placed? WE don’t have that list written down anywhere.”

“Do you recognize the photo?” Crystal nodded to her picture. “That might help.”

“That’s from my driver’s license.” Rachel retrieved her wallet, showing it to Crystal. “I just got that a few months ago.”

The detective tilted her head. “They had someone run your DMV records,” she deduced. “That would explain how they got your address. And the info about your car.”

“Which I am definitely trading in, first chance I get.” She looked back at the wall. A few more pictures of her were pinned up, some printed from Facebook, including a picture of her and Steph with a circle around her face. Others were candid shots taken from long ranges; there was one of her leaving her apartment, another of her getting out of her car in front of her office, and another of her
walking next to Brooke as she escorted her out of the courthouse. “Son of a bitch. Those fuckers were following me.”

“You probably don’t want to see your dad’s stuff.” Crystal pointed to another part of the wall. “They must have someone dedicated to tracking him, with all the pictures they have.”

She looked and saw that Crystal was right. Her father’s picture was pinned to the top of another portion of the wall, a smaller photo of her mother pinned right beneath it. The information beneath it was written in very small handwriting, and took up every available inch. Dozens of photos were pinned near the bottom. “Have you guys called him yet?”

“We did.” Crystal smirked. “He wasn’t very surprised.”

Rachel walked around the room, noting several other people she recognized. Her boss, Stacy; the Arcadia Bay police chief, Watson; the lawyer, Megan Weaver...

She froze as she saw a picture at the end of the room. “Jesus Christ.”

Crystal appeared next to her. “Oh. That’s her, isn’t it?”

Rachel nodded, as she stared at Max’s picture. Chloe’s hung next to it. “I guess I shouldn’t be too surprised,” she allowed. “Still. This is bad shit.”

She scanned their column as well, sighing in relief as she saw the notes about their address. “Thank fuck.”

“What?”

“She moved after they dropped the dead cat in front of her door. But it doesn’t look like they have her current address.” Rachel pointed to the information about a P.O. box written on the wall. “They can’t do much with that.”

“Unless they go check their box.” Crystal pointed to a picture of a post office beside it, the sign identifying it as one in San Francisco. “How much you want to bet that’s the building the box is in?”

“I really, really don’t want to know.” Rachel kept reading. “Shit, they have the info about Chloe’s parents on here. And her…” she trailed off. “Crystal, what’s that?”

The detective stepped closer and examined a sheet of paper pinned to the wall. A picture of a younger Chloe was on top, clearly an older booking photo; she didn’t have her tattoo, and her hair was still brown. She looked pissed, as she glared into the camera. Below that was a list of charges.

“It’s her rap sheet,” Crystal said, as she read through it. “Pulling a fire alarm, vandalism, driving without a license... your friend has a pretty colorful- wait a minute.” Moore frowned. “This isn’t her public record.”

“Yea, aren’t those on an official police letterhead?”

“They are. This is an internally-generated file.” Crystal un-pinned the paper from the wall and took a closer look. “These numbers, here at the bottom? Those are used to track requests from other agencies. Someone from outside the San Francisco PD put in an inquiry for this.”

Rachel looked at her. “Wait, what are you saying?”

Crystal looked back at her, a stunned expression on her face. “These assholes got this from a cop.”
“I’m worried that you don’t looked as surprised as I thought you’d be.”

James slowly chewed the food in his mouth, as Rachel watched him carefully during dinner. She’d just finished telling him what she’d learned, and he’d barely reacted.

Finally, he swallowed. “Sweetie, Chief Watson and I have been considering the possibility for the past couple of years,” he told her. “There have been some-”

“You KNEW?!” Rachel exclaimed. “Dad! What the FUCK?! I work with the cops all the time! I bring kids to see them! You didn’t think that we should know-”

“Absolutely not,” James interrupted. “Rachel, if we thought you or your teenagers were in any real danger, we would have already intervened. Chief Watson and I both agreed that unless a real threat was presented, we should allow the mole to get comfortable and keep doing whatever First Light asks.”

“WHY?!” Rachel asked incredulously.

“Because, sweetie, when people get comfortable, people make mistakes,” her father explained. “So far, this mole has only been annoying, not dangerous. We both agreed that it was only a matter of time before he or she screwed up and gave First Light something that we could trace back to them.” He sighed. “Of course, now that the state police are involved, that plan is out the window.”

Rachel’s face flushed, as she tried to come up with an argument. “Why couldn’t you just... fuck, I don’t know, give all the cops in town lie detector tests?” she asked angrily. “Or dig into their finances, cell phone records, fucking SOMETHING!”

“Sweetie, you took criminal justice classes as part of your curriculum. You know how faulty a lie detector test can be. And we have no way of compelling the cops to take them anyway.” James shook his head. “Everything else you suggested would require a court order. We have no reason to offer a judge to grant one.”

“Tell the judge you’re looking for a mole!”

“This is Oregon, Rachel, not Soviet Russia.” James leaned back in his chair. “We were not ignoring the problem. We were very confident that the mole would screw up eventually; they always do.” He shrugged. “But not anymore. News of what was found has probably spread, and whoever’s been giving First Light information will most likely stop for a while. Chief Watson is meeting with investigators from the Internal Affairs division of the state police tomorrow.”

Rachel exhaled slowly, unable to come up with a counter argument. “Well, they’ll find him easily enough,” she allowed. “The cop I talked to said there were tracking numbers on those forms. They can figure out who-”

“They traced them already.” James smirked. “It came back to Chief Watson.”


“It wasn’t him,” James assured her. “At the time it was requested, Watson was in Seattle for a Seahawks game with his family. He verified it with pictures and bank records. Someone snuck into his office and somehow used his credentials during that week to get a lot of information without revealing themselves.”

“Christ.” Rachel ran her hand over her face. “That was quick. Thought it would take a while.”
James took another bite of his dinner. “Did you call Max and Chloe?”

“Yes, when I got back to the office, while the state cops were talking to everyone about what they found.” She nodded. “They were a little spooked, I think. But they seemed relieved to know that they arrested those fuckers. What are you charging them with?”

“Quite a lot. They’ll be in jail for some time. But I may not be the one charging them,” he added. “Those weapons they found may put the case in federal court.”

“And the Merrick parents? Elder Jefferson?”

“They’ve already been released. They all refused to speak, and the investigators couldn’t pin anything on them. Unfortunately, Patricia’s statement wasn’t good for anything more than an arrest warrant for her brother.” He shook his head. “Of course, everything we found at that house is admissible. Those four men have already been booked.”

Rose cleared her throat, finally drawing Rachel’s attention as she leaned forward. “Sweetie, what are you going to do about the information they had about you?” she asked. “I don’t like the idea of you staying in that apartment by yourself, if they know where you live.”

“I’m not. I called my landlord when I left the house. She’ll let me break my lease.” She looked back at her dad. “Can you help me set up an LLC, like Max has?”

He nodded. “Of course. What about your car?”

“I’m gonna trade it in this weekend. I’m making enough money to find something nicer anyway.”

“And...” her mother hesitated. “You still carry, right?”

“Yes, mom, I still carry.” Rachel smirked. “You know, most parents wouldn’t like that their kid packs a gun all the time.”

“Most parents don’t have kids that make a career out of pissing off a cult of religious zealots.” Rose shook her head. “As long as you have a way of fighting back, I’ll sleep a little easier.”

“As will I.” James nodded. “They had a pretty scary amount of information.” He paused, tilting his head. “By the way, when did you get a tattoo?”

“... Christ,” Rachel muttered. “I really don’t want to know how they found out about that. It’s not like I go out in public wearing shorts, and I never put it on Facebook.”

Rose blinked. “You have a tattoo?”

“Yes, I have a tattoo.” Rachel extended her leg, pulling up on her slacks so her mother could see the Chinese dragon on her calf.

“When did you get that?”

“Steph and I went to a parlor back in Corvallis.” Rachel shrugged as she pulled her leg back. “The artist was showing me some designs, and he had a really cool dragon, so I got it.”

“What’s Steph’s tattoo?” Rose asked. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen it.”

“It’s a twenty-sided die.” Rachel shifted uncomfortably. “And, uh... you’ll probably never see it.”

“Why? Is it on her hip or something?”
Rachel: Hey, are you sitting down?

Megan: Why?

Rachel: I need to tell you something, and it’s pretty bad.

Megan: Are you okay?

Rachel: Yea, mostly. I’m dealing with it, too. So is my dad, and Stacy.

Megan: Okay, fine, I’m sitting down. What’s going on?

Rachel: The state police raided a First Light house this afternoon to arrest a couple of guys for terroristic threats and stalking. They found what looks like an intelligence operation against First Light’s enemies.

Rachel: Including you.

Megan: ... huh.

Megan: I guess I’m flattered?

Rachel: Really? I almost shit bricks.

Megan: But the knowledge that those assholes are so worried about me that I got a spot on their wall-o’-bad-guys is kind of an ego boost.

Rachel: Yea, you go with that. I’m still moving out of my apartment.

Megan: And I think it might be time for a new car. I’ve been eyeballing a later-model Mercedes anyway.

Rachel: Is there anything that can be done about this? Legally, I mean?

Megan: Well, I’m assuming the guys in that house are all going to jail?

Rachel: Yes.

Megan: Beyond that, not much. There’s probably no way to pin any of the stalking that got that info on anyone else in First Light. And without proof that there are copies elsewhere, we kind of have to live with it.

Megan: Who else was on those walls?

Rachel: Beside you and me? Stacy, my parents, three other CPS workers, Chief Watson, six cops, two ADAs, the State Police Superintendent, and a few of the kids who’ve caused problems for them.
Megan: Brooke?

Rachel: No, thankfully. None of the kids still in our care. Probably because they can’t find them.

Megan: Good. They are destroying all that stuff, right?

Rachel: Oh, totally. The state police thought they smelled marijuana, and proceeded to rip apart the drywall looking for it.

Megan: Did they have a warrant for that?

Rachel: Doesn’t matter. They didn’t find any. By way of apologizing, they helpfully cleared out all the debris.

Megan: How nice of them.

Rachel: Yea, they really did feel bad about it.

Rachel: Any thoughts on how to move apartments without being followed?

Stacy: Did you find a new one?

Rachel: Yes. Already signed the lease. But I didn’t think about how I was gonna get everything over. Renting a U-Haul is a little obvious.

Stacy: I actually have something for this. A trick that I picked up from someone in a woman’s shelter. Have you heard of PODS?

Rachel: No. What are those?

Stacy: It’s basically a small shipping container that gets dropped off at your apartment complex. You load it up with your stuff, and the next day they take it to a warehouse.

Stacy: When you’re ready to move into the new place, you call them and have them bring it to you. Stuff is always going in and out of the warehouse, and all the pods look the same, so it’s impossible to track.

Rachel: Huh. That’s pretty neat.

Rachel: I’m overthinking the hell out of this, but what if they slip a tracking device onto it?

Stacy: Leave it in the warehouse for a week or two. No tracking battery will last that long.

Stacy: And you’re right, you are overthinking it. First Light isn’t a foreign intelligence service, they don’t have tracking devices.

Rachel: Wanna stake a paycheck on that?

Stacy: ... fair enough.

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Victoria: Hey. Max told me about you having a spot on a wall like a serial killer victim. Are you okay?
Rachel: Yea. Thanks for asking.

Victoria: You moving out of your apartment?

Rachel: And getting rid of my car. Gonna try and minimize my footprint.

Victoria: My family used to work with a pretty good attorney in Portland. Do you want his number? He can help you out with an LLC, like Max and Chloe.

Rachel: My dad is helping me with that. We’re gonna file paperwork with the city tomorrow.

Rachel: I appreciate it, though. Honestly, I didn’t think you’d care.

Victoria: I didn’t hate you so much that I wanted to see you dead.

Rachel: Is that ‘hate’ in the past tense?

Victoria: Look... I’ve been doing a lot of thinking, since Kate’s accident. You know it was supposed to be me in that car. And you know how close I came to losing her.

Victoria: I reacted poorly to what happened, back in high school. And it was nine years ago. I don’t want to be the kind of person that holds a grudge for that long. Life’s too short as it is.

Victoria: So, while I’m sure it’s not as satisfying to hear from me as it was to hear from Max... no. I don’t still hate you for what you did.

Rachel: Wow. That... actually means a lot more to me than I would’ve thought, to hear you say that.

Victoria: Well, let it not be said that I was totally stubborn.

Rachel: Does this mean I can call you “Vic” now?

Victoria: I will vivisect you alive and send your family body parts through the mail, one at a time.

Rachel: Then how, exactly, does Chloe have permission?

Victoria: SHE DOESN’T

Victoria: AND SHE FUCKING KNOWS IT

Sadie: Miss Amber, what’s going on?

Rachel: What do you mean?

Sadie: NCIS just came to my FOB to interview me about First Light. I got pulled off a patrol for it. They said they were told by the Oregon State Police about my name being on a wall or something?

Rachel: I didn’t realize they would be notified. I’m sorry, I would have given you a heads up if I’d known.

Sadie: Is it true?

Rachel: I’m afraid so, Sadie. They had a picture of you, and a bunch of personal information.
Sadie: What the fuck?! Why?!  
Rachel: Language!  
Sadie: ... really?  
Sadie: I thought I was done with this shit. Why are they still coming after me?  
Rachel: Sadie, there’s no indication that they were coming after you. They didn’t even have any photos of you, except for your DMV picture.  
Sadie: Probably because I live on the other side of the country, in the barracks on a military base. What happens when I get out?  
Sadie: And you haven’t answered my original question of “why”.  
Rachel: I don’t know why. The men they arrested refused to speak.  
Rachel: And I can’t predict what will happen, Sadie. All I can tell you is that First Light lost everything in that house; the police destroyed and confiscated all of it.  
Rachel: What did NCIS say?  
Sadie: Nothing substantial. They just said it was a routine follow-up, to make sure I was okay. Which, you know, I’m in the middle of Afghanistan, so dumb fucking question.  
Sadie: But now my Lieutenant knows. And most of my squad. It’s really embarrassing.  
Rachel: I’m sorry, Sadie. I really am.  
Sadie: Those guys really aren't talking?  
Rachel: I’m afraid not.  
Sadie: Wish I was there. With twenty minutes alone with them, some plastic wrap, and a bucket of water. I could make them talk.  
Rachel: I know they don’t teach you guys how to waterboard people.  
Sadie: I’ve seen Homeland. I know how it works.
Stacy: This is not a good idea.

Rachel: I know.

Stacy: This is SERIOUSLY not a good idea.

Rachel: Again, I know.

Stacy: You need to try to talk Max out of it.

Rachel: I did. Multiple times. For hours.

Stacy: ... shit.

Rachel: Look, I don’t think it’ll happen. There’s only, like, seven people I can even ask. And I know for a fact that a couple of them won’t even consider it.

Stacy: This doesn’t go to the teenagers still in foster care.

Rachel: Of course not. Come on.

Stacy: I know I don’t have to tell you. Sorry.

Stacy: Have you sent the emails out?

Rachel: This morning. I haven’t gotten any replies back yet.

Stacy: And... Max?

Rachel: Her and Chloe have started wedding planning. With any luck, she’ll get so wrapped up in it that she’ll forget all about it.

Stacy: You think she will?

Rachel: ... no. But it’s nice to hope.

Stacy: Right. So, now what?

Rachel: I go back to my Maid-of-Honor duties. And do my best to support my friend.

Max: Okay, how bored are you right now?

Kate: Very.

Max: I can see that. Do you know how many notifications I had waiting for me when I got off work?

Kate: ... how many?
Max: 129.
Kate: Oh. Wow.
Max: Have you hit the end of Pinterest yet? I feel like you should have by now.
Kate: Sorry. I am SO bored though.
Kate: Did you like any of them?
Max: I’m still skimming through.
Max: I do like this one about the different color wedding dresses.
Kate: Yea, I saw that this afternoon. It seemed like something that would appeal to Chloe.
Max: Not gonna lie, it kind of appeals to me, too.
Kate: It does?
Max: I mean, I never saw myself getting married in a color other than white, but there are some really pretty dresses in here.
Kate: Well, that was what kind of drew me to it. That one girl near the end has a dress that matches Chloe’s hair.
Max: I know, I can’t stop looking at it. More research may be called for.

Steph: Dude, how far have you gotten in wedding planning?
Chloe: Over the past few weeks? Not a ton. Why?
Steph: Okay, I have an officiant that you guys should meet with.
Chloe: Seriously?
Steph: I wasn’t looking for her, it was totally an accident.
Chloe: How?
Steph: My boss sent a few of us down to LA for the E3 pre-planning meeting. A whole bunch of the planners were there, and I heard them mention that the usual wedding officiant was going to be attending.
Chloe: The usual? A wedding officiant goes to E3?
Steph: It is apparently not uncommon for gamer couples to get married at the convention. There were four weddings last year.
Chloe: That is really lame and totally awesome at the same time.
Steph: Right? I figured anyone who’s willing to marry couples at E3 is probably pretty cool. And she lives in San Francisco too, so I got her info. You want it?
Chloe: Does she dress up as a video game character?

Steph: I don’t know. Maybe? Why?

Chloe: I kinda think it would be cool to have someone dressed as a Vault Dweller marry us.

Steph: ... okay, I agree that that is very cool. But even I know Max will never go for that.

Chloe: Yea. Sometimes my fiancée is a real buzzkill.

Steph: Is that why your voicemail message isn’t funny anymore?

Chloe: I’m STILL pissed at Vic for that one.

Penny: Have you guys started searching for a venue yet?

Max: Yes. We’ve looked at a few online, but haven’t really found anything we like in our price range yet.

Penny: Can I offer a suggestion?

Max: I made you a bridesmaid specifically so that you could.

Penny: I know a GM at a nearby golf course that just wrapped up construction of their new club house. It’s a really nice building that overlooks the whole course.

Penny: If you and Chloe like it, I think I can wrangle the ‘friends and family’ discount out of him.

Max: Does he have a website?

Penny: <golfcourse.html>

Max: Wow, you weren’t kidding. That place is gorgeous.

Penny: They also provide the open bar. But you’ll have to find your own catering, and everything else.

Max: I can live with that, for a venue like this. Chloe likes it, too.

Penny: Want me to call him and arrange a tour?

Max: Yes, please.

Chloe: Does David have a tux?

Joyce: I don’t think he does. I’ll check.

Joyce: Nope. Just his dress uniform. He says he’s never really needed one.

Chloe: What, has he never been to a wedding before?

Joyce: He says every time he was, he had a dress uniform to wear. Do you want him in a tux?
Chloe: Well, yea. I’m proud of his service and all, but I’d rather he wore something a little snazzier when he walked me down the aisle.

Joyce: ... he’s walking you down the aisle?

Chloe: I mean... yes?

Chloe: Though it just occurred to me that I never actually asked him.

Chloe: He’ll, you know, do it, right?

Joyce: Of course he will, Chloe! You have no idea how flattered he is!

Chloe: Can we not make this a thing?

Joyce: Oh, come on, sweetie.

Chloe: Fine. So, can he rent a tux then?

Joyce: He wants to know what kind.

Chloe: ... a nice one?

Joyce: I was about to say he should match with whatever Max’s father is wearing, but I presume he won’t be there.

Chloe: That’s gonna be a HARD no.

Joyce: So what is Max doing for her entrance?

Chloe: Jake is walking her down the aisle after me.

Joyce: Her boss? The man we met in the hospital?

Chloe: Yep. She said he was more of a father figure than her dad was, so she wanted him to do it. He couldn’t say yes fast enough.

Joyce: How sweet! I liked him, he was nice.

Joyce: He actually offered to buy my waffle recipe from me. Even said I could name my price :)

Chloe: You do know he’s a millionaire, right?

Joyce: ... he is?

Chloe: Him and Penny, the blonde that was with him? They own about twenty businesses together, including a bunch of restaurants. Guy rakes in cash by the truckload. He was probably serious.

Joyce: In that case, I may have to reconsider his offer.

Chloe: Seriously? You’re gonna sell the recipe before you give it to your own daughter?

Joyce: Are YOU going to buy it from me?
Chloe: I thought blood was thicker than cash.

Joyce: I can’t renovate the kitchen with blood, sweetie.

Rachel: I found the CUTEST shoes for you!

Rachel: <pic.txt>

Max: ... those are sneakers.

Rachel: They match Chloe’s hair! They would look ADORABLE when people see you dancing in them!

Max: ... they’re still sneakers.

Rachel: Okay, first off, they’re Chuck Taylors. Second, they are SO cute!

Max: They’re SNEAKERS. I am not wearing laced shoes down the aisle, I am wearing nice heels.

Rachel: But these are cute! And I’ll bet they’re a million times more comfortable that whatever heels you pick.

Max: That may be true. But it’s not going to happen. Chloe and I are both wearing dresses and heels.

Rachel: Does Chloe even know how to walk in heels?

Rachel: For that matter, do YOU?

Max: ... is it so different?

Rachel: Oh, honey.

Max: Okay, Chloe says she can walk in heels. And that she’s going to teach me.

Rachel: Does she really? She doesn’t strike me as a “heels” kind of girl.

Max: She just dug deep into the bowels of her closet to produce a pair of pumps. Apparently she learned for a father-daughter dance she did when she turned thirteen.

Max: This doesn’t seem hard. It’s just a stick under your foot.

Rachel: Give it a shot. Tell me how it goes.

Max: Fine.

Rachel: ... Max? Are you there?

Max: She’s icing her ankle. And she says she hates you.

Rachel: Chloe? What happened?

Max: She took too big a step, and her leg folded like a lawn chair.
Rachel: NICE

Max: I know, it was hilarious. We’re gonna keep practicing.

Victoria: Did Courtney get back to you guys?

Chloe: She did. Said she was happy to help, so long as we didn’t ask for your opinion?

Victoria: Ugh. Christ, she holds a grudge.

Chloe: What did you do?

Victoria: Apparently wanting the perfect dress for your wedding is considered “too picky”.

Chloe: Ah. Well, she’s not the boss of me, and you’re still my MoH, so I’ll probably ask your opinion anyway.

Chloe: How’s Kate doing?

Victoria: Recovering. The doctors are gonna take the cast off her arm in a couple of weeks. Until then, she’s camped out on the couch.

Chloe: Burning through Pinterest like a madman, from what I hear.

Victoria: Well, there are only so many shows you can binge-watch.

Juliet: I had another meeting with the producer.

Max: And?

Juliet: I’m sorry. We had a really long discussion about it, but she’s right. If you’re the only one doing the story, then there won’t be one.

Max: ... shit.

Juliet: Has Rachel heard back from ANYONE?

Max: I don’t think so.

Juliet: Would she tell you if she did?

Max: I know she’s not on board with this, but she wouldn’t hold back something like that. She hates First Light, too.

Juliet: How many people did she reach out to?

Max: I don’t know. But I got the impression that there isn’t a huge pool to draw volunteers from.

Juliet: Right. Well, I’m sorry, but we’re stalled until we hear otherwise. Like I said before, they want at least one other. Ideally two.

Max: Yea, I remember.
Max: She’s coming down this weekend. I’ll ask her about it then.

Juliet: Hey, don’t get down about it, all right? Plenty of people hate First Light. I’m sure at least one of them will have a score to settle.
The Girl Who Wants Redemption

It was the same damn dream.

It started in the school hallway, as she slowly walked towards the bank of pay phones. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t stop herself from picking up the receiver and dialing her parents. She felt herself say all the things that she regretted so much, and wished desperately that she could take back. Then, as soon as she hung up, she felt a familiar wetness on her hands. Looking down, she saw them covered in blood.

When she looked back up, a hand wrapped around her neck and she was violently slammed into the wall. She wasn’t in the school hallway anymore; she was in the bathroom, the hand connected to a short-haired blonde girl that glared at her menacingly. Rage and disgust emanated off of her in visible waves as she spoke.

“She’s dead,” the girl would seethe. “She’s dead, and you killed her.”

She’d try to argue, or fight back, on sob out an apology, but the result was the same. After what felt like an eternity, the blonde girl would drop her, and she’d fall straight though the floor. It would feel like she was falling for miles and miles, the temperature getting hotter and hotter before she finally landed in a heap.

It was a dark alley. And it was raining. She’d stand up to look around the downpour, and Max would be there, splayed out on the ground, clearly dead. Lifeless eyes would stare at her accusingly.

“It’s your fault.

“I didn’t know,” she sobbed as she dropped to her knees. “I swear to God, I didn’t know.”

You should have.

The alarm jerked her from sleep.

Samantha Myers, or Sam as her friends had come to call her, blinked back to wakefulness, reaching out and quickly silencing her phone. “God damn it,” she muttered, rubbing her face as she slowly sat up, took deep breaths, and remembered where she was.

Her studio apartment was one of the nicer ones in Portland, but it was still small; the best she could afford that wasn’t in a bad neighborhood, and it was everything to keep herself in it. For the first year or so she’d been in the city, she’d struggled more often than not just to make rent.

She sighed, finally throwing back the covers and planting her feet on the floor. Her phone told her that it was a little before three in the afternoon; she had about an hour or so to get to work, and she’d be there most of the night.

It’s Saturday, she reminded herself. Tips are always good on Saturday. Should cover the rest of my rent, and with a little luck, some of the tuition payments, too.

Oh, no. I still have to finish my paper. She looked over at her beat-up and ancient laptop, sitting on the nightstand. Have to do it tomorrow. Got plenty of time before midnight.

Trying to forget about her dreams, she ran through her shower, brushed her teeth, and packed her
bag for work. She took a couple of minutes to microwave a burrito before she ran to catch her bus.

Bartending. She still thought it was funny. Turned out she was pretty good at something that would have made her parents furious. Memorizing drink recipes had been easy enough, but her old foster dad had taught her some tricks; he’d owned his bar for a few years, and she watched him practice with the bottles sometimes. After she’d asked, he’d shown her how to make drinks quickly and skillfully, lamenting that bartending was an easy enough skill to fall back on if she needed it.

She’d been a natural. Nobody knew why, especially not her, but spinning and flipping the bottles around to impress customers came easily. She’d barely dropped any, even when learning, and once she started doing it for work, she’d been flawless.

Of course, bartending didn’t pay the bills. Especially in an expensive city like Portland. She’d found out the hard way that with a plethora of young adults that didn’t have degrees, the city establishments didn’t care to pay their bartenders a decent wage.

Unless you worked at the right kind of bar.

She glanced at the sign as she got off the bus; **SLICK KITTIES**. Portland had more strip clubs per square mile that Las Vegas, but the one she worked at was one of the nicer ones. They actually hired professional bouncers, kept the place clean, and their manager wasn’t a sleazeball.

Best of all, she didn’t actually have to strip. The manager had other girls to do that; all Sam had to do was work the bar.

“Afternoon, Sam,” the bouncer greeted her.

“Hey, Charles.” She smiled as she went inside.

The club wasn’t due to open for another twenty minutes, so the lights were still bright; she saw a couple of the dancers sitting around, chatting, and her manager doing last-minute checks. “Hey Sam,” he greeted her absently.

“Hi, Chris.” She strolled towards the back room. “Be ready in a few minutes.”

“Sure. Hey, we got two bachelor parties coming in tonight,” he told her. “They each reserved the champagne room. Can you make sure the bottles are chilled?”

“Will do.”

She walked up to her locker, sighing as she took off her jeans and long-sleeved shirt. Opening her bag, she retrieved a Catholic schoolgirl outfit she’d bought online and tailored for her work. She put on the skirt she’d trimmed short, and tied the blouse into a knot around her chest, exposing her midriff. Then she tied her hair into pigtails. A little mascara, some concealer for the bags under her eyes, some black heels, and she was ready.

Closing her locker, she headed for the door. She was about to open it before she saw herself in a full-length mirror.

*Abigail wouldn’t even recognize me right now.*

She missed her sister. Her parents she didn’t really care for, but Abigail... her heart wrenched every time she thought about her. Her little sister was the one thing she missed about First Light. And she stared miserably into the mirror, hating herself for what she had to do to make a living.
If she saw me, she probably wouldn’t even speak to me.

“You done?”

She glanced behind her and saw one of the other dancers waiting to use the mirror. Sam nodded wordlessly, stepping aside as the dancer took her place. “You look good anyway,” the girl said absently. “Trust me, the guys will all want a piece of that.”

Wonderful.

She didn’t really have much in the way of assets at a strip club. But one of the dancers had taught her a couple of ways to get better tips.

Sam planted her hands on the counter below the bar as she leaned forward, squeezing her breasts together with her biceps to give the impression of having more cleavage. “What can I get you, hon?” she asked sweetly.

The guy on the other side of the bar leered at her chest for longer than was necessary. “How about you, sweetheart? Are you on the menu?”

God, what a creep.

She smiled and gave him a fake but sincere-sounding giggle. “I’m afraid not, sweetie,” she replied. “How about a Jack and Coke?”

“Yea.” He nodded, eyes still on her chest. “Sounds pretty good.”

Sam retrieved a tumbler, quickly scooping some ice into it and setting it on the bar. Then she spun around quickly, which she knew let her skirt fly up enough to reveal a hint of her underwear. She could practically feel the man’s eyes on her backside as she retrieved the bottle of whiskey, but she ignored the sensation as she turned back, flipping the bottle in her hand without looking.

She gave the man a wink as she lifted the bottle high, giving the impression that she was over-pouring for him before she caught the bubble and placed the bottle back on the counter. Finally, she topped it off with some coke from her soda gun. “Here you go, sugar.”

“Thanks, sweetheart.” He held up a ten-dollar bill between his fingers. “Keep the change.”

She giggled again, tucking the bill into her bra for him to see. He leered at her chest a little more before turning back to the stage. As soon as he walked away, she turned to the register and cashed the bill, taking the change and dropping it into the jar below the counter.

Another dancer working a waitress rotation came up to her, wearing lingerie. “Need three more Coronas and a Seven & Seven for table twelve,” she ordered. “And I’ve had two people ask if the hottie behind the bar does dances.”

Sam rolled her eyes as she retrieved three beer bottles, quickly popping the caps. “You know the answer, Claire,” she replied in her normal tone of voice.

“I know.” Her friend grinned. “You’ll make a lot more money if you do.”

“I’m aware of that.” She grabbed the bottle of Seagram’s next, fixing the mixed drink. “I still don’t want to. There are some morals I’m not willing to throw out.”

Claire shrugged, as she took the tray. “Your loss.”
Sam sighed, as she took her place back behind the bar and looked for anything she was short of. “Hey, Chris?” she asked, as her manager walked onto the floor.

“Yea?”

“Do we have any more Captain Morgan?”

“Delivery’s tomorrow, but I think we’ve got a couple more bottles in the closet.” He waved his arm towards the back of the bar. “Can you grab them? I’m kind of busy.”

“Ohkay,” Sam made her way out from behind the bar and across the floor, towards the storage room. Halfway across the room, she felt someone grab her wrist. “Hey, sweetie, how about a dance?”

She jerked her arm free immediately, turning to see two men in shorts and t-shirts sitting and grinning. Given the number of empty bottles in front of them, she doubted they were sober. “I am NOT a dancer,” she said sternly.


“Then find a stripper,” Sam snapped. “Excuse me.”

She turned to leave, and felt him grab her wrist again. Before she could react, he gave her a sharp tug. She felt her ankle give out as she tripped over her heels, and she stumbled backwards into his lap. “HEY!!” she shouted.

“Looks like you do give dances!” the other guy laughed, as the first one grabbed her hips.

“Let GO of me!” Sam struggled to get up, but the guy had a firm grip on her waist. Panicking, she drove her elbow back into his ribs. A gasp exploded from his lungs as he finally loosened his grip, and she shot back to her feet, breathing heavily as she backed away.

The guy’s face turned red as he clutched his side. “You fucking-”

A massive hand slammed down onto the man’s shoulder, and two fingers dug into his collarbone. He screamed in pain as he grabbed the bouncer’s forearm, but Charles’ grip was like iron as he dragged him upright. “You!” he barked, pointing at the second guy. “Get up.”

“Hey!” the second guy stood. The club had gotten very quiet; even the dancer on stage stopped her routine to stare. “We didn’t do shit! She fuckin’-”

“You don’t touch the women here,” Charles snapped back. “Get your ass out.”

“I’m not-”

A second bouncer materialized behind him. He grabbed the man’s arm and twisted it backwards violently. The man yelped loudly, as him and his friend were dragged towards the entrance.

After couple of seconds, the DJ turned the music up and changed the song. The stripper on stage immediately shed her bra, and the attention was diverted back to her as Chris appeared next to Sam. He motioned for her to come with him, gently placing a hand on her back as he guided her into the dressing room.

The music volume dropped dramatically as the doors closed. “You okay?” he asked.
“Yea.” She put her hand on the wall and took weight off her foot. “Ouch.”

“What’s wrong? Did he hurt you?”

“I think I rolled my ankle when he pulled me down.” She tried to put weight on her foot and hissed in pain. “Ooh, that hurts.”

“Here, sit down. Let me see.” Chris led her to a chair, and she sat down carefully while he pulled out a small pen light and examined her ankle. “Yea, you might have sprained it.”

Sam glanced down and saw that her ankle was already starting to swell. “Great,” she grunted, as she reached down and undid the strap on her heel. “Feels wonderful.”

The door opened again, and Charles reappeared. “She okay?”

“Ankle’s sprained.” Chris stood. “Where are those two assholes? Still nearby?”

Charles thumbed towards the bar next door. “They called me a dirty nigger and stumbled over to Theodore’s Pub.”

“Good. Do me a favor and call the police. Tell them that our bartender just got assaulted, and the guys that did it are next door.”
The next hour went about as expected. Chris gave her a long jacket to wear as she spoke to the cops outside. Charles gave them his own statement, and showed them the security footage. After they saw it, another pair of cops went into the pub and walked out a few minutes later, leading the two men in handcuffs.

“That fucking slut hit me first!” the man who grabbed her slurred. “I didn’t even pull her that hard! I just wanted a fucking dance!”

The officer who was handling him seemed exasperated. “You have the right to remain silent,” he said in a neutral voice, pushing the guy into the back of the squad car. “Do yourself a favor and exercise it.”

The female officer shook her head as they were taken away, turning back to Sam. “Do you want a ride to the hospital?” she asked. “You should get that ankle checked out.”

“I don’t have health insurance,” Sam replied quietly, as she sat on the bench outside of the club with her hands in her lap. “I’ll be fine.”

“Portland General accepts people without insurance,” the cop assured her. “And with the police report, you’ll be able to sue that guy for your medical bills.”

She shook her head. “I just want to finish my shift.”

“No way.” Chris looked at her. “Sam, your ankle’s busted, and it’s only eight o’clock. I’m not going to make you stand behind the bar for the next six hours.”

“I need the money, Chris,” she argued. “I have rent and tuition payments coming up. It doesn’t even hurt that bad anymore. I’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure?” the officer asked. “Like I said, you probably won’t have to pay for the hospital visit.”

“I’m sure.” She pushed herself upright, trying not to let the sharp pain in her ankle show on her face. “Look, see?”

Chris looked very apprehensive, and she thought for a second he would insist. But he finally shrugged. “If you say so,” he allowed. “But I still really think you should get checked out. Or at the very least, go home.”

“I appreciate it.” She nodded. “I’ll be fine.”

The pain was bearable. For the first hour.

After that, she didn’t bother being nice to the customers. “What are you having?” she asked the next guy, keeping as much weight off her foot as possible.

He smiled at her. “Are you on the menu?”
“No,” she snapped back. “Do you want a beer? Or a pickup line I haven’t heard six times this week?”

He did a double-take. “Uh... a Corona. Please.”

She retrieved one quickly, popping the cap and putting it in front of him. “Six-fifty.”

“Okay.” He pushed a few bills onto the table and took his bottle before walking away.

Sam planted both her hands on the counter, sighing as she tried to put her foot back on the ground. She winced, picking her foot back up. “Ouch.”

“Totally fine, I see.”

She opened her eyes to see Charles standing in front of her, smirking. “It is,” she said quickly.

“Okay.” He lifted a soft ice pack and an Ace bandage. “So... you don’t want these, then?”

Sam blinked. “Where did you-”

“My cousin lives a few blocks away. I had him run them over.” He shook them. “Do you want them or not?”

“Yes,” she said immediately. “For the love of God, please.”

He took her hand and brought her to a chair, helping her sit down. “Let me see that ankle.”

“You know what you’re doing?” she asked carefully.

“I spent a couple of years as a linebacker in high school,” he assured her. “I know how to treat a sprained ankle. Let me take a look.”

Sam held out her leg, and he wrapped it quickly, tightening the bandage. Then he wrapped the ice pack around her foot, securing the velcro straps. “There. How’s that?”

She stood, gently testing her ankle out. “Actually... much better than I thought it would be,” she admitted.

“Good.” Charles nodded. “Let me know if you need any heavy lifting, alright?”

“Sure.” Sam smiled. “Thank you.”

She made her way back to the bar just as Claire came over. “Nice ice pack,” she noted. “Charles give that to you?”

“Yea, he had his cousin run it over.” Sam nodded. “What did you need?”

“A Dos Equis and two Blue Moons.” Claire smirked, as Sam started retrieving the beer bottles. “Charles had his cousin bring it down? Sounds like he has hots for Catholic schoolgirl.”

“Oh, shut up.” Sam paused. “Wait, you think so?”

“Totally.” Claire nodded. “You think guys have family members run first-aid stuff to their place of employment for girls they don’t like?”

Sam squirmed. “I mean... maybe?”
“Plus, he started breaking that guy’s collarbone as soon as he laid hands on you.”

“That’s his JOB, Claire.”

“Well, he doesn’t usually go at it with such gusto. He practically teleported across the bar, when that guy pulled you down.” She tilted her head. “Why is it so hard for you to believe that he might have a crush on you? Do you not think he’s attractive?”

Sam bit her lip. “I just...”

“Is it because he’s black?”

“Wh- no!!” Sam recoiled. “Of course not!”

“Then what is it?”

“I...” she hesitated. “I don’t know. I mean... I’m a bartender at a strip club.”

Claire scoffed. “He’s a bouncer at a strip club. So what?”

“Well, I’m not really-”

“Oh, Jesus.” Claire rolled her eyes. “I take off my clothes to earn a living. Most of my rent money has spent time in my panties. I still think I deserve a boyfriend.”

Sam didn’t respond.

“Is it something else?” Claire cocked her head. “What’s wrong, Sam?”

“Nothing.” She shook her head. “Can we stop talking about this?”

“Yea.” Claire took her drinks. “Sure.”

Sam sighed, as her friend walked away, and turned back to wipe down the bar.

_I got someone killed_, she thought miserably. _I don’t deserve it._

“It doesn’t sound like you did.”

Sam shrugged, as she sat across from her student advisor. Stacy Hemmingway had introduced the two of them, and Molly had helped her get a lot of scholarships; she’d essentially taken Sam under her wing, like Stacy had, and become a confidant and friend.

“There hasn’t been a trace of her in years,” Sam said quietly. “I don’t really know a lot about being homeless, but I know it’s not easy. I mean, yea, she might have been alive when she ran away, but I’m pretty sure she’s dead by now.”

“You don’t know that.” Molly leaned forward. “And even she is dead, that’s on her family, not you.”

“I was the one who told the church that she was gay,” Sam muttered. “They didn’t know until I told them. It’s my fault.”

“That was who you WERE,” Molly assured her. “You were raised in a cult that encouraged that sort of behavior, Sam. Hell, plenty of professionals would say that you were brainwashed. You’re a
different person now.”

Sam glanced up at her. “So... what? I’m just supposed to forget what I did?”

“Even if I told you that you should, I doubt you ever will.” Molly shook her head. “But that doesn’t mean it has to affect your life forever.”

“Still.”

“Do you like this guy? What was his name, Charles?”

“Yea. And... kind of.” Sam shrugged. “Look, I have no idea if he’s even interested in me. Maybe he just had his cousin help me out because he felt sorry for me.”

Molly smirked. “Sam, boys don’t go that far out of their way for girls they aren’t at least a LITTLE attracted to. Hell, my husband was always helping me around the office before he worked up the guts to ask me out.”

“You sound like Claire.” Sam smirked back. “Can we change the subject? What about my application?”

“I was wondering when you were going to ask.” Molly produced a piece of paper. “It came back yesterday. The foundation approved you for the Collins Scholarship.”

“Awesome!” Sam exclaimed, glad to get excited for once. “The full amount?”

“Five thousand dollars.” Molly nodded. “They were very moved by your story, Sam. One of the chairwomen called me personally, to make sure you knew that you can reapply in January.”

Sam breathed a sigh of relief, still smiling. “So... that will cover the rest of my tuition for the next class?”

“And the two after that.” Molly turned to her computer and hit a few buttons. “So you’ll be good until your November classes. Then we’ll need another nineteen hundred.”

“Okay.” Sam nodded vigorously. “I can do that. Are there any other grants or scholarships I can apply for?”

“A couple, but they’re very competitive.”

“Great.” Sam checked her watch. “Shoot, I need to catch a bus. Can you email me the info?”

“Of course.”

**Man, she wasn’t kidding.**

Sam sat on her bed, injured foot on a pillow while she scrolled through the email. *An essay for both of them? I don’t even know when I’ll have time.*

**Well, at least I freed up some cash.**

The worry about having to cover her tuition gone, she’d decided to splurge and have some Chinese food delivered. Balancing her computer on her lap, she used chopsticks to slurp down some chow mein as she read the requirements. *Four pages on my ideas to improve society? Crap, I don’t even know where to begin.*
“Tomorrow’s problem,” she muttered, closing the email. She clicked on the next few, trying to clear her inbox.

Spam trying to sell male enhancements. Deleted.

An offer from an old classmate, blasted out to hundreds of students, looking for people to join her team selling LuLaRoe leggings. Deleted.

Another piece of spam, letting her know about the sexy singles in her area. Deleted, and a note made to update her email filter.

Grading notifications from her teachers. A’s and B’s. She made a quick fist-pump before moving on to the next message.

An email from someone named Rachel Amber? She was about to delete it, before she saw it came from a .gov address. *Maybe it’s about one of my grants,* she reasoned, as she opened it and started reading.

**Samantha,**

I hope you don’t mind my reaching out to you. Stacy Hemingway gave me your email address.

I’m a social worker with CPS. I took over for Stacy, looking after teenagers who’ve run away from First Light like you did. I think you should know that there are quite a few of you now; there are currently seventeen teenagers in state care. More and more leave the church every year.

One of the other adults who’s left the church is trying to put together a tell-all story with a major news outlet. Her name is Max Caulfield; you might remember her better as Elder Ryan Caulfield’s daughter. The reason I’m reaching out is because the news outlet wants to speak to other people who left the First Light of Christ church, and can attest to its methods and teachings.

You should know that you are under NO obligation to help out. You can say no, or choose not to respond, and nobody in this office will think any less of you for it. If you do decide to help out, or if you have questions, feel free to call me at the number below any time.

**Rachel D. Amber**

Oregon Dept/Social Work, CPS

Sam read the email several times. Her eyes kept stopping halfway through.

*Max Caulfield.*

*Max is... alive?*

*Oh my God. She started to hyperventilate. Oh my God. Max is still alive. I didn’t kill her.*

Sam slapped her laptop shut, pushing it off to the side. She stared at the wall, her mind racing as she tried to control her breathing. *Max is still alive. I didn’t get her killed. And... she wants me to help with a news story.*

...
Oh my God.

Chapter End Notes

I didn't realize that I passed my hundredth chapter.

Sorry there wasn't anything special about it, like EtL. But thanks to everyone for sticking around regardless! Hopefully y'all aren't bored yet :)
The phone rang once, twice... in the middle of a third ring, a female voice answered. “Hello?”

Sam licked her lips before she replied. “I’m, uh, looking for Rachel Amber?”

“This is her. Who’s calling?”

“It’s Samantha.” She hesitated, not used to giving her full name; she didn’t do it very often, since she’d left the church. She’d gone by Sam for years. “Samantha Myers.”

“Oh.” Rachel paused. “You’re... you got my email?”

“Yea. I did.”

There was silence, as Sam tried to think of what to say. “Do you have any questions?” Rachel finally asked. “And like I said, you do NOT have to help out if you don’t want to, Samantha. We’d all understand if you didn’t.”

“No, I got that,” Sam assured her. “Um... what, exactly, does Max want?”

“Well, it’s like I said in the email,” Rachel started. “MSN is looking into running a major story about First Light. Max has volunteered to speak on camera about what she went through.”

Getting beat up because I ratted her out. Sam’s gut twisted.

“MSN wants to speak with more than one person, though,” Rachel explained. “They’d like to speak to two or three. But Samantha, you’d have to be on camera, and on the record. You would definitely attract First Light’s attention.” She paused. “And while there is an organization that has pledged to help with legal battles, I can’t promise that you won’t get sued.”

“... oh.”

“Yea. Like I said, Samantha, nobody here will blame you if you decide not to do it. I won’t even mention to Max that we had this conversation.”

Potential lawsuit. Great.

But getting First Light’s attention...

Sam looked at the framed photo on her bedside table. She hadn’t been able to take much with her, but she had grabbed a photo of her family the morning before she tried to turn herself in; she reasoned that she’d be allowed to keep it in jail. It was the last picture she had of Abigail, and it was almost eight years old.

The longing to see her sister again was painful.

“Samantha?”

“T’ll... can I call you back?” she asked. “I need to think.”

“Of course. And if you don’t call me back, I won’t think anything of it.”
For her next phone call, she left her apartment and hobbled on her hurt ankle for two blocks. The public library had phones available, in soundproof booths, for use with prepaid phone cards. She signed in, taking the key to a booth and stepping inside to call some very old friends.

Walker and Tiana had been part of her social circle before she’d left First Light. After she had aged out of foster care and started working, Claire had convinced her to join Facebook. One night, being bored and between assignments, she started searching for her friends. She’d been very surprised to see that the two of them had a joint page, and after a few days of agonizing thought, she’d sent them a friend request.

She’d fully expected it to go unanswered. Sam was shocked when they messaged her back right away, asking how she was and if she was okay; they had worried about her greatly, since she’d left. They gave her their number, and when she’d called, they’d spent almost an hour catching up.

Their parents had arranged their marriage, as was custom in First Light. But unlike her, they hadn’t minded; they were good friends beforehand, and taking their relationship to the next step had been easy for them. Tiana was expecting their first baby in January, and Walker had become a successful car salesman at First Light’s dealership. Neither of them wished ill on her for leaving.

But none of them wanted to get caught speaking to each other, either. They’d purchased a pre-paid cell phone, and she always called from the library, so nobody in First Light knew that they spoke. Sam dialed the number from memory, waiting for the call to connect.

It was answered on the second ring. “Hey, Samantha,” Tiana answered, sounding tired. “I was hoping you’d call today.”

“Why?” Sam frowned. “Are you okay?”

“Oh, I’m fine. This kid is going to kill me, though.” Tiana chuckled. “She apparently doesn’t know that I’m only supposed to get morning sickness in the mornings.”

“Aww, you already know it’s a girl?”

“No, not yet. My last ultrasound was inconclusive.” Tiana paused. “But we’re really, really hoping. Anyway, Walker’s at work, so I need a distraction. How are you doing?”

“Pretty good.” Sam bit her lip. “I... actually had kind of an important reason for calling, though.” She heard Tiana shift through the phone. “What is it?”

“When was the last time you saw my parents?”

“Hm.” Tiana paused. “I would say last week, at services.”

“And... Abigail?”

“Oh, gosh, Samantha, I would have to think about that one.”

“Why?” Sam’s heart rate spiked. “Is she okay?”

“Well, I don’t know, really. Your parents just haven’t been bringing her to any of the services. We haven’t seen her around, either. But honestly, Samantha, we haven’t really sought her out.”

Sam pursed her lips. “Mm.”

“Why do you ask?”
“I... you know, I just worry about her. I mean, she wasn’t really doing great before I left, you know. And I kind of miss her.”

“I understand.” Tiana paused. “How are you doing, really? Are you surviving on the outside, away from God?”

To anyone else, it would have sounded derisive, but Sam knew Tiana was genuinely worried about her. “I’m making ends meet,” she replied. “Classes are going well. I got approved for a good scholarship today that will cover most of the year.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful!” Tiana exclaimed. “Wow. I really do envy you some days, Samantha. I kind of wish I could take some college classes, like Walker does.”

“You could, you know.”

“Oh, Walker wouldn’t have a problem with it, I know that,” Tiana assured her. “But between his own classes, and tithing, and saving for the baby... money is tight, I’m afraid.”

Tithing. Sam shook her head, as she remembered parting with a quarter of her allowance every week to place in the church donation bin. She’d hated it, because she didn’t get very much to begin with, but her parents insisted on it. “That sucks. Sorry.”

“It’s okay. Do you remember Karen? The older woman who works in the church office? She mentioned that she could help us get approved for food stamps, to help alleviate some of the bills. We’re going to see her later this week.”

Sam nodded. “She helped my mom apply, too. She’s really nice. I remember her doing all the paperwork for us, and getting our monthly groceries.”

“Oh, she’s such a gift. But anyway. Would you like us to ask your family, next time we see them, how Abigail is doing?”

“I would really appreciate that, Tiana. Thank you.”

Her foot felt fine after a few days. When she was finally able to stand on it without wincing, she gave the ice pack back to Charles. “So it’s all better now?” he asked.

“Good enough to work on.” Sam nodded. “Thanks again.”

“Sure thing.” Charles squirmed nervously. “Hey, uh... are you doing anything later this week?”

She hesitated. “Why?”

“Well, I figured... you know, if you were free, we could go see a movie or something?” He smiled. “Maybe grab some dinner?”

Oh my God, Claire was right. He is interested.

And he’s asking me out. On, like, a real date.

“Oh, um...” she paused, trying to think. “I...”

“I mean, you know, if you’re already-”

“I can’t,” she blurted, not knowing what else to say. “I mean... not this week. I have a, uh, a bunch
of assignments that I have to do for class.”

Charles blinked. “Oh. I didn’t know you were in school.”

“Online, mostly. Some actual classwork.” Sam nodded vigorously. “Maybe another time?”


Sam sighed in relief, as Charles went back to work. She turned to go back to slicing limes-

“The fuck?!”

She practically jumped, as Claire materialized right in front of the bar. “Tell me I did NOT just see you turn down Charles for a date!”

“Jesus, Claire!” Sam exclaimed. “Where did you come from?!”

“I was watching. And don’t avoid the question.” Clare looked at her piercingly. “Why in the HELL would you say no?!”

“I, uh, have a lot of schoolwork,” Sam said lamely. “This isn’t a good week, Claire, I-”

“Oh, bullshit.” Claire leaned forward onto the bar. “Girl, Charles is a catch. He’s smart, good-looking, and he’s saving to open his own bar. You know what bar owners can make in this city, Sam?!” Claire narrowed her eyes. “Chris owns three clubs. You think he drives a Mercedes ironically?" 

“I don’t care about his potential income, Claire.”

“Then what’s wrong with you?” she asked. “Or, maybe the question is, what do you think is wrong with HIM?”

“Nothing,” Sam answered honestly. “It’s me, Claire, not him.”

Claire scoffed. “Heard that before.”

“I swear!”

“I don’t believe you.” Claire folded her arms. “Explain it to me.”

... hell. She’s one of my best friends.

Sam glanced at the entrance; the strip club wouldn’t open for another half hour. “Fine. Just... can we go outside, please?”

“Certainly.” Claire gestured angrily towards the back door. “I’d LOVE to hear what kind of mental baggage you have that precludes you from accepting a date.”

“... wow.”

Sam snorted in amusement, as she sat on the stairs. “Good enough for you?”

Claire bit her lip next to her. “Um. Sorry I was such an asshole.”

“Apology accepted.”
“Girl, that is some... shit, I don’t even know what.” She looked at Sam, concern in her eyes. “I’ve heard of those guys before. Never would have pegged you as a former cultist.”

“Thanks. I think.” Sam sagged against the railing, suddenly tired.

“Is that why you won’t strip?”

“Partially.” Sam glanced back at her. “One of the things we were always told was that we would never be able to make it on the outside. That the people who left were reduced to prostituting and begging their way through life. I just... really, kind of still want to prove them wrong.”

“So dressing up like a slutty schoolgirl every night is...”

Sam smirked. “The furthest I’m willing to push the boundaries of the phrase ‘whoring myself out’.”

Claire arched an eyebrow. “Do you think I’m a whore?”

“No, of course not.” Sam shook her head. “Look, Claire, I’m not qualified to do anything else. Bartending doesn’t really pay the bills, and I haven’t graduated yet. This is the best way for me to get enough money to make tuition AND rent payments, while affording food. I just don’t like that this is what I have to resort to.”

“... fair enough, I guess.” Claire looked back at the parking lot. “That still doesn’t explain why you said ‘no’ to a date with Charles, though. Unless your old religion was racist in addition to homophobic?”

“There are African-American parishioners,” Sam offered. “Not many, but a few. As far as I can tell, First Light isn’t racist. Though there aren’t any interracial marriages in the church that I know of.”

“So... what is it?”

Sam bit the inside of her cheek. “I thought I got a girl killed,” she said quietly.

“The Max girl? The one that lady emailed you about?”

“Yea.” Sam nodded. “I mean, I know I didn’t, now. But I hated myself for a long time, Claire. There were a few times when I was a teenager that I really, really wanted to die.”

“Fuck, Sam...”

“I still have dreams that I got her killed, sometimes. Where I make that phone call, and then my hands are covered in blood.” She blinked, then wiped away the moisture on her eyes. “I don’t know, Claire. I’ve never really thought that I deserved anything good. That I was doomed to dress like a slut and serve alcohol to horny creeps at a strip club for the rest of my life.”

“Okay, that’s a load of crap.” Claire laid a hand on her shoulder. “Especially now that you know this Max girl is still alive. Don’t ever let anybody tell you that you don’t deserve good shit.”

Sam nodded. “Yea. I... guess I just haven’t really absorbed it yet.”

“I get it. You need time.” Claire paused. “So... are you going to do this interview?”

“I’m not sure.” Sam shrugged. “I don’t know how excited I am to piss off First Light. Those people are crazy, Claire.” She glanced at her friend. “It’s like you said. I need time to think.”

The door behind them opened, and they turned to see Chris. “There you two are. Sam, we’re about
to open. Claire, you’re first on stage. Joey has Hot Crossed Buns queued up for you.”

“Okay.” Claire patted Sam’s shoulder as they got up. “We’ll talk later.”

When they went back inside, Sam made her way back to the bar. She quickly busied herself in preparation to start serving drinks.

Claire headed for the stage, pausing as she got to Charles. “Hey, man.”

He looked at her. “Hm?”

“Don’t give up on Sam.” Claire nodded to the brunette, oblivious to their conversation. “She’s definitely interested. But she’s dealing with some heavy shit.”

“She is?” Charles looked at her, concern evident in his face. “What, those two assholes from before?”

“No, dude, way heavier than that.” Claire shook her head. “Just... give her some time, all right? I promise, she’s not a lost cause.”

Charles looked back at her, then nodded. “Sure thing.”
Sam: Skype Call

“I’m really sorry,” Walker said sincerely. “When we asked your parents about her, they got very evasive. They said that she was having some difficulties, and leaving the house was hard for her. It felt like pushing the issue would be rude, and we didn’t have a good reason to anyway, so we dropped it.”

Sam sighed, as she leaned her head against the wall of the phone booth. “I get it. I’m sorry, I don’t mean to put you guys in a bad position.”

“It’s fine. But we didn’t want to come back with nothing, so Tiana spoke to a couple of other people after the service. You remember the Peterson family?”


“Their younger daughter, Jewel, was one of the girls in Abigail’s prayer group. Tiana managed to ask her, and she said she hadn’t seen your sister in several months. Your parents won’t have her over to visit.”

“Oh.”

“Yea.” Walker paused. “I’ll be honest, Samantha, this is getting a little concerning. Tiana and I are both worried about your sister now. I know you didn’t really talk about it with my wife... but would you tell me why you’re asking after Abigail?”

Sam took a few seconds to come up with her story. “I just realized how long it’s been,” she admitted. “I mean, Abigail was six, when I last saw her, and even then she wasn’t doing great. I remember that I always had to shower before I went into her room, to read her a bedtime story. And I don’t even think she remembers me.”

Walker processed that for a moment. “Well, I’m not sure what else we can do here, Samantha. We can keep our ear to the ground, but that’s about it.”

“Okay.” Sam nodded into the phone. “I appreciate it.”

As she walked back to her apartment, she found herself lost in thought. It’s been two weeks since I spoke to Rachel, she realized. I’m sure she’d like an answer.

Do I really want to do it?

The thought of being sued scared her. The idea of Ryan Caulfield coming for her, even after almost eight years away from the church, was terrifying. And she knew there was no hiding from First Light once you caught their ire.

And Max. God, I don’t even know if I could face her, after what I did.

It could shake the branches. If I talk about Abigail, maybe my parents will be forced to bring her into the open.

Maybe I could see her again.

God, this is stupid. I don’t even know if it works like that.

But it’s Max. After what I did... this might be the least I can do. If she’ll let me, anyway. She shook
her head. *Remember the 8th and 9th steps, Sam. You can do this.*

Sam stopped in front of her building, removing her cell phone from her pocket and bringing up Rachel’s number again.

She answered on the fourth ring. “*Hello?*”

“Hi, Rachel.” She paused. “It’s Samantha Myers.”

“It’s...oh. *OH. Samantha. Right. Of... hang on, Ste- no, seriously, stop.*” She listened to rustling on the other end of the line. “*Of course. How are you?*”

“I’m... good.” Sam frowned. “Are you busy? I can call back.”

“*No, it’s fine. What did you need?*”

Sam licked her lips. “I’ve been thinking, about the interview thing,” she started. “Would, um... do you think I would be able to talk to Max about it?”

“*Uh... yea. Actually, we could probably do it tomorrow,*” Rachel said hesitantly. “*I’m visiting her this weekend, funnily enough.*”

“Tomorrow, huh?” Sam hugged herself. “Can she do that?”

“Well, she was just asking me about it today. I’m sure she’ll make time. You remember that you don’t have to do this, right?”

“I know.” Sam nodded. “But... I would really like to speak to her.”

Rachel was silent for a few moments. “*Alright,*” she finally agreed. “*I can have her call you as soon as-*”

“No,” Sam said immediately. “I, uh, don’t like people giving out my number.”

“*Okay. Do you want to Skype instead? You can make an anonymous account.*”

Sam nodded. “*Yea. I can do that.*”

“All right. I’ll text you my info in a little bit.”

She sat at her table, drumming her fingers on her laptop the next morning.

Rachel had told her that she’d Skype once she saw Max. That had been over an hour ago. Sam had spent the entire time agonizing over what she was going to say.

*I don’t even know where to begin.* She started itching at her nails. *Do I just come out an apologize? Do I lead into it? I have no idea what I’m supposed to do.*

The laptop rang, dragging her back to reality, and she saw Rachel’s name.

*Moment of truth,* she thought to herself as she answered the call. “Hey, Rachel.”

“Hi, Samantha.” Rachel smiled at her. “You asked me to call you, when Max got here?”

“Yea.” She took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “I’m ready. Go ahead.”
Rachel moved the laptop, and the screen spun past another girl with blue hair and stopped on a brunette.

*Hair, freckles, blue eyes...*

“Max Caulfield,” Sam said quietly. “It really is you.”

“That’s me.” Max smiled at her. “You’re... Samantha?”

“Yea. Samantha Myers,” she added. “It’s... it’s been a while.”

Max tilted her head. “Have we met?”

“Well, not directly,” Sam backtracked. “I, ah... I was one of the other junior counselors, at the summer camp that year you ran away. I don’t think we ever spoke, though. I thought you were dead for a while.”

“Yea, I heard that was the rumor.” Max nodded on the screen. “I’m happy to say that reports of my death were greatly exaggerated.”

She couldn’t stop herself from chuckling. “My favorite Mark Twain quote.”

“Are you a student?” Max continued. “Rachel said most of the adults who left the church were in school.”

*I guess she would have told her a little about me.*

“I go to Portland State part-time,” she explained. “I’m trying to get my degree in Health Studies without any loans. I’ve still got a few classes to go. I work as a bartender, when I’m not in school.”

“I’ve been doing it online,” Max replied. “My last semester is about to start. My degree plan is for Business Management, though.”

“Nice.” Sam bit her lip, and glanced down at her hands.

*Just get it over with.*

“I, uh... Max...” she looked back up into the camera. “I have to tell you something.”

Max leaned forward. “What?”

“I...” Sam took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Max.”

Max furrowed her brows. “You’re sorry? Why?”

*She really didn’t know it was me.*

“I lied.” Samantha couldn’t stop herself from sniffing, as she felt herself getting emotional, anticipating Max’s angry reaction. “I told Rachel I wanted to talk about the TV thing. That wasn’t true. I wanted to see you face-to-face.”

“I don’t understand.” Max sounded confused. “Why did you want to talk to me?”

She took a shaky breath. “I transferred, to PSU, from the Portland Community College,” Sam said. “I got my Associate’s degree in Addiction Counseling while I was there. And... well, we covered the Twelve Step thing. Steps 8 and 9 are about finding those we hurt, and making amends. That was
why I wanted to speak to you.”

“But... we’ve never met.”

“No, not face-to-face. But I know who you are.” Sam clasped her hands in front of her mouth, closing her eyes as she chose her words. “Max... I was in the library, when you had that argument with those other students. I heard you guys talking about how you stole your dad’s emails, and that you liked girls.”

She opened her eyes, her voice breaking as it turned to a whisper. “I was the one who called the church, and told them everything.”

Max blinked and opened her mouth, but didn’t respond. She stared at Sam in shock. Sam, not knowing what else to do, pushed onward. “I am so sorry, Max,” she got out in a thick voice. “I thought I was doing the right thing. My parents were always telling me that the gays were just confused, and they needed help to find their way back to God.”

She felt a tear making its way down her check, and stopped to wipe at it quickly. “I just thought your parents were going to sit you down and talk, to try and get you back on the right path. I swear to God, Max, I had no idea what was going to happen.”

Sam heard movement behind the camera, and a familiar face appeared on the screen. “Holy crap, that is you,” the other girl said. “I remember you. I saw you a couple of times, after Max ran away.”

It can’t be. Sam almost did a double take. “Steph?” she said quietly. “Steph Gingrich? What are you...”

“She was the girl I was arguing with,” Max said. “Her and Rachel.”

Rachel... wait, what?!?

“Rachel was there too?” Sam arched her eyebrows in surprise. “I had no idea.”

The social worker re-entered the frame, standing behind Max. “I didn’t even know you went to our school,” she said with a stunned look. “Stacy never told me. I thought you were one of the ones that was home-schooled.”

Max leaned forward. “Why did you leave the church?”

“I...” Samantha paused, swallowing to get her voice back before she continued. “... when you didn’t show up for school the day after I called the church, I just figured that your parents had pulled you out, to get you help. I didn’t hear that you’d run away until Victoria Chase cornered me in the girl’s bathroom on Friday.”

“I heard about that. I’m really sorry, Samantha. I know she’s pretty scary, when she’s mad.”

Sam smirked, as she wiped her runny nose on her sleeve. “A little. She pinned me to the wall and demanded to know what stolen emails had to do with you running away. All I was able to get out was that someone had asked you to steal your dad’s emails to give to their father. She got really quiet, then dropped me and ran out.”

Rachel sighed. “I always wondered how she found out I was involved.”

“Sorry.” Her eyes were getting moist again, so Sam wiped them, too. “Max, I felt so bad... I didn’t even mind that nobody talked to me for the rest of the year. I didn’t think I deserved it. But then the
next year, the older teenagers started spreading a rumor that you hadn’t run away. That your parents had faked it, to cover up that they had killed you.”

She sniffed deeply “I believed them. I... I thought I had gotten you killed, Max. I just... I wanted to die.”

Max looked horrified. So did Steph and Rachel. “Samantha-”

“I didn’t do anything,” she assured them. “But I really hated myself. And on top of all that, my parents told me they had arranged a marriage for me, to another boy that I had never met.”

Sam shook her head. “I had a kind of... mental breakdown. I couldn’t deal with it anymore. So... I went to the school police officer, and tried to turn myself in. I told him that it was my fault you were dead.”

Rachel snapped her fingers. “I remember this. That was when my dad heard that rumor.” She turned to Max. “Samantha was one of the first teenagers to run away from the church, after you left. He told me that the CPS office had gotten a report that your parents had killed you, about a year after you ran away.”

*James Amber: Never made that connection.*

“Yea, that was me,” Sam admitted. “I didn’t find out that you really had run away until I met with Miss Hemingway. I felt a little better, until she said there were indicators that your parents had hurt you.” She started getting overcome by emotion again, and quickly wiped the tears gathering at her eyes. “Max... I am so, so sorry. I never... meant for... you to...”

She couldn’t finished her sentence. Sam clamped her eyes shut as she held her breath, and tried not to sob.

“Samantha,” she heard Max say. “Samantha, Look at me.”

She opened her eyes, not bothering to wipe the tears away.

“You were lied to,” Max told her. “The church spoon-fed all of us a bunch of bullshit when we were kids. I believe you, that you had no idea what was going to happen. I really believe that you were just trying to help. What happened to me is not your fault. I do not regret running away from the church. And I forgive you for telling on me.”

Sam could never hope to describe the impact those words had on her. It felt like the floor dropped out from under her feet, her shoulders relaxing after bearing the weight of her guilt for so long she couldn’t remember not holding it. All she could do was lower her head slowly into her arm, as she finally burst into tears.

“Hey,” Rachel said after a few seconds. Sam slowly lifted her head. “Samantha. We didn’t-”

“I want to do the TV thing,” Sam interrupted. She wiped the tears from her face, letting out a cough as her voice quaked. “I want do it, with Max.”

On the other side of the Skype connection, Rachel blinked. “Wait, you do NOT have to-”

The screen spun back to Max. “Samantha, you don’t need to try and make anything up to me. You don’t owe me anything,” the brunette said firmly. “If you don’t want to do this, that’s perfectly okay.”
“I do.” Samantha replied, sniffing, as she scooted her chair closer to the table. “I do want to do it. I decided a couple of days ago. It has nothing to do with you.”

Max frowned. “But... why?”

Sam let out a shaky breath, as she told Max and Rachel all about Abigail. And reaffirmed her insistence on doing the TV interviews with Max. “I can’t keep hiding in Portland anymore,” she finished quietly. “And if this hurts the church, then all the more for it.”

“... okay, then,” Max said, exhaling. “I’ll... is it okay, if I have this Skype information? I want to be able to call you back.”

Samantha nodded. “It connects to my phone, too. Unless I’m working, I can answer wherever.”

“Okay.” Rachel sighed. “We, uh... we need to talk a little bit. I’ll talk to you when I get back to Oregon, okay?”

Sam didn’t have the dream that night. She actually woke up feeling refreshed.

The interview was still on the back of her mind. She knew she should probably be worried, or at least be thinking about if she really wanted to do it or not. But as she rode the bus to the club, she only thought about the conversation she had with Max.

“What happened to me is not your fault.”

“I do not regret running away from the church.”

“And I forgive you for telling on me.”

She sighed, as she watched the city fly by out the window. *I cannot believe how much hearing that meant.*

Sam actually smiled, as she got off the bus and made her way into the strip club. She couldn’t remember the last time she was happy to be at work.

She paused halfway to the changing room, noticing Charles. The bouncer was doing a security check on the club, walking around and making sure that all the appropriate doors were locked and that nothing was loose enough to become a weapon. He was totally absorbed in his work as he jiggled the chairs and doorknobs.

*Claire’s right. I deserve good stuff.*

She walked over to him. “Hey, Charles.”

He brightened, as he saw her. “Hey, Sam, what’s up?”

“I, uh... I finished all my assignments for class early.” She shifted nervously. “Is that offer for dinner and a movie still good?”
**Sam: Texts**

**Sam:** Hey, I’m not really feeling well. Is it cool if I take the night off?

**Chris:** Sure. You okay?

**Sam:** Yea. It’s just been a really heavy day.

**Chris:** What happened?

**Sam:** Personal stuff. I’m sorry.

**Chris:** I get it. Will you be fine for tomorrow?

**Sam:** I should be.

**Chris:** While I have you, 4th of July is coming up. You remember last year, everyone was doing patriotic outfits but you?

**Sam:** Oh, right. I forgot. Is this a reminder?

**Chris:** More like a heads-up. I’m going to go to the military surplus store and get a few sets of cheap fatigues for the dancers to cut up. Do you want me to put one aside for you?

**Sam:** Kind of cliché, don’t you think?

**Chris:** You have something better?

**Sam:** ... I guess not. Yea, save me one.

**Max:** Hey. I just wanted to let you know I’ve spoken to the reporter.

**Samantha:** And?

**Max:** Well, she liked hearing that someone else was willing to come forward. She asked to pass her thanks.

**Samantha:** Does that mean it’s going to happen?

**Max:** That hasn’t been decided yet.

**Max:** But I don’t want you to think that you can’t back out, Samantha. You really don’t have to do this.

**Samantha:** It sounds like if I don’t, it won’t happen.

**Max:** That doesn’t matter. It’s your safety on the line. If something happened to you, I would hate myself.

**Samantha:** I have my own reasons for wanting to do this, Max. Just like you do. I’m not going to back out.
Max: Okay. Just, you know, remember that the option is there.

Max: ... Samantha?

Samantha: Sorry. I’m at work. Had a rush of people.

Max: Oh. Didn’t mean to distract you.

Samantha: It’s fine. The customers are pretty easy here. I mostly open beers and mix the occasional drink.

Max: Sounds like a simple enough way to make a living. It pays the bills?

Samantha: And my tuition.

Max: How long until you graduate?

Samantha: At this rate, in about a year or so. What about you?

Max: I’m actually in my last semester. I should be getting my degree right after these next classes.

Max: ... customers again?

Samantha: Sorry. We get a rush every few minutes or so.

Max: What, do you have a band playing or something?

Samantha: Sort of.

Molly: Do you think you could write a three page essay about your plans to reduce your carbon footprint?

Sam: Why?

Molly: It’s for another scholarship application.

Sam: Does it have to be by Friday? Because I have a final paper due that day, too.

Molly: It does if you want to get another six hundred dollars towards your tuition.

Sam: ... shit.

Sam: I don’t even know how I can reduce it.

Molly: Tell them about your plans to trade in your car for a hybrid.

Sam: You know I don’t have a car.

Molly: Tell them about your plans to start composting.

Sam: For what? The garden I don’t have?

Molly: Then swap out all your lightbulbs with LEDs. And convince your place of employment to do
so, too.

**Sam:** Yea, because people go to strip clubs for the brilliant ambiance. Also, aren’t LED bulbs twenty bucks each?

**Molly:** Sam, I don’t know where I said you actually have to DO any of this stuff. Just write up some plans.

**Molly:** Preferably double-spaced, with APA formatting. A few references wouldn’t hurt, either.

**Sam:** Due in three days, though?

**Molly:** Six hundred bucks.

**Sam:** ... fine. I suppose I don’t really need sleep anyway.

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**Claire:** <black.jpg>

**Claire:** <red.jpg>

**Claire:** Which one of these would you throw money at?

**Sam:** ... neither?

**Claire:** Come on, help me pick one! They’re on sale!

**Sam:** I am SO the wrong person to ask. Why don’t you text your boyfriend?

**Claire:** We broke up last week.

**Sam:** Really?

**Claire:** We were going in different directions. His led him into another girl’s bedroom.

**Sam:** Oh, no. I’m so sorry.

**Claire:** Fuck him. I hope he gets an acute case of galloping cock-rot. Black or red?

**Sam:** ... okay, first of all, wow.

**Sam:** Second, why does it matter? You take them off after one song anyway.

**Claire:** It’s the sensuality of the initial outfit. Now, please pick a color.

**Sam:** Fine. Black.

**Claire:** Really? But the red seems so much naughtier, like I’m a dirty mistress.

**Sam:** Red, then.

**Claire:** But that black gives a nice contrast against my skin. And the lace gives it that extra something-something.
Sam: Okay, I quit. Do whatever you want.

Claire: Sam!

Charles: Did I leave a roll of quarters at your place?

Sam: Yes, actually, you did.

Charles: Would you please bring it to work tonight? I need it.

Sam: Why do you need a roll of quarters for work?

Charles: I keep it in my pocket, in case I need to give my punches a little extra 'oomph'.

Sam: Really? That seems... I don’t know, extreme.

Charles: Remember when that tweaker started flipping chairs last year? How Mike punched him in the face, but the dude kept going?

Sam: Probably not gonna forget. That was pretty scary.

Charles: Remember how I punched him, and he dropped?

Sam: I just figured that was because you’re stronger than Mike.

Charles: Well, I am. But I had the quarters in my fist when I did that.

Sam: Didn’t that guy go to the hospital though?

Charles: Yea? So?

Sam: What if he’d been really hurt? You could’ve gone to jail.

Charles: For punching a guy in the middle of a meth freakout? Who was about to assault the patrons and dancers? Not likely.

Charles: Besides, he was going to the hospital anyway, on account of how his heart was about to explode. The cop I talked to later said his heart rate was one of the highest the ER had ever seen.

Sam: Wow.

Charles: Anyway, you’ll bring the quarters?

Sam: Yes. See you at work ;)

Unknown: Is this Samantha?

Samantha: ... who is this?

Unknown: It’s Juliet Watson. Max should have told you that I might be texting?

<CONTACT INFO UPDATED>
**Samantha:** Right, she did. I just forgot about it.

**Juliet:** Did she pass on that First Light knows about the story?

**Samantha:** Yea.

**Juliet:** I’m sure she’s told you, but I’ll say it too; you have every opportunity to back out. Nobody will think anything bad about you for doing so.

**Samantha:** I understand. I’m still on board.

**Juliet:** Okay.

**Samantha:** Is MSN not? Are they going to pull the plug?

**Juliet:** No. But they have gone ahead and notified the SPLC that you guys may need representation.

**Samantha:** The who now?

**Juliet:** Southern Poverty Law Center? Have you heard of them?

**Samantha:** No. Who are they?

**Juliet:** An organization that combats hate groups in court. They’re mostly famous for their work against the KKK, and a few other White Supremacy groups.

**Juliet:** They’re based in Alabama, but they do their thing all over the country. And they know about First Light’s nonsense. They’ll contract out a lawyer on your guy’s behalf.

**Samantha:** That’s actually really reassuring.

**Samantha:** Are their lawyers good?

**Juliet:** Well, they’ve all received death threats.

**Samantha:** ... I’m not sure how I feel about that.

**Juliet:** It means yes, they’re really good at what they do.

**Samantha:** Yea, but I feel bad that a death threat is a measure of success for someone.

**Juliet:** As someone who’s gotten a couple of them, trust me; they treat it like a badge of honor.

**Samantha:** Really?

**Juliet:** Yes. But we’re going off-topic. MSN is still moving forward, so long as you and Max are willing to talk on camera.

**Samantha:** Is it just us, then?

**Juliet:** My understanding is that nobody else is willing to do it.

**Samantha:** ... I get that. It’s a little scary.
**Juliet:** I bet. You, Max, and anyone else who wants to take on First Light has to have some serious balls.

**Samantha:** Thank you. I think.
A few weeks passed before Miss Amber was able to secure Regina a lawyer. Brooke was surprised to see that it wasn’t Megan, when they got to the CPS office. “Michael Wolchowski,” he said by way of introduction. “You can all call me Mike.”

“Where’s Miss Weaver?” Emily frowned. “I thought she was the one we’d be meeting.”

“Unfortunately, Megan has other obligations,” Mike explained. “She asked me to take your case.”

“Are you as good of a lawyer as she is?” Regina asked quietly.

“I’m afraid very few people can hope to hold a candle to Megan. But unlike her, I specialize in divorce law, which means I’ve fought a lot more custody cases than she has.” He smiled. “I promise, Regina, you’re in good hands with me.”

Regina nodded, as she clutched Aaron tightly without speaking.

“Why don’t we go into the conference room, and talk a little more privately.” He gestured into the office. “I’m afraid your friends will have to wait outside, though. And if they could watch Aaron, that would be helpful.”

“Okay.” Regina turned and handed Aaron over to Brooke, who accepted the baby carefully, not wanting to disturb him. Emily took the diaper bag, and Regina followed Mike.

Brooke sat down in a nearby chair slowly, Aaron wiggling in her arms. “We should’ve brought the car seat,” she muttered.

“Do YOU want to try and figure out how to undo that thing?” Emily asked as she sat next to her. “Remember that it took two firefighters to put it in?”

Brooke smirked, as she recalled their field trip. Pete had helped them get the car the previous week, and he’d had them put it under Emily’s name, since she had the most driving experience. They’d only taken it out a few times since then, including to the fire station, to have a firefighter install Regina’s new car seat. The fact that the first one had not been able to figure it out had brought them a lot of much-needed mirth.

“I’m worried about this new guy,” Emily said quietly. “She should have YOUR lawyer. The one who kept you out of the church last time.”

“You heard what he said, she’s busy. Besides, I’m sure Megan wouldn’t have sent him if he wasn’t good.” Brooke shifted Aaron to sit more comfortably. “And it’s not like we have a choice.”

“I know.” Emily leaned forward onto her elbows. “Still. The little parasite is growing on me. I don’t want her to lose him.”

Brooke shot her a dirty look. “You know she wants you to stop calling him that.”

“Well, I want to sleep through the night more than twice a week. Life’s a bitch.”
“Language.” They both looked up to see Miss Amber leaning her arms on the top wall of her cubicle. “And Brooke is right, Emily, that’s a terrible thing to call him.”

“Hey, you should hear some of the things I call him at one in the morning.” Emily shrugged. “Parasite is the best of them.”

“Nevertheless.” Their social worker walked around the cubicle and knelt in front of Brooke. She took hold of one of Aaron’s fists, the baby squeezing her fingers. “God, he’s getting big.”

Brooke smirked. “Yea. Heavy, too.” She glanced up at Miss Amber. “Regina’s not going to lose him, right?”

“The courts have always upheld that raising a baby is the parent’s prerogative. Grandparents do not have a say in the matter.” She glanced up at the two of them. “I won’t lie, though. Regina’s situation is... complicated.”

Emily frowned. “Why?”

“That woman isn’t just the baby’s grandmother. Technically, she’s also Aaron’s step-mother.” Miss Amber sighed. “Which, unfortunately, makes her a parent too, legally speaking.”

“Wh- are you kidding me?” Emily exclaimed.

Aaron starting wriggling at the sudden outburst, and Brooke immediately started shushing him. Emily lowered her voice. “What kind of fucking reasoning is that?!” she demanded. “Her goddamn husband raped Regina! That cunt should probably be in jail with him!”

“Language!” Miss Amber hissed quietly.

“Fuck my language! You know that’s true!”

“Emily, I know you’re angry at the situation, but getting upset is not going to help Regina or Aaron.” Miss Amber stood, folding her arms. “This is Regina’s fight. Just like Brooke had her custody battle. Nothing either of you will do can change what’s happening.”

“But...” Brooke tried to come up with a good argument. “We’re his godparents. There must be something we can do.”

Miss Amber’s expression softened, as she looked at her. “I’m sorry, Brooke. But there really isn’t. All you girls can do is be there for Regina, and support-”

Her phone interrupted her as it jingled. She pulled it from her pocket and read the text quickly. “I have to go.”

“Why?”

“They need someone from our office at the police station, so they can interview a child.”

Brooke raised her eyebrows. “Another kid from First Light?”

“No. She may be a witness to her father dealing drugs.” Miss Amber went back to her desk and grabbed her attaché bag. “I work with all kids, Brooke, not just the teenagers from your old church.”

“What about Regina?”

“She’ll be fine. She’s in good hands with Mister Wolchowski.” She paused right before she walked
out. “Remember what I said. Just focus on taking care of her and Aaron.”

“That’s bullshit.”

Brooke and Emily both nodded. “Yea, we know,” Emily said. “But what else can we do? Miss Amber’s got a point.”

“Fuck, I don’t know.” The boy across from them, Andrew, folded his arms angrily. “I can’t believe the stones on that bitch. I mean, suing for custody of the child your husband conceived after he raped a sixteen-year-old girl? Are you fucking for real?”

“Andrew, calm down.” Next to him, Christine laid her hand on his forearm. “Getting angry isn’t going to help Regina.”

“I fucking...” he sighed. “Yea. I know.”

Brooke looked around the table in the library. Five other people crowded around in chairs, listening. They were the unofficial First Light support group, that didn’t involve the guidance counselor. They’d started meeting the year prior, to talk about their old church.

All of them saw themselves as having a common enemy in First Light, and they all took pleasure in watching their local government land blows against them. But now they were trying to figure out how they could help the member who wasn’t present, Regina.

“How, exactly, is this woman not in prison too?” Isabelle leaned forward. “I have a hard time imagining that she didn’t know about what her husband was doing to Regina. Miss Amber’s father couldn’t have charged her as an accessory or something?”

“Maybe there wasn’t proof?” Tyler offered.

“I think that’s beside the point,” Brooke interrupted. “I’m sure that if he could have, he would’ve. I think her dad gets his jollies off on throwing those guys in jail.”

Tyler’s sister, Celia, snorted. “Hell, I would, too.”

“Does Regina need money for her lawyer?” Isabelle asked. “I don’t really have much, but if we pool our cash together, maybe we can get a down payment or something.”

“She’s not paying,” Emily assured them. “It’s through that retainer CPS has with Megan Weaver’s office.”

“Then what can we do?” Christine leaned forward. “There must be something.”

“Sneak over and crack that bitch’s head open with a tire iron?” Andrew offered.

Tyler snorted in amusement. “Christine, maybe you should focus on keeping your husband under control.”

Christine and Andrew shot Tyler dirty looks. He yelped, as something kicked him under the table. “OW!!”

“You deserved that,” Celia shot back.

“Meh.” Celia turned back to the others. “Barring violence. What can we do to help?”

Emily ran her hand down her face. “Fucked if I know. How about we put her into hiding?”

“Where would we take her, and with what money?” Isabelle countered. “Also, I’m not really a legal expert, but I don’t think that would stop any kind of custody proceedings. Nor would it sit well with a judge.”

“Are any of you guys still talking to people inside the church?” Brooke asked. “Do any of them know anything about this? Maybe they could offer some advice.”

Isabelle, Christine, and Andrew shook their heads. Tyler and Celia exchanged looks. “Our cousin, Richard,” Tyler answered. “We’ve been talking on Facebook. He kind of wants to leave, too.”

“Why hasn’t he?” Andrew asked.

“He’s still on the fence. We’re not putting any pressure on him.” Tyler shrugged. “But we have no connection to the McCalmon family. I’m not sure what good we can do.”

A blonde teenager, Sienna, appeared at the library entrance, and quickly jogged towards the table. They all turned to watch her slide into a chair. “Sorry I’m late. What did I miss?”

“Regina’s getting sued by her cunt of a mother-in-law for custody of Aaron, and we’re clueless about how to stop it,” Isabelle summed up. “Your turn.”

Sienna blinked. “Shit.”

“Yea, we’ve covered that expletive,” Brooke said dryly. “You got anything to add to it?”

“I mean... not really.” Sienna shrugged. “I was just coming to tell you that something big’s going down back at First Light.”

Everyone leaned forward to listen. Of all the teenagers, Sienna was the one with the most connections to the church; she was incredibly social, and had managed to save most of her friendships when she’d left, despite being labeled as a pariah like the rest of them. “What did you hear?” Christine asked.

“Lisa Carson’s dad told their family at dinner that the church is looking to hire additional lawyers,” she said quietly. “And a crisis manager. He was asked by Elder Xavier to start searching for a good one.”


“She didn’t know. But it must mean that they’re anticipating something bad coming.” Sienna looked at all of them. “I don’t know much about crisis management, but I’ve never heard of them hiring outside the church for scandals when they break. Not even for that story that came out last year, and got the Tacoma compound shut down.”

“They must be expecting something really bad to break open.” Tyler looked at the others. “Maybe the child marriages?”

Emily rolled her eyes. “Everybody knows about those already.”

“Maybe the church killed someone else,” Isabelle offered. “Like Jennifer and Sara.”

“If they had, wouldn’t we have heard about it by now?” Christine asked. “It’s not like they can hide
that sort of thing anymore.”

“If they’re hiring someone to handle the issue, it must be something we’ve never heard about,” Celia deduced. “Sienna, did you hear ANYTHING else about it?”

The blonde teenager shook her head. “Sorry, I-”

“Hear anything about what?”

They all jumped in their seats and turned towards the source of the noise. Standing in an aisle, partially hidden by a bookshelf, Doctor Greene watched them with her arms folded. “What are we talking about?”

“Nothing.” Eight teenagers said in unison.

“Nice. That didn’t sound rehearsed at all.” She walked out, standing next to their table. “I’m certain that you guys weren’t talking about interfering with ongoing legal proceedings. Or else I’d have to report that to Miss Amber.”

“Of course not.” Tyler smiled brightly. “We’re all such good kids, Doctor Greene. We would never.”

Doctor Greene looked over all of them, one at a time. “I’m glad to hear that. It never works out for anybody.” She pursed her lips. “I want to make it very clear that I don’t want to hear any discussions like that for the rest of the year.”

“Brooke, Andrew, and I get our diplomas after finals next week,” Emily reminded her.

“I don’t care.” Doctor Greene leaned forward, planting her hands on the table. “There will be no more talk about interfering with a legal matter that doesn’t concern you. Is that clear?”

“Yes,” they all muttered.

“Good.” Greene stood back up. “The late busses will be here shortly. I suggest you all go catch them.”
Brooke: Texts

_June-July 2020. Between ch 76 & 77 of EtL._

**Unknown:** You need to be a mature adult and come home. Now.

**Brooke:** Who the fuck is this?

**Unknown:** That had better be the last of the foul language you use. It’s time for you to end this foolishness and come back to where you belong.

**Brooke:** Is that you, Henry? Because you better prepare to be really fucking disappointed.

**Unknown:** You have dishonored your family name long enough! I’m not going to tell you again!

**Brooke:** But I like it out here. I’m having way too much fun sacrificing goats to Satan, and committing blasphemy, and drinking bourbon until I can’t feel my face.

**Unknown:** This is not a request!! Come back to where you belong and take your place!!

**Brooke:** And what happens if I don’t?

**Unknown:** Then you’ll die a sinner’s death.

**Brooke:** I doubt it.

**Unknown:** Do you think we don’t know where you are? We found your phone easily enough.

**Brooke:** Wrong. You found my user ID on an anonymous app. I know you can’t trace it. What’s the next empty threat?

**Unknown:** You think this is empty? That I won’t kill you rather than risk being shamed further?

**Brooke:** Catch me if you can, bitch.

<CONTACT BLOCKED>

**Brooke:** Can my user ID be tracked down in this app anywhere?

**Joey:** Um, not really. It’s pretty secure. Why?

**Brooke:** Someone from First Light found me.

**Joey:** You know how?

**Brooke:** No.

**Joey:** Okay, well, the simple fix is to make a new account and nuke the old one. It’s pretty easy.

**Brooke:** And that’ll fix it?
Joey: Unless they somehow track down your new user ID, sure.

Brooke: Right.

Brooke: I did it again.

Chloe: Really, dude?

Brooke: Sorry :(.

Chloe: I’ll remote in. What were you trying to download?

Brooke: Spaceballs.

Chloe: Ah. One of Mel Brooks’ finest works. Still, you have GOT to be more careful on those sites.

Brooke: They tricked me. The button said “Download”, but it put something weird on the laptop instead. It keeps popping up these ads at random.

Chloe: Yea, that’s a common tactics those assholes use to install malware on your computer. Gotta check the whole page and make sure you click on the right button.

Chloe: Found it. I know this one, it’s a pretty common piece of code.

Brooke: ... am I hosed?

Chloe: No. I have a program written for this guy in particular. Already took care of it.

Brooke: Thanks. You won’t tell Max, right?

Chloe: Of course not. But try not to make a habit of this, either.

Amy: So, am I going to see you at PSU this fall?

Brooke: Nope. Taking a gap year to save money.

Amy: Aw. I miss you.

Brooke: Me too. Sorry :(

Amy: Where ARE you going? Have you decided yet?

Brooke: Not yet. Probably OSU. Me and the other girls I live with have talked about going there together.

Amy: What, like sister wives or something?

Brooke: ... wow.

Amy: Was that not funny?

Brooke: It just hit a little too close to home.
Amy: Sorry.

Unknown: We weren’t done talking.

Brooke: That was quick. Took you two whole weeks to figure out my new user ID, did it?

Unknown: You don’t have to live in fear, Brooke. You can still come home, and repent for your sins.

Brooke: But I like my sins. I was just having a blast at this pool party, wearing my skimpiest bikini, where people were smoking cigarettes and having pre-marital sex. And then someone told me I should try this stuff called marijuana? Holy SHIT, it’s amazing.

Unknown: ENOUGH OF THIS

Brooke: But I didn’t get to the part where I was trying to ride one of the boys like a pogo stick.

Unknown: YOU ARE A LIAR, A DECIEVER, A JEZEBEL, AND A FOOL. YOU ARE NOT A WHORE!!

Brooke: Touched a nerve, did I? Sorry you have to hear about your little sister trying to get laid by the captain of the swim team.

Brooke: Actually, I don’t think this is Henry anymore. He’s not smart enough to use this app. So who is this?

Unknown: THAT DOESN’T MATTER

Unknown: YOU ARE DESTROYING YOUR FAMILY’S GOOD NAME

Brooke: Couldn’t give a flying fuck. Bye, Felicia.

<CONTACT BLOCKED>

Brooke: It happened again.

Joey: First Light?

Brooke: Yea.

Joey: Nuke button.

Brooke: But HOW?? I really have no idea how they keep finding out my user ID.

Joey: It could be someone that you’re talking to?

Brooke: None of the other teenagers are rats for First Light. I know that.

Joey: I’ve got nothing else, Brooke. Sorry.

Brooke: Fine. See you on the other side of Hiroshima.
Joey: Too soon.

Brooke: Hey, does Jane want us to bring back dinner?

Regina: I think she was about to start cooking.

Brooke: She doesn’t have to. The chefs cooked way too much pasta, and the manager told all the waitresses that they could take some home if they want.

Regina: Ah. She says if it’s not too much trouble, she’ll appreciate the night off.

Brooke: Okay, we’ll bring back five plates. Do you want anything else? Aaron need anything?

Regina: No, we’re good.

Brooke: Oh, BTW, we had a group come in for a business meeting. I think it went really well, because they left a huge tip. Enough for us to get the stroller you wanted.

Regina: You guys don’t have to get that one! I was kidding! It was really expensive!

Brooke: Maybe I didn’t emphasize enough. HUGE tip.

Regina: Seriously, the normal stroller will work just fine!

Brooke: Yea, until you need to hold more than just a kid. And you’re going to get a hunchback pushing that thing. We’re gonna stop at Wal-Mart to buy the good one on the way home.

Regina: ... I don’t know what I did to deserve you guys.

Emily: Did you use my hairbrush?!

Brooke: No.

Emily: THEN WHY IS THERE BLACK AND RED HAIR IN IT?!?!!?

Brooke: ... maybe.

Emily: You owe me a new one.

Brooke: Oh, come on! It’s fine!

Emily: It is NOT fine! We each have our own for a reason!

Brooke: It was an accident! It was dark! I thought it was mine!

Emily: Well, it is now.

Brooke: Man, you have GOT to get over this issue.

Emily: Excuse me, did YOUR older brother use your hairbrush as a kid and give you head lice?!

Brooke: No. But I don’t have head lice!
Emily: YOU COULD

Brooke: You’re the one who colors my hair! Have you ever seen lice in it?!

Emily: I don’t care! You’re buying me a new hair brush!!

Brooke: Why?!

Emily: Because if you don’t, then you’re rolling the revenge dice with the only person in the house who knows how to do your highlights.

Brooke: ... you suck.

Emily: Do yourself a favor and get one that doesn’t look like yours.

Unknown: ENOUGH IS ENOUGH. IT IS TIME FOR YOU TO COME BACK HOME.

Brooke: You know what I was just thinking? There’s a lot of cute, sexually liberal girls around my new school, and I’ve never actually eaten pussy before.

Brooke: How do I really KNOW that I don’t like it?

Unknown: THIS IS NOT A FUCKING GAME YOU HARLOT

Brooke: So I am a whore now? Just because I feel like munching a little carpet?

Brooke: I would ask how you keep the hair from between your teeth, but I doubt you ever actually get laid.

Unknown: YOU WILL COME HOME OR I WILL MAKE SURE YOU WILL BURN IN THE HOTTEST LEVEL OF HELL

Brooke: Does hell have levels? I don’t remember Pastor Thompson covering Dante’s Inferno in his sermons.

Unknown: This is not a joking matter. You cannot stay away from me. You are bound by a holy covenant to return when I say so.

Brooke: ... I don’t know why it took so long to realize that it was you.

Unknown: You need to return home and take your place.

Brooke: That will never happen. I will slit my own throat before I go anywhere with you. And the next time you text me, I’ll send everything I have saved to James and Rachel Amber.

Unknown: You will come back, or you will die.

Brooke: You’re not pulling a scared little girl’s ponytail anymore, you whiny little bitch. Bring it the fuck on, because I will destroy you. And I am NEVER going back.

Unknown: You’re from an Elder’s line. There is no life for you away from us.

Brooke: Tell it to Max Caulfield. And then go fuck yourself.
Brooke: Paying Dues

August 2020. Just before ch 77 of EtL.

“You look like hell.”

“Thanks, Snooze.” On the other side of the computer, Sadie ground her palm into her eye. “Though I certainly feel like it. I didn’t sleep worth a damn last night.”

Brooke frowned, as she sat next to Emily. The two of them were in their room late in the evening, talking to Sadie through Skype. They could see the sun shining through a door behind her, beside which sat a black rifle and a helmet. “Why not?” she asked. “Everything okay?”

“Yea, we’re fine. Fucking insurgents like to mortar our FOB in the middle of the night to mess with our sleep.”

Emily’s eyes widened. “Wait, really?”

“Yea. They’ve got shit for aim though.” Sadie smirked. “Plus, we’ve got a fancy radar that can tell where they’re firing from, and they know about it. They generally only fire one shot before they start running, because we can mortar them back in about two minutes. And our mortars are a lot more accurate than theirs.”

“Oh.” Emily exhaled. “Well, good. With all the shit you gave me, I don’t know if I’d have anything nice to say at your funeral.”

Brooke elbowed her friend’s shoulder. “Dude, don’t say stuff like that.”

“... yea. Sorry.”

“It’s cool.” Sadie nodded as she scratched her head. “I’m pretty over this place, honestly. I miss sleeping on a real bed. And good food.” She paused. “And a toilet that isn’t a porta-john full of penis drawings.”

Brooke snorted. “Gross.”

“You’re tellin’ me. Least I was able to bring my own tampons.” Sadie shrugged. “How are you guys doing?”

Emily smirked. “Fine, relatively. We’d be assholes if we complained now.”

“Maybe. I still want to know how everything’s going,” Sadie said. “How’s the thing with Regina?”

“We don’t know.” Brooke sighed. “Lawyers are still doing lawyer things through the court. They won’t have a hearing for months.”


“Trust us, we know.” Emily folded her arms. “We both hate that we can’t do anything about it.”

Sadie shook her head. “It’s not your guy’s fight.”
“We’re Aaron’s godparents. It should be.” Emily shook her head. “God, I’d almost go back to First Light just to knock that bitch’s teeth into her throat.”

“But you’re not,” Sadie said forcefully.

“No. Of course not.” Emily sighed. “But I’d like to.”

“I know.” Sadie leaned back in her chair. “Trust me, I get it. I think about it too, sometimes, going back to knock on my parent’s door and punching whoever answers.”

Brooke raised an eyebrow. “You could, you know. I bet you’d take them in a fight, now that you’re a Marine.”

“Yea.” Sadie bit her lip. “... I’ve thought about it a lot, trust me. But I don’t think I have it in me to go back to. The thought of being anywhere near those people...” her voice trailed off as she looked away.

“I get it.” Brooke rubbed her hands together. “My brother found me at our job, a couple of months ago. I had a panic attack because I thought he was going to try to take me back.”

Sadie nodded, as she looked back at the camera. “I had nightmares like that, when I first got to Jane and Pete’s house,” she admitted. “When I finally slept, I mean. That First Light would show back up and drag me back to the church. I haven’t had any in months, but...” She shook her head. “You know, I really wanted to help, when Miss Amber asked. But I just couldn’t do it.”

Emily blinked. “Help with what?”

“With Max.” Sadie sighed. “I spent a few days trying to decide. But I got too much anxiety thinking about it.”

“With Max?” Brooke asked, confused. “What does that mean?”

Sadie tilted her head. “... you don’t know.”

“Know what?”

“I don’t think I’m supposed to tell you.”

“Sadie.” Emily leaned towards the camera. “What did Max want help with?”

They watched her take a slow breath on the other side of the camera, before Sadie looked around and scooted closer. “You didn’t get it from me. Understand?”

“Got it.” Brooke nodded. “What’s going on?”

“I got an email from Miss Amber a couple of months ago,” Sadie replied. “The gist of it is that Max is volunteering to go on a news segment, to tell the media about what it was really like growing up in First Light. And they were trying to find anyone else who was willing to go on TV with her.”

Brooke and Emily exchanged looks. “… holy shit,” Emily breathed, turning back to the computer. “They wanted your help?”

“I think Miss Amber was emailing everyone who’s aged out of foster care.” Sadie shrugged. “I know I wasn’t the only one she asked.”

“And you don’t want to,” Brooke stated.
Sadie dropped her gaze. “... I do,” she admitted. “But... I also don’t want to get dragged back into that world.” She shook her head. “I know that’s pathetic, that even as a combat vet I’m still scared of some fucking church. But I can’t.”

Emily took a deep breath, as she leaned forward. “Sadie, I know what you did, when you ran away.”


“I heard about it from one of the other foster kids. You told Miss Amber and her father that Jennifer and Sara were killed by their parents, right?”

Sadie nodded.

“I think you paid your dues, then.” Emily nodded. “You already punched your parents in the face.”

A smirk came over Sadie's face. “... you always did know what to say, Snooze.”

“You want to go back to this email,” Brooke interrupted. “So Max is going on TV to tell the world about all the fucked-up shit First Light’s done?”

“That’s the impression I got,” Sadie affirmed.

“And she’s looking for people to go on camera with her?”

Sadie nodded again. “I don’t know if she’ll find anyone,” she added. “I’m not sure how many of us there actually are, but I don’t think there’s more than a half-dozen kids that’ve aged out of foster care from First Light.”

“Yea.” Brooke sat forward in her chair. “Right.”

Emily looked at her. “What does that mean?”

Brooke planted her elbows on her knees and clasped her hands, resting her chin on her knuckles. “… I think there might be a way for us to help Regina after all.”

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Brooke: I know why First Light is in crisis mode.

Sienna: You do?

Andrew: Why??

Celia: What for?

Brooke: Because Max Caulfield struck a deal with MSN. She’s going to go on national television and tell the whole world what it was like to grow up in First Light.

Tyler: ... no way.

Emily: She’s right. I heard it too, from a good source. Max is gonna spill all of their dirty little secrets.

Isabelle: Whoa.

Sienna: If that’s true, then what I heard yesterday makes a lot more sense.
Christine: What did you hear?

Sienna: Brooke, do you know that your brother is working for Ryan Caulfield as an assistant?

Brooke: I suspected. What does he have to do with it?

Sienna: I talked to Lisa again. She overheard him having a conversation with Peter Xavier, after services, about how Ryan was going to need more money if they wanted the story stopped. And Peter was telling him that it would be better spent if the story never came to light.

Sienna: I figured it was another news article, like the one last year. But if it’s a television piece, it would explain why they’ve got their collective panties in a knot.

Celia: Holy shit.

Tyler: Okay, that is awesome, and I cannot wait to see those fuckers burn to the ground. But what does this have to do with us?

Emily: Max can tell the world about Regina! What do you think would happen if everyone knew that bitch was suing for custody of the baby her husband conceived from rape of a child?

Andrew: Shit, that’s how you get protestors. People in Guy Fawkes masks standing in front of your church chanting.

Emily: Exactly!

Christine: Hang on. When did this start? It wasn’t in June, was it?

Brooke: I don’t know, maybe? Why?

Christine: I don’t think Max is the only one doing it.

Andrew: ... Samantha?

Christine: I’m not sure who else Kenny might have been talking about.

Emily: Who’s Samantha?

Andrew: Another girl who ran away from First Light years ago. Like, one of the OGs. About the same time as Max, sounds like. She used to live in our house before she aged out.

Christine: We overheard Miss Amber talking to foster dad about her. Him and his wife sounded pretty worried, and Miss Amber said she was, too. But she said her and Max have made up their minds.

Celia: So Max and Samantha are going on TV to tell the world about what First Light did to them? Max’s parents beating the shit out of her, and... whatever happened to Samantha?

Sienna: That’s what it sounds like.

Isabelle: You know what? Forget them telling the world. We should get in on this. The more people the press can get stories from, the better.

Andrew: Um... yea. I’m all for helping out, but that sounds like a fucking terrible idea.
Sienna: He’s right. I don’t like that plan.

Isabelle: Why?

Sienna: Dude, you know First Light will not be fine and dandy with this. Whoever goes on TV is going to get the living FUCK sued out of them.

Christine: I’ll do it.

Andrew: NO.

Christine: What are they going to sue me for? Telling the truth about how my parents forced me to marry you?

Andrew: There’s no proof.

Christine: You were there!

Andrew: Yea, and you know I’ll have your back. But it’s our word versus First Light’s. There’s a reason those assholes have never gotten in real trouble for the child marriages.

Celia: I’ll do it, then. I still have scars on my back from my father’s coat hanger. They can’t argue with that.

Tyler: That’s true. And Miss Amber took us from our home specifically because of the abuse. We didn’t run away. There are official records.

Sienna: You two are children. Those records are sealed. Besides, that’s not institutional, that’s two kids having a shitty parent.

Emily: Okay. I’ll do it.

Brooke: Absolutely fucking not.

Emily: I can handle it.

Brooke: No. And I’ll tell you why it’s a no; because I have to do it.

Isabelle: Excuse me? Why does it have to be you?

Brooke: You guys just have stories. I have physical evidence that the church is doing shady shit at an institutional level.

Tyler: You do??

Christine: What kind?

Brooke: I can’t say. The less anyone knows, the better.

Brooke: Besides, I’m from an Elder’s family, like Max. Me bucking the system will have more of an impact than any of you.

Sienna: That’s kind of a good point.
Celia: What about getting sued?

Brooke: If it takes the spotlight off of Regina and Aaron, then it is what it is.

Emily: You guys need to tell her not to do this.

Brooke: Just because you’re losing the argument outside the chat doesn’t mean you need to bring the others into it.

Andrew: Celia’s got a good point too, Brooke. You know Elder Caulfield will not be on board with this.

Brooke: Ryan Caulfield can eat me. I’m the best one to do this, and you guys know it.

Christina: What if they decide it’s not worth the risk, Brooke? You wouldn’t be the first teenager First Light killed.

Brooke: I’m willing to take that risk.

Regina: Please don’t.

Brooke: ... I didn’t know you were here.

Tyler: Smooth, Brooke. Way to go.

Brooke: Shut up. Look, Regina, this could help you keep Aaron.

Regina: Or it could get you killed. Don’t do this.

Brooke: We’re coming upstairs.
Brooke: Best Option

August 2020. Concurrent with ch 77 of EtL.

Regina was nursing Aaron when Brooke and Emily pushed the door open. One hand held the baby under the blanket, and the other was setting her phone down on her lap.

“I didn’t realize you were in that group chat,” Brooke said quietly.

“Yea.” Regina put her phone down took hold of Aaron with both hands. “I figured.”

The two of them sat down on her bed. “Regina, I want to do this,” Brooke started. “I know it might be dangerous. But I don’t care.”

“Well, I do. You two are my best friends. If something happened to either of you because you were trying to help me...” her voice trailed off. “I don’t even know.”

“It’s our choice, not yours,” Emily pointed out.

“It doesn’t matter. You’re still doing it because of me.”

“No, I’m not.” Brooke shook her head. “I’m doing it because it’ll screw over First Light. Helping you is just the icing on the cake.”

“But-”

“No buts.” Brooke folded her arms. “I should have given everyone what I have a long time ago anyway. I was keeping it as my ace, in case my family tried anything else, but they’re not; I may as well use it to help you.”

Regina bit her lip, looking down at Aaron. She glanced back up after a minute. “What do you have, anyway?”

“Financial records with my grandfather’s signature on them. They’ve got proof that First Light is using at least four different shell companies to launder money, so they can pay for the personal expenses of the Elders and Pastors.”

“... wow.” Regina sat back. “I’m kind of surprised you didn’t give it up at the custody hearing.”

“Actually, me too.” Emily looked at Brooke. “What was your plan, exactly?”

Brooke shrugged. “If the judge ordered me sent home, I was going to tell him everything I had, and hope he’d change his mind.”

“What if he hadn’t?”

“I... had another backup plan.” Brooke shifted uncomfortably. “It’s not important anymore. What IS, Regina, is the fact that we have leverage over First Light. Something we can tell the public, and force an investigation.”

Emily sat up. “Why don’t we just tell them what you’ve got?” she asked. “We can bribe them. Tell your grandfather that if he gets this bitch to drop her custody suit, we’ll throw the papers in the
fireplace.”

Brooke fixed her with a look. “Because I didn’t risk my ass to get that proof, just to toss it away. We can use it to wreck them AND get the custody suit to go away, if I go on TV with Max.”

Regina squirmed, as she moved Aaron and reached inside the blanket to close her shirt. “I don’t know about this, Brooke. How do you even know Max will accept you help?”

The energy left Brooke, as she slumped over. “… I didn’t think about that. She’ll probably say ‘no’.”

“And there’s no way Miss Amber would let you anyway,” Regina added. “She’ll flip when she finds out what you’re trying to do.”

Emily sighed, as she leaned forward. “Fuck.”

“Okay.” Brooke inhaled deeply, sitting back upright. “Then I’ll force their hand.”

“What does THAT mean?”

“I’ll tell them to let me do the TV interview with them, or... I’ll put everything I’ve got online.” Brooke nodded. “I’ll send it to all the media outlets. MSN, CNN, NBC, and all the newspapers and web sites I can think of. Under my real name.”

“Which is cool, until Miss Amber calls Jane and has her take away your laptop,” Emily pointed out.

“... maybe we can grab her phone?”

“And Pete’s? And all the house phones?”

“Shit.” Brooke glanced between them. “I don’t know.”

After a few seconds, Regina heaved a sigh. “Aaron has an appointment with the pediatrician the day after tomorrow,” she said quietly. “We’ll be across town. If you can find an excuse to stay here, then she wouldn’t be able to do anything.”

Emily looked at her. “So... you’re good with this?”

“No. I still don’t want you to do this.” She glanced at Aaron. “But if it keeps him away from that woman... then I’ll beg God’s understanding if anything goes wrong.”

“Nothing’s going to happen, Regina.” Brooke glanced between her and Emily. “So we’re in agreement?”

They both nodded. “Fuck’em,” Emily stated. “Do what you have to do.”

“Okay, then.”

Two days later, Emily fidgeted nervously in the waiting from of the doctor’s office. “Are you okay?” Pete asked, a look of concern on his face.

“Yea.” Emily nodded. “I’m fine.”

“Something on your mind?”

She sighed. “The custody battle.”
Pete nodded. “That woman isn’t going to get Aaron,” he assured her. “Miss Amber and Regina’s lawyer will make sure of that.”

“I hope so.” She glanced at him. “You and Jane are really awesome, Pete.”

He smirked. “Are you trying to butter me up for something?”

“No.” Emily shook her head. “It just occurred to me that we’ve never told you that. You guys have been better parents than our real ones ever were, and it means a lot to us. Especially letting me stay after I turned eighteen.”

“Well, that’s a dumb rule anyway.” Pete shrugged. “But... you’re welcome.”

“I’m just...” she paused. “I’m really sorry for all the problems I’ve caused. Between skipping classes, my mental stuff, holding a knife on Brooke’s brother... we don’t really appreciate you and Jane enough.”

Pete tilted his head. “Is everything okay, Emily?”

She nodded, as she checked her watch.

The door to the exam room beside them flew open. They looked up as Jane appeared in front of them, a very distraught look on her face. “We have to go.”

Pete immediately stood. “Why?”

“We need to get to Brooke. Rachel says she’s threatening to put evidence of First Light’s crimes on Facebook under her own name.” She glanced behind her as Regina followed, holding Aaron. “She’s going to put herself in danger. We have to go take her laptop, right now.”

“We’re almost an hour away!” Pete sounded worried. “What does Rachel think we can do?”

“We’ve got to try.” Jane motioned distractedly. “Come on, girls, let’s go!”

The two of them followed Jane and Pete outside. But Emily quickly sped up, walking in front of Pete around the hood of their car. He frowned as she got to the driver’s door. “Emily, what are-”

The ratcheting sound distracted him. He looked at Emily’s hands as she finished securing a pair of handcuffs to her right wrist. Before he could stop her, she slapped the second half around the driver’s door handle, locking herself to the outside of the car.

“Emily!” he exclaimed, grabbing the handcuffs and trying to open them, to no avail. “What are you doing?!?”

“Buying Brooke time.” To her credit, she looked abashed as she met his gaze. “I’m sorry, Pete.”

“Dammit, Emily, where’s the key?!?”

She shrugged as Jane raced around the hood of the car, stopping as she saw Emily handcuffed to the door. “Oh, no.”

“Emily, you have to undo those cuffs,” Pete objected. “Brooke is in real danger here. This isn’t a game.”

“I know.” Emily bit her lip. “We don’t have any better ideas, though.”
Pete rubbed his forehead as Jane looked at Regina, who had stopped on the sidewalk. “Do you have the keys?” she asked.

Regina didn’t answer, as she sat down on the bench outside the doctor’s office.

“Regina!”

“Sorry, Jane,” she said softly.

“... shit,” Jane muttered; the first curse word they’d ever heard her use. “Pete, call the non-emergency number. See how quickly we can get an officer to come down and un-do those handcuffs.”

It took thirty minutes for a cop to get to their location. Jane and Pete tried during the entire time to persuade Emily to un-cuff herself, but they got nowhere.

After the cop arrived and finally unlocked the handcuffs, Pete and Jane told Emily and Regina that they were going back home, with or without them. The car ride was silent as Pete sped back as fast as he could.

They were successful, though. Miss Amber called them just before they got home, sounding very tired, explaining that they’d reached a compromise. Brooke was waiting for them on the couch. Emily and Regina joined her as Jane gave them some very choice words, clearly unhappy with the situation.

Miss Amber came to see them the next morning. The three girls were put back on the couch, as their social worker spoke to them while she sat on the coffee table.

“I do not appreciate what happened yesterday.” She had a very intense look on her face, as she focused on Brooke. “You got what you wanted. But you need to strongly consider backing out.”

Brooke folded her arms. “I won’t.”

“I know you don’t want to. But I want you to think about it. As you said, this decision will have consequences for you. You’ll probably be sued for slander, at the very least.”

“I remember.”

“And?”

“It’s not your problem, is it?”

Miss Amber narrowed her eyes. “If you’re going to try to come across as a mature teenager, Brooke, you need to sound like you’re taking these risks seriously.”

“I AM taking it seriously,” Brooke shot back. “But it’s my decision to make.”

Miss Amber’s face flushed, and they could tell she was angry. But she kept her voice neutral, as she replied. “And have you thought about the potential consequences of that decision? Or how they’ll affect others?”

“Miss Amber-”

“Regina.” Miss Amber turned to her. “We have put a lot of effort into hiding your location from First Light. But we can’t hide the fact that you’re a student at Blackwell. Principal Wells has invested heavily in the school’s security, but that might not stop people who are dedicated to finding you.
Henry’s visit to Brooke earlier this year confirmed for us that they know she lives in the same house as you, which means that you’re a trail for them to follow back to her, Emily, and Aaron.”

Regina bit her lip and didn’t say anything.

“If First Light finds out where you live? The BEST case, absolute cherry-picked outcome, is that we have to move all of you. And we can no longer place First Light teenagers here. Which will suck for the next kids who run away, because we don’t have a lot of secure foster homes to begin with.”

Miss Amber turned to Emily next. “Can I assume that you got those handcuffs from Tyler and Celia?”

Emily nodded.

“Are you aware that they stole them from their foster mother’s duty belt? That’s a department-issued, personally-accountable item. She had to pay for new ones herself.”

“... no.”

“I didn’t think so.” Miss Amber extended her hand. “Give them to me.”

Emily wordlessly drew the cuffs from her pocket, dropping them in the social worker’s hand.

“By the way, just because you return them doesn’t mean that she gets the money back that she spent to replace them. It doesn’t work like that.” Miss Amber stuck the cuffs in her purse. “I expect you, Tyler, and Celia to repay her.”

“Okay.”

“And you need to apologize to Jane and Pete.”

“I already did.”

“Well you’d better hope they accept it,” Miss Amber said. “You’re still living here because of their good will. I hope you’re aware that legally, they can give you thirty days to leave this house. How happy do you think they are with you right now, for cuffing yourself to the outside of their car?”

Emily didn’t reply, as she looked at her lap.

“And you.” Miss Amber turned back to Brooke. “Do you know how much trouble it would have saved our office, if you had given us that information the day I got you from school?”

Brooke shrugged. “I told you already—”

“Yes, you were saving it for a rainy day. If you had given it to us, there wouldn’t have BEEN a rainy day. The district attorney could have arrested your grandfather, and we might have avoided the issue entirely. Instead, you cost our office thousands of dollars that we had to pay Miss Weaver for your legal defense.”

“Would your dad have arrested my father?” Brooke countered. “Or my mom? Because I’m pretty sure they would have still tried to get me back regardless.”

“Whatever you gave us, he would have used to get a search warrant. And who knows what he would have uncovered. It might even have been enough to arrest Ryan Caulfield.” Miss Amber gave her a hard look. “Where is the paperwork you took?”
“In a safe place.”

The social worker leaned forward. “Brooke, this is not a game. I need to-”

“You’re right, it’s not. But it’s my ass on the line, not yours.” Brooke matched Miss Amber’s glare with one of her own. “I was the one who risked my life to get that evidence. Which means I decide who gets it. Not you, not Max, not Jane and Pete, nobody. And since Megan told me that she couldn’t be sure that I wouldn’t get sent back, I decided to hang onto it.”

“And now, here we are,” Miss Amber retorted. “You’ve put both of your friends in extremely precarious situations, solicited two other teenagers into committing theft, and placed the security of this foster home in jeopardy.” She paused. “The consequences of your actions are very real, and very serious, Brooke. You need to think about how what you’re doing affects the people you care about.”

“Like you did, when you asked Max to steal her father’s emails?”

Their social worker looked like she’d been punched. She slowly exhaled through her nose and looked at her lap, as her fingers gripped the edge of the coffee table tightly.

Brooke immediately regretted what she said. “... I’m sorry.”

“No.” Miss Amber glanced back at her. “You are one hundred percent right. I didn’t think for even a second, about what would happen to Max. And she paid for my arrogance by spending four years on the street, homeless, almost freezing to death, and not knowing where her next meal would come from. My stupidity almost got her killed.” She paused. “I want you to do better than me, Brooke. I want you to learn from my mistakes.”

“I know.” Brooke folded her arms. “These people tried to marry me away. They paid a head shrink to tell a judge that I’m a pathological liar. Pastor Thompson straight-up lied on the stand. And I’m one of the lucky ones.” She spared a quick glance at Regina and Emily before turning back. “This isn’t about me, or my revenge. This is about all the other kids in that church who are being forced into marriages against their will, or being abused.”

Miss Amber took another deep breath and exhaled slowly. “Like I said. You got what you wanted. My guess is that the piece will air after you turn eighteen, so you’ll be allowed to go on TV.” She stood. “I just hope you appreciate what your decisions cost people.”

Brooke frowned. “Where are you going?”

“You’ve made it very clear that you’re not going to hand over the information you took from your grandfather. And I have no way to compel you to do so. So now I have to go see the District Attorney and the Chief of Police, to try and convince them not to arrest you for withholding evidence of criminal activity.”

Emily’s eyes got wide. “They can’t do that.”

“They can, actually. Unlike MSN, they don’t care about Brooke’s age. But I’m your guardian ad litem, which means my job is to keep you safe. And right now, that means keeping you out of jail.” Miss Amber looked at Brooke. “Like I said, learn to appreciate what your decisions cost people.”

Brooke didn’t reply as their social worker left the house, closing the door behind her. After a couple of minutes, they heard her car start, and listened to her drive away.

“I’m sorry,” she muttered.
“Brooke-”

“She’s right.” Brooke sighed. “I didn’t think about what this would cost you guys before I did it. I should have.”

Emily leaned forward. “We all agreed that this was the best thing to do, Brooke.”

“Yea, but now they might try to find Regina. And Jane and Pete might kick you out.”

“We’re not.”

The three of them turned to see Pete standing behind them, with his arms folded. “You don’t have to worry about us asking you to leave,” he told Emily gently. “We meant what we said. We’re not going to put you on the street just because we don’t agree with your decision.”

Emily dropped her gaze back to her lap. “Thank you. And... I really am sorry.”

Pete pushed himself off the wall and walked over, taking a seat on the chair by the couch. “I’ve never told you girls what I used to do in the Army, did I?”

They all shook their heads.

“I was a Green Beret, assigned to the Fifth Special Forces Group.” He paused. “Our official area of responsibility was the middle east. I had been with the group for a few years before nine-eleven.”

They all looked at him in surprise. “Did you deploy?” Brooke asked.

“I did. My unit was one of the first on the ground in Afghanistan.”

“Like Twelve Strong?”

“Yes. Though we tried not to ride our horses straight into gunfire.” He smirked. “We acted as advisors to the rebels that were waging war against the Taliban. We got our hands dirty sometimes, but we mostly fought with our radios, calling in air strikes.”

“Cool,” Emily said in awe.

“Not really. Three of the guys I deployed with died before Christmas.”

Emily flinched, looking down again. “Sorry.”

“That’s okay. When you see it on TV and the big screen, it does look pretty cool.” He nodded. “We had a common enemy of religious fundamentalists, too. When we entered villages and towns after they were liberated, our interpreter would translate everyone’s horror stories for us. People had hands cut off for stealing food, women were beheaded for learning to read, little girls were stoned to death because they were raped...”

He pressed his lips together. “We were very highly motivated to put an end to the Taliban’s regime. Our commander used to refer to it as ‘taking out the trash’.”

“I don’t think our group of fundamentalists really holds a candle to those assholes,” Brooke said in a small voice.

“Maybe not. But the idea is the same.” Pete leaned forward. “I get where you girls are coming from. And that you have your own motivations. I won’t condone what you’re doing, Brooke, because I think you’re taking a huge risk. But... I get why you’re doing it.”
She slouched in her seat. “... thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. Especially to Jane.”

**Dad:** Are they properly chastised?

**Rachel:** I think so. They looked it, anyway, when I left.

**Dad:** Good. The information Brooke has is safe?

**Rachel:** She wouldn’t tell me where it is. I’m sure it’s in the house, though.

**Dad:** As long as she isn’t carrying it around, and telling the whole world what she has.

**Rachel:** I honestly thought you’d be more upset about this.

**Dad:** Don’t get me wrong, I would like what she has very badly.

**Rachel:** Then... ???

**Dad:** Things are in motion. I can’t say more than that. But her holding onto what she has may have been more beneficial in the long run.

**Dad:** You don’t have to tell her that, of course.

**Rachel:** I wasn’t. You’re not going to tell me what’s going on?

**Dad:** You’re not the only one who has to sign NDAs. You’ll find out soon enough, trust me.
Steph: Paternal Favor

December 2020. Between ch 83 & 84 of EtL.

“I still can’t believe it.”

Steph sighed, as she leaned onto her elbows. “I know. Me either. I feel really bad that I wasn’t there.”

“Oh, come on.” Through the Skype connection, Steph watched Rachel roll her eyes. “You wouldn’t have been able to stop it. Besides, Jake and Penny were there. Max and Chloe were fine.”

“They caught the guy anyway.” In the other window, Jake nodded reassuringly. “He’s going to jail for a few years. Max is safe and sound.”

“Still, I could have... fuck, I don’t know.” Steph shrugged. “Chloe lost her truck. I can be a little bummed that I wasn’t there to help.”

“Well, don’t let it eat you up.” Rachel rubbed her hands together. “I think that’s one of the reasons my dad wants us to push up Max’s timetable.”

“Max doesn’t know?”

“No. Mostly because I don’t even know if we can-” Rachel’s computer started beeping, and she glanced at the corner. “Finally.”

“She said she’d be late.”

“I know. Still.”

Rachel clicked her mouse, and a third window opened to Victoria’s face. “How’s Max?” she asked immediately.

“Max is fine. Chloe has some burns on her hands. And their truck is toast.” Steph smirked. “I think that hurts her worse than the burns.”

“Too bad. That truck should’ve been set on fire a long time ago.” Victoria leaned back and folded her arms. “What are they charging the arsonist with?”

“I have no idea. What would they charge him with?”

“If it was me? Aside from the arson, you’ve got stalking, harassment, property damage, assault, and maybe vandalism if they get creative.”

Jake smirked. “Chloe said the guy also head-butted a cop.”

“Ooh, even better. That’s another couple of years, even with a plea deal.” Victoria nodded. “So. Why am I here, exactly?”

Rachel cleared her throat. “Well. My dad told me this morning that law enforcement wants to speak to Max. BEFORE she goes on TV,” she added. “And Brooke, and Samantha. They want to sit down and ask some questions.”
“Why?” Jake asked.

“I couldn’t tell you. I’m not ‘need to know’.” Rachel shrugged. “Victoria, Brooke is still technically still a ward of the state. But she’s also eighteen, so the cops won’t let me sit in on the interview with her. Is there ANY possibility that talking to the police could go badly for them?”

“All?” Victoria nodded. “But not knowing anything about her situation, I couldn’t tell you for certain. Has she committed any crimes?”

Rachel pursed her lips. “Let’s say, for the sake of argument, that she might have.”

“Well, depending on the crime, she could get arrested. You would want to negotiate that any conversation needs to include immunity from prosecution.” Victoria tilted her head. “How serious would this hypothetical crime be?”

“Not bad enough for her to refuse to take the meeting.”

“Well, the safest bet is to get her a lawyer.”

“I can’t.” Rachel shook her head. “Our office won’t pay, not for something like this.”

Victoria inhaled slowly, then exhaled through her nose. “When is this meeting?”

“Thursday.”

“Okay.” She nodded. “I’ll do it.”

Rachel blinked. “You will?”

“I mean, sort of.” Victoria bit her lip. “I can’t practice law in Oregon. I can offer legal advice, though, which is better than nothing. And to be frank, I’m not super comfortable with Max talking to the police without a lawyer, either.”

“Why?” Jake piped up. “She didn’t break any laws.”

“Let’s be honest, Jake, if we really think we know everything she went through, we’re kidding ourselves. There’s a four-year gap in our relationship with her that we’ve got no insight on.” Victoria leaned forward. “And this Samantha, too, might appreciate having a lawyer on her side of the table.”

Rachel smirked. “You know she’s the girl you confronted before you found me in the library, right? In the girl’s bathroom?”

Victoria blinked. “... I did not.”

“Well, that won’t be awkward.” Jake shook his head. “But how are they going to get up there, Rachel? Chloe no longer has a car. And Penny and I both have plans we can’t break for that weekend.”

“I’ll drive them,” Steph said immediately. “My car still works.”

“You’ll have to stay the whole weekend,” Rachel reminded her. “Can you afford a hotel room?”

“For them, I’ll break out the credit card.”

“Uh... random thought.” Victoria paused. “Since the cops want to talk to her, are they willing to provide security? This is a pretty big thing Max is doing, and it’s not unlikely to put her in danger.”
Rachel sighed. “My dad discussed it with the police chief, but they don’t want to do it. Not when they still don’t know who the mole is.”

Jake frowned. “Mole? What mole?”

“There’s a cop feeding info to First Light,” Rachel answered. “They’ve been trying to figure out who it is for a while now, but they still don’t have a clue.”

“I thought the state police were involved,” Victoria countered. “They can’t talk to them?”

“They think that it’s a cop in Arcadia Bay, but they can’t be sure that the mole isn’t in the state police force instead. For Max’s safety, they don’t want to take that chance.” Rachel rubbed her face. “Look, I hate the thought of her being unprotected while she’s up here. And Brooke, and Samantha. But I’m not sure what else we can do about it.”

None of them spoke for several seconds. Finally, Steph sighed. “I have to go.”

“Why?” Rachel asked.

“I might be able to help keep Max safe.” Steph stood. “But I have to go to Santa Cruz. I really don’t want to find out what the limits of my father’s love for me are over the phone.”

Michael and Amanda listened quietly as Steph sat in their kitchen and spelled out Max’s situation. Including their past; asking for her father’s emails, searching for her, and finding her again. Neither of them spoke for several seconds when she was done.

“That’s a hell of a story,” Michael finally said.

“Yea.” Steph kept her gaze down as she fidgeted with her fingers. “Sorry I put a pin in the ‘good daughter’ image.”

“You made a mistake, Steph.” Amanda leaned forward. “We don’t think less of you. And I can’t imagine the guilt you carried before you found Max again.”

Steph shrugged. “I, uh... this is stupid.” She looked back up at Michael. “It’s a big thing that I’m asking. I know it is. But you were telling me about how you guys helped the Bikers Against Child Abuse, and rode with that kid to court, and...” she hesitated, then sighed. “I don’t know. I’m not really sure where else to turn.”

“When are you driving up to Portland?” Michael asked.

“This Wednesday. The police want to meet with Max and the others on Thursday, and the MSN interview is on Saturday.”

He checked his watch. “Kind of short notice. But let me make a call.”

She frowned as he pulled his cell phone out. “A... who are you calling?”

“The club president. I’m gonna ask him to move up our monthly meeting up to this Monday.”

“Wait, seriously? You can do that?”

“Steph, do you think there’s a chance in hell I’m letting you drive Max, a girl who has a huge target on her back, around without some protection?” He shook his head as he put the phone to his ear. “Not gonna happen.”
She went with him on Monday night.

Michael met her in the driveway as she parked. “I got you something,” he said, handing her a black beanie as she got out of her car. “I know it’s not your usual one, but I hope you like it.”

Steph took the beanie, turning it over in her hands to admire the Locos Lobos emblem; a white wolf with red eyes snarling ferociously. “This is pretty wicked,” she admitted, pulling her white beanie off and jamming the new one over her hair. “Are we leaving?”

“Yep.” He turned back to his bike, plucking a helmet from the seat and holding it out for her. “Here, put this on.”

She hesitated. “Why?”

“Because you have to wear a helmet on a bike.”

“Uh... I’ve never been on a motorcycle before.”

Michael smirked. “All you have to do it hold on. I’ll do the rest.”

She tried not to let her apprehension show as she buckled the helmet onto her head, and climbed onto the seat behind her father. “How far of a ride is it?”

“About twenty minutes.” Michael started the bike and revved the engine. The noise immediately made Steph tense up, and she wrapped her arms around him as tight as she could. “Ready?” he yelled over the noise.

She nodded.

The bike shot forward, and Steph’s hands tightened into a death grip as she watched the pavement fly underneath them. Her heart lurched up into her throat, as she realized that there was absolutely nothing between her and the quickly-moving asphalt. The hoodie and jeans she was wearing suddenly felt like tissue paper.

After a few minutes she lifted her head and peeked around her father. Nervous as she was, she had to admit that it was pretty cool, taking in a wider view of the scenery as they flew by. Steph started focusing on things that were further away from them, and found herself relaxing after a little bit. *Okay, this isn’t so bad. I can see why people get into this.*

Then a car flew past her, so quickly it looked like a blur, only a couple of feet away. She re-tightened her hug around Michael.

They arrived at the bar a little faster than Michael’s twenty minutes. Steph blinked in surprise as he killed the engine; she’d barely heard anything else for the ride, and without listening to the roar she almost felt deaf. “So?” he asked, as they got off the bike. “How was your first ride?”

“Not as bad as I thought it would be,” Steph admitted.

“That mean you’re going to buy one someday?”

Steph smirked. “That’s a little stereotypical, don’t you think?”

Michael laughed, as he set his helmet on the handlebars. Steph hung hers next to it, then followed him through the door.
About twenty other people loitered in the bar, almost perfectly split between men and women. All of the men wore leather vests like Michael, and all of them shouted out greetings as they walked in.

One of the guys who was almost as big as Michael came up to them first, and the two of them hugged tightly, slapping each other’s backs. “What up, big man?!”

“Good to see you, brother.” They separated, and Michael laid a hand on Steph’s shoulder. “Ricky, this is my kid, Steph. Steph, this Ricky, the club president.”

Steph smiled. “Nice to meet you.”

“Good to meet you!” Rick shook her hand vigorously. “And it’s about time Mikey brought you along. He won’t stop telling us all about you.”

She blushed furiously. “Really?”

“Oh, yea. It’s actually getting a little annoying.” He grinned. “Is it true you’re a better artist than him?”

“No,” she said quickly.

“Oh, bullshit!” Michael exclaimed, as he patted her shoulder. “The bad guy she designed is going to be in a PlayStation Five video game! Steph, show him that trailer!”

She groaned. “I don’t want to.”

“Which trailer?” A younger biker piped up from behind Rick.

“For Earth.”

The guy’s eyes went wide. “Wait, the High Patriarch? YOU designed him?”

“Drew him and everything!” Michael told him excitedly.

“That’s fucking awesome!” The guy grinned excitedly. “I was just telling my wife that it looks like a badass game. We both agreed that we’re gonna reserve the system to play it when it comes out!”

Steph smiled. “Really?”

“Oh, yea, totally!”

Rick rolled his eyes. “God, you’re such a nerd.”

“Dude, I’m a programmer.” He smirked. “Kinda comes with the territory.”

Michael made sure to introduce her to everyone, including all the wives and girlfriends. It was definitely not what she’d imagined, especially after seeing every episode of Sons of Anarchy; they were all very nice and polite, and she actually had an enjoyable time chatting with the others. There were even a few kids at their own table, eating snacks and playing a board game.

After a little bit, the club got down to business. The bikers, numbering about fifteen, all sat around a few tables in a row. The women stood around the outside of the meeting, observing and talking quietly; Steph took a seat at the bar, sipping her Jack and Coke as she watched the men talk for twenty minutes about club business, mostly regarding a charity ride they were planning in January.
“So,” Rick finally said. “The reason we’re meeting a week early.” He looked over at Michael. “You’ve got the floor, brother.”

“Well, I’ll jump right into it.” Michael cleared his throat as he stood. “I want to tell you guys about a girl named Max; she’s twenty-five, spent most of her teenage years homeless on the street because her parents beat the shit out of her for being gay, and now a religious cult wants to kill her.”

Wow. Steph couldn’t help but be taken aback at her father’s straightforward attitude. And she noted that every single person in the bar was watching him intently. Way to get everyone’s attention.

Michael quickly ran through what she’d told him, leaving out the part about Rachel and the emails. He summarized with the dead cat, the death threats, and Chloe’s truck getting burned to the ground. “These are bad, crazy motherfuckers,” he finally finished.

“Jesus Christ.” One of the bigger bikers leaned forward. “That’s some dark shit, brother. I didn’t think people like that actually existed.”

“I think it’s safe to say you got our attention, Mikey.” Rick nodded. “What does Max need?”

Michael gestured at Steph. “Since her girlfriend’s truck is a smoldering wreck, my daughter is planning on driving her north to Portland. And I’m sure you guys can imagine that I, as her father, am less than pleased with the idea of her being within a hundred miles of these psychos. So I’m going to ride up with her.” He paused. “It also occurred to me that it’s been a long time since we did a club ride up to see Vinnie and the Hounds, and that’s a tragedy unto itself.”

“That is a damn shame.” Rick smirked. “Vinnie knows how to throw a barbeque.”

“He does indeed.” Michael looked over the rest of the club. “I understand it’s short notice. And I know we all have commitments, and jobs, and families. But it would mean a lot to me, personally, if the club would sponsor a ride north.”

Rick pursed his lips for a few seconds, before turning to everyone else. “All in favor?”

Steph couldn’t believe how fast everyone’s hands shot up, as they made noises of agreement. And she couldn’t keep the smile from her face.

Steph: I got security for Max.

Rachel: Really?

Jake: Who?

Steph: My dad. And six of the other bike riders from his club. Would’ve been more, but it’s too short notice.

Victoria: Damn. Well, that’ll definitely do it.

Steph: There’s more. They talked to a friendly club in Portland called Hell Hounds. Their club president has agreed to provide security for Samantha and Brooke as well.

Rachel: Wait, seriously?

Steph: Yea. I’m supposed to give them your number, so they can arrange a meeting to hammer out details.
Jake: Well, that sounds pretty badass.

Rachel: I’m not sure how comfortable I am bringing a biker gang to see those two.

Steph: The Hounds are all former USMC. They also do work with B.A.C.A. I’m surprised that your office doesn’t already know about them.

Rachel: Hmm. BRB.

Victoria: What about Chloe? Did you get her off work, Jake?

Jake: I did, from Wednesday to Sunday.

Steph: Really? How?

Jake: Her company does all of our IT work, so we pay them a shitload of money. Her boss was amicable to granting a simple favor.

Jake: You ready to head to Portland, Victoria? I know it’s a longer drive for you than anyone else.

Victoria: Ugh. No. I hate road trips. But Kate’s coming with me, so I won’t have to drive the whole way.

Steph: You know you can still come, Jake.

Jake: Chloe’s not the only one who lost her truck last week, remember?

Steph: Right. Forgot. Sorry.

Jake: You girls don’t need me anyway. You’ve got things handled.

Jake: But let me know if you need help, alright? I know a couple of people in Oregon. Nobody really influential, but still.

Steph: I’ll keep your number handy. Much appreciated.

Rachel: Back. So, I asked my boss about these guys. She does know them, mostly through their President.

Victoria: So they’re legit?

Rachel: Legit-ish. Officially, our office doesn’t have a relationship with them; they apparently present something of a liability issue.

Steph: Really?

Rachel: According to her. And let’s face it, would you say for 100% that these guys wouldn’t haul off and beat the shit out of someone who might have molested a kid?

Victoria: I wouldn’t even say that about Kate.

Steph: Does that mean you’re not going to use them?

Rachel: I didn’t say that. Like I said, we have no official relationship with them.
Rachel: BUT. If a few were to roll with me, on the condition that they go nowhere near Brooke’s foster house? So long as they don’t cause problems, Stacy won’t ask questions.

Steph: So... have we ironed out all the details?

Victoria: All I can think of that’s left is to start packing.

Rachel: When will you leave?

Victoria: Tonight, I think, right after dinner. I’ll probably have to do some work while I’m up there, but I can do it from my laptop. We’ll get a hotel in San Francisco for the night.

Steph: Are Brooke and Samantha ready?

Rachel: Samantha should be. Knowing Brooke, she’s probably already packed.

Jake: So are we ready to let Max and Chloe know that we’ve meddled?

Rachel: Let me call the Hell Hounds first. Then yea, we’ll let them know.
Figure out what people will pay for, then provide it.

One of the core concepts of business. Find a profitable market and work your way into it. Or, if the market didn’t exist, become an entrepreneur and make one.

The market that the man worked in was certainly niche. And incredibly exclusive; there were only a few people who could do what he did. But he had worked hard, making contacts, earning the trust of others, doing good work... and as a result, he’d become something of a legend in his small industry.

And there weren’t more than fifty or sixty people who even knew he existed.

If asked, he just replied that he was a managerial consultant. A boring enough job, difficult to disprove, and good enough reason for him to meet with some of the world’s most powerful and influential men and women.

All of his clients were billionaires. For a simple meeting, he charged fifty thousand dollars. And for the services he provided, they were happy to pay it.

As far as what, specifically, he did for his customers? “Well,” he would say, “it varies from client to client, and I’m afraid my services are confidential. But I always do what they need, and they’re seldom disappointed.”

It was rare, though, that he met new clients. After twenty years of experience, he’d cornered a market very effectively with the families that always seemed to need his services. But the woman in question had asked for a recommendation, and one of his clients had given her his phone number.

He didn’t turn down meetings. No matter the risk.

The man stood, waiting, in the rain on the corner outside of the deli. He held an umbrella with one hand as he sipped his coffee with the other, savoring the taste. He’d found that each city had its own coffee taste, and had sampled some of the finest in the world, from Brazil to Vietnam. Los Angeles had... decent coffee. Not the best. But good enough.

Not that it mattered. He’d be on a plane in a few hours anyway.

A black Porsche pulled up to the curb right on time. He closed his umbrella quickly, opening the passenger door and sliding inside.

“Good afternoon, Miss Chase.”

“Nice to meet you.” The blonde woman began driving again, her eyes giving away her apprehension.

New clients were always nervous. No doubt she’d heard some of the things he’d done for his other customers. Very well, he’d be the proactive one. “Did Mister Prescott tell you my initial fee?” he asked.
“Yea, Nathan told me.” She nodded. “It’s in the glove box.”

He opened it, withdrawing the envelope inside and squeezing it gently, checking it’s width. “Very good,” he allowed, slipping it into his coat pocket. “Thank you.”

“You’re not going to count it?”

“I trust you.” He looked at the center console. “May I turn on the radio?”

“Sure. Um... where should I drive?”

He hummed, as he turned the radio on and raised the volume; while he doubted that Victoria was recording him, he wasn’t going to take the chance. “Wherever you like. But I would prefer if you headed in the direction of the airport.”

“Okay.” She hit the turn signal and changed lanes. “Nathan said you were discreet. Nobody will know that I talked to you. Is he right?”

The man nodded. “I have the utmost respect for people’s privacy,” he assured her. “I assume you don’t want your father to find out you’ve been speaking to me?”

“Not really, no.” She paused. “I don’t want my wife to find out, either.”

“I can promise you that neither of them will know of our conversation.” He leaned back in his seat. “Now. What is it that you need, Miss Chase?”

She bit her lip, her nervousness on her face. “It’s... my wife’s mother.” She glanced back at him. “Nathan said you did research into everyone you meet with, too. I’m guessing you know what happened?”

“I do.” He nodded. “Terrible business. I’m glad your wife is okay.”

“Me too.”

He tilted his head. “I must tell you, Miss Chase, that if you want me to make your problem disappear, I can’t.”

She blinked. “Disappear?”

“Your mother-in-law is currently awaiting a transfer to the Central California Women’s Facility,” he explained. “I cannot make her disappear while she is in the prison system. So I’m afraid that if you-”

“No.” She shook her head. “I don’t want that bitch dead. I want her alive.”

The man processed that for a few seconds. “I’m afraid that I don’t know what you mean, Miss Chase.”

“That bitch is going to be in jail for the rest of her life.” Anger lit at her eyes, as she looked at him. “I want her to suffer for every last day of her existence. I don’t want her to make friends, or ever be eligible for parole. I want every single prisoner and guard to hate her, and I want to make sure that bitch knows it.”

“Mm.” The man nodded, thinking. “That is something I can do. But it will be costly,” he added. “I’ll have to pay quite a few people, over a long period of time.”

“How much?”
“Initially?” he considered. “One hundred thousand. And I may come back for more.”

She glanced at him. “And it’ll happen? Nathan said you were the best.”

“Mister Prescott isn’t wrong.” He smiled. “I’m afraid for something like this, it will be difficult to get you proof of service. But you have my utmost guarantee that it will be done.”

“And it can’t be traced back to me?”

“It cannot.”

She slowly inhaled, then exhaled. “How do I pay you?”

He produced a business card, placing it in the vehicle’s cup holder. “My banking information is on there. Once I receive confirmation that the funds have been wired, I’ll begin working.”

“Okay.” She nodded. “You’ll have your money by tomorrow.”

“Very good.” He looked out the window. “You can drop me off along here.”

She pulled the car over, stopping. “Can I ask one more question?”

“Certainly.”

“Say someone beats the shit out of that bitch in prison. And she has to go to the infirmary. They take pictures of her injuries, right?”

“I believe so, as part of their incident report.” He paused. “That will cost an extra twenty thousand, I’m afraid. The perpetrators will likely face punishment for the assault, and I have to make it worth people’s while.”

The woman nodded. “The harder they hit, the better,” she said quietly. “And I want those photos.”

“You’ll have them.”

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She never spoke of the meeting to anyone. If her father realized that almost two hundred thousand dollars went missing from a discretionary account, he didn’t mention it.

But he was scary with what he knew sometimes.

About five weeks later, an email from an anonymous account found its way to her inbox. The subject was simply “Services Rendered”, and it contained three photos.

She smiled maliciously, as she examined them. Kate’s mother had been beaten pretty badly; her black eye was a deep purple, and forced the eye closed. There were stitches on her face, as well as several smaller cuts, and one side of her jaw was swollen; it looked like she’d lost a tooth.

*Checkmate, bitch.* She flipped through the pictures on her phone. *I win, and you fucking lose. How’s that for karma?*

“Vicky?”

She glanced up, quickly closing out the email app as her wife approached. “Hey, babe.”
Kate smiled back. “Something funny?”

“One of my friends put something dumb on Facebook.” She pocketed her phone. “You ready to go? We’re supposed to be meeting Steph and the bikers in a few minutes.”

“I’m ready.” She shouldered her duffle bag. “Gonna be a long ride.”

“Yea.” Victoria paused. “How do you feel?”

Kate slowly placed her hand over her stomach. “Good,” she said quietly. “Trying not to think about it. Don’t want to jinx it.”

“Hey, you know it’ll work.” Victoria wrapped her arms around her wife’s neck. “It’s going to happen, Kate. Whatever it takes.”

“Some long again?”

“Just a few days.” Sam dropped some more clothes into her suitcase, before going back to her closet. “I’ll be back on Sunday.”

“When on Sunday?” Charles asked, as he reclined on her bed. “Only asking because Mitch invited us to see the game at his place.”

“Late morning, maybe early afternoon.” She came back out with more clothes, throwing him a smirk. “It’s not like I’ll be out of the country. I’ll literally be right outside of town. I mean, we’ll probably be going into the city a couple of times.”

Charles hummed. “Sounds like a boring girl’s weekend. Especially if Claire’s not going.”

“I have friends outside of the club, Charles.”

“When do I get to meet them?”

“Maybe later. But not this weekend.” She stepped back. “There. I’m finished.”

Charles scoffed. “No you’re not.”

“Yes I am!”

“Where’s your toothbrush again?”

She paused. “I may have forgotten something.”

He laughed as she retrieved her toiletry bag, re-opening it and jamming the toothbrush inside. “Someone’s excited to get away.”

“Excuse me.” Sam smiled. “I will have you know that I’ll miss you the entire time that I’m gone.”

“Oh yea?” Charles spun, planting his feet on the floor. He reached out with one hand and wrapped it around her waist, and Sam fell with a shriek into his lap. “How much will you miss me?”

“A lot less now!” Sam laughed, as she tried to escape his grip. “Charles! Come on!”

“Maybe I don’t want you to go,” he growled softly. “Maybe I decided that we have a weekend to ourselves where we don’t leave your bedroom.”
Her phone buzzed from her pocket, and she had to struggle to grab it. “It’s Rachel,” she said, still squirming as she read the text. “She’s outside, waiting for me.”

“Maybe she can wait ten minutes.”

“She really can’t, we’re picking up someone else.” Sam wiggled. “Come on, Charles, I have to go.” He pouted, but eventually he released her. “You’re no fun.”

“I’m LOTS of fun.” She grinned. “Just not right now. You going to take a nap before work?”

“Might as well.” He checked his watch. “Yea, still a few hours before it’s time to go in. I’ll make sure I lock up.”

“Okay.” She quickly bent over, planting a kiss on his lips as she grabbed her bag. “I gotta go. I’ll see you on Sunday!”

He said his goodbye as she closed the door, hurrying downstairs. Rachel was waiting in her car as she walked outside. She quickly dumped her bag in the trunk before climbing into the passenger seat. “Took you a minute,” Rachel observed.

“Sorry. I was using the bathroom.” Sam looked around as she buckled in. “Where’s Brooke?”

“We still have to go get her.” Rachel shifted, pulling away from the curb. “We gotta meet some people on the way, though. Might take an hour or so.”

“Cool.”

Sam glanced back at her apartment in the rearview mirror, a wave of guilt washing over her. Her and Charles had been together for almost six months, and she still hadn’t told him anything about her past life. All she’d said was that she’d been through the foster system; he’d never pressed for details. She wasn’t sure if he’d even heard of First Light of Christ.

She was going to have to tell him. She knew that. Especially since, if the weekend went according to plan, she’d be on national television before long. But every time she’d tried to approach the topic she’d gotten cold feet.

Let’s just get through the weekend. She turned back to the front of the car. Four days. I’ll see him in four days. What’s the worst that could happen in four days?

“I still don’t think this is a good idea.”

Brooke nodded, glancing at Jane as the two of them sat on a bench in the park. “I know.”

“I mean it, Brooke.” Jane fidgeted nervously. “You know I’ll support you either way. And I know how badly you want to help Regina. But her custody hearing starts tomorrow, and you might be too late to do anything.”

“I’ll take that chance.” Brooke squeezed the fabric of her backpack, trying to hide her nervousness. “Trust me, Jane, I’m aware of the danger. Max and Miss Amber have made it very clear.”

“But you’re still going to do this.” Jane phrased it like a statement, not a question.

Brooke glanced at feet. “Wouldn’t you?”
“I...” Jane sighed. “Maybe. You know I want to help Regina, too. But my hands are tied.”

“I know. Mine aren’t.” Brooke shrugged. “I really do appreciate everything you’ve done for us, Jane. And Pete, too. I know we haven’t been the easiest kids to look after.”

“Oh, we’ll never make that claim.” Jane smiled. “Has Emily gotten the apartment furnished yet?”

“She has the mattresses. And a folding table and chairs.” Brooke nodded. “Once I’m there, bringing in more money, we’ll get everything else. By the time Regina and Aaron arrive, the apartment will be fully furnished.”

“Good.” Jane hesitated. “I know Miss Amber says Aaron won’t have to go with that woman. And I hope she’s right. But Brooke... I think you should consider the possi-”

“No,” Brooke interrupted. “Aaron is staying with Regina. I believe that.”

“... okay.”

A dull roar sounded in the distance. The two of them looked up just in time to see a pair of motorcycles fly around the corner. Right behind them was Miss Amber’s car, an unfamiliar brunette in the passenger seat; Samantha, she supposed. “I think my ride is here.”

“Uh huh.” Jane’s eyebrows had shot up, as the bikers pulled in front of them. “That’s... my lord, that is some escort.” She frowned. “What are Hell Hounds?”

“Miss Amber says they’re all former Marines with drinking problems.”

“Oh, my.”

“Yes.” Brooke stood as Miss Amber parked on the street. “I’ll see you in a few days, Jane. Please just... keep an eye on Regina for me.”

Jane nodded, her eyes still stuck on the bikers. “Will do.”

Brooke left, jumping in the back seat of Miss Amber’s car. They drove off before she could even finish buckling her seat belt. “You good?” the social worker asked.

“Yea.” She nodded.

“You’ve got the evidence?” Miss Amber pressed. “Some important people will want to see it.”

“It’s in my backpack.” Brooke laid a hand on it, gripping the strap tightly. “I’ll hand it over, I promise.”

“Good.” Miss Amber gestured to the passenger seat. “Brooke, this is Samantha.”

The brunette smiled. “Nice to meet you.”

“You too.”

“You ready for this?”

“Very.”

“It could be very dangerous.”
“I don’t care.”

“I’m not kidding, Miss Watson. You’d have to sign the mother of all liability waivers before we’d even consider it.”

“Got a pen I can borrow?”

Agent Graham leaned back in his chair, a tired look on his face. Juliet felt guilty, for a brief moment; she knew the FBI agent had been working almost around the clock on the RICO case. Though once Max and the others showed up, she imagined that his job would be a little easier. “Eagerness aside, Miss Watson, I would really like to know that you’re taking this seriously.”

“I got dragged into a deposition by Ryan Caulfield because of this,” she retorted. “I’ve reported on gang violence and corruption before. I spent six days in the hospital when a pimp assaulted me for chasing down a story about a state congressman. Trust me when I tell you that I’m taking this very seriously. And I don’t need you to worry about me; I have an editor for that.”

“How’s that?”

“Somehow, I doubt your editor worries about you getting killed in a shootout.”

She smirked. “You’d be surprised.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Graham stroked his chin. “Danger aside, Miss Watson, there are serious legal matters we need to take into account. There’s a potential to taint future jurors, compromising evidence, inadvertent leaking of confidential information...”

“I will submit to whatever restrictions you guys want.” She glanced between him and the man next to him, the federal prosecutor who looked just as tired as he did. “My paper has gone on ride-alongs before. It’s common practice to have you guys filter all the pictures I take, and you’ll get the first look at what I write.”

Otto Jones leaned forward. “And if you decide to write something that compromises a case?” he asked. “It’s a great risk for us, with very little return.”

“I don’t like these cocksuckers any more than you do,” Juliet countered. “I’ll give you final say for my article. And MSN is already doing an in-depth piece about First Light. I fail to see how my presence could make anything worse.” She folded her arms. “Besides, you guys are forgetting something.”

“What’s that?”

“If it wasn’t for me, nobody would even be here.”

Graham chewed on the inside of his cheek. “I will concede that point. But that doesn’t mean that the FBI owes you anything.”

“Then consider it a professional courtesy.” She gave him an exasperated look. “I will acknowledge that you don’t really have a reason to let me come along. But if it wasn’t for the the media, you guys wouldn’t have shit to go on. I was the one who got Max to connect with the others, I’ve spent weeks with MSN to prepare for the interviews, AND I was the one who convinced them that it would be beneficial to allow you to sit in while they film. A little quid-pro-quo is not uncalled for on your end.” She paused. “Especially if you still want to be there while they’re filming.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Is that a threat?”

“No. That’s a reminder that our cooperation is part of the reason your case against the church is
about to break.” Juliet folded her arms. “And cooperation cuts both ways.”

Graham pursed his lips, turning slowly to Jones as the three of them sat in the conference room of the state police headquarters in Portland. Juliet got the feeling they were both starting to regret letting her into the building.

Jones looked back at her after several seconds. “We get to see what you’re going to write before it gets published?”

“As long as you’re willing to stay up late. Deadline’s at midnight.”

“And we get veto privileges?”

“Within reason, yes.”

“When you say ‘within reason’...”

Juliet rolled her eyes. “Try to at least REMEMBER that we’ve got the First Amendment, and we’ll all be happy.”

Jones looked at Graham. “I can live with that.”

Graham looked back at her. “When we ride, you stay in the car, until someone comes and gets you,” he told her. “Any pictures you take are cleared by me before your paper prints them. And I’m the only one you’ll be allowed to ask questions to; you’re not to speak with any other officers. Understood?”

Juliet nodded. “Perfectly.”

“... fine.” Graham nodded as he checked his notebook. “You’re going to have to be here at three in the morning, Miss Watson. We’re planning to gear up and leave no later than four.”

“I’ll bring coffee.”

I don’t like this.

Chloe took deep breaths, in and out, as she gripped the edges of the bathroom sink. And tried to act like she wasn’t worried out of her mind, as water ran from the faucet under her.

There’s something wrong with this trip.

I don’t know what, though.

God damn it. Should’ve said no, back then. She sighed deeply. Should’ve asked Max not to do this. Had to go and be the goddamn supportive fiancée.

And now we’re going to Oregon to sell these zealots down the river.

Not in my truck, of course. Her gut twisted at the reminder of her loss. Of everything they had to torch. And Dad’s fucking lighter, just to rub salt in the wound.

Her fingers tingled again, under the bandages. They’d healed well, though she still kept them covered at Walt’s suggestion. She ignored it, tightening her fist as she let out a slow breath.

Stop it. This isn’t helping. You’re just getting yourself worked up.
Okay. She stood back upright. Steph said security’s been handled. We’ll only be up there for a few days. And we’ll be hours away from Arcadia Bay. Those fuckers might not even know we’re up there until after the story airs.

And then Max gets sued.

... stop it. Chloe closed her eyes. Everything will be okay. She will be just fine. I’ll be there to protect her. And Steph, and Rachel, and Vic. The four of us can handle whatever those fucks decide to throw at her.

And hey, maybe you’ll see her father. She let a smirk play over her face. “I’m sorry, babe, but he was just begging to be stabbed in the gut. I let him bleed out, slowly and painfully, to pay back those four years of homelessness.” How’s that for a wedding present?

Okay, little grim. Better reel it back in.

“Chloe?”

Crap. She checked her watch; it was almost time. “Coming!” she called as she turned the water off and grabbed her toothbrush.

Max was standing by the door with her duffle bag as Chloe walked out, dropping the toothbrush in her toiletry bag. “You okay, babe?”

Chloe nodded as she closed her bag. “Sorry. Are you ready?”

“I’ve been ready.” Max tilted her head. “You sure you’re okay?”

“I...” Chloe hesitated, as she looked up. “Yea. I’m just... you know, it’s finally here. And happening.”

Max bit her lip. “Are you worried?”

“Of course I am.” Chloe stood back upright. “But that’s not going to end, babe. Regardless of what we do this weekend.”

“Um.” Max looked at her feet. “... do you want me to back out?”

“What?”

“I can tell when you’re nervous, Chloe.” Max tucked her hair behind her ears as she glanced back up. “And I know you don’t want me to do this. If you really want me to back out...” she let the sentence hang.

Say yes say yes SAY YES ALREADY.

Chloe took a deep breath. “No.”

“Are you-”

“What I want doesn’t matter.” Chloe walked over and grabbed Max’s shoulders. “I know what this means to you. And what it would mean for you to call it off, especially so close. You’re not gonna do it just because I’m nervous.”

Max looked very apprehensive. “You’re sure?”
Chloe kissed her fiancée’s forehead. “Hundred percent.”

“... okay.” Max looked at the clock on the wall. “Steph will be here in ten minutes.”

“Let’s go wait in the lobby then.” Chloe walked back to the bed and grabbed her duffle bag. “Come on, the elevator’s always slow in the mornings.”

They walked out of the apartment, Chloe moving to close the door behind them. She was pulling her keys out to lock it when she hesitated. “Aw, shit.”

“What?”

“Hang on.” Chloe re-opened the door, disappearing back inside. She returned several seconds later, re-zipping her duffle bag. “Sorry.”

Max smirked. “What’d you forget?”

“My laptop.” Chloe closed the door and locked it. “Definitely don’t want to leave that behind.”
Brooke tried to keep what Max said in mind as she sat in the passenger seat of the car, bouncing her foot up and down on the floor. She wasn’t quite sure what to expect; Max had never elaborated on what was going to happen.

*You don’t have to worry about Aaron, or Regina. They’re going to be fine.*

She exhaled slowly. *Should’ve asked what she meant by that,* she thought idly. *I can’t stand not knowing what’s going on.*

When she’d returned from Portland, Emily and Regina looked like they’d been told the world was ending. Which, for Regina, she supposed it seemed like it was. Her friend had barely put Aaron down, except to change him and let him sleep, desperate to soak up all the time with him that she could.

She’d told them what Max had said. Unfortunately, when pressed for details, she had none to give. All she could say was that Max had told them to trust her.

Shockingly, neither of them was ready to grab hold of that level of hope.

There’d been no surprise phone calls. Or emails. Nothing had happened to make them believe that anything different was going to occur that Wednesday. As Emily turned the car into the parking lot at the police station, none of them had a lot of reason to suspect that the woman they’d taken to calling ‘Cuntface’ wouldn’t show up.

Emily found a spot that was in view of the station entrance and backed into it. “We’re here,” she muttered quietly.

Brooke glanced in the backseat. “Are you okay?”

Regina didn’t make any indication that she heard her, as she looked at Aaron. The baby was asleep in his rear-facing car seat, her hand resting on him. After a few seconds, she unbuckled him, carefully taking him into her arms. “What time is it?” she asked, as she cradled her son.

“Eleven fifty-four,” Emily answered, as she fiddled with the heat.

Brooke scanned the parking lot. “What kind of car does Cuntface drive?”

“A red SUV,” Regina replied morosely. “Is she here?”

“No.”

“We’re early,” Emily pointed out, as she glanced at her watch. “Eleven fifty-five.”
Regina sniffled, rubbing her nose. “I... Brooke, are you sure Max didn’t say anything else?”

Brooke shook her head. “She just said to trust her,” she replied quietly. “She just said that you two would be fine. And that everything would be okay.”

“... okay.” Regina sniffled again, as she rocked Aaron. “I, uh... I want to. But... I don’t know.”

Emily exhaled slowly, checking her watch again. “For a woman so eager to take custody, she’s not exactly punctual,” she offered hopefully. “I figured she’d have been here waiting for us. So... there’s that.”

“I trust Max.” Brooke glanced between the two of them. “I know you two don’t have any reason to. But I have to trust her, that you guys will be okay.”

Regina didn’t reply, as she kept her eyes on Aaron. Brooke turned back to the front of the car, keeping her eyes on the road with Emily as they scanned traffic. The road wasn’t a very busy one, but there were a few cars driving back and forth. They waited silently, the tension in the car thick enough to cut with a knife.

When the alarm on Emily’s phone went off, they all jumped in their seats. “Noon,” Emily said, as she silenced it. “She’s supposed to be here by now.”

“Maybe she’s just running late,” Regina muttered.

“Maybe.”

The car fell silent again, as they watched the road. After a couple of minutes, a vehicle turned into the lot, and they all tensed up as a green sedan parked across from them.

A man got out. They all sighed, as he ignored them and walked towards the police station.

“Are you sure about the car?” Brooke asked.

Regina shrugged. “I haven’t seen her in over a year,” she reminded them. “But as far as I know, she drives a red SUV.”

“Okay.” Brooke nodded, keeping her eyes on the road.

They all lost track of time, as the observed the ebb and flow of traffic. Twice more, cars pulled into the lot, and they tensed up both times. It was the same result; the drivers got out and walked into the police station, ignoring them.

A glimmer of hope sprouted in Brooke’s head. Please, God, let Max have been right.

Three hours prior...

“Where did you get this?”

“That doesn’t matter. You’re missing the important point, which is that I have it at all.”

“You can’t use that. It’s not admissible in court.”

“It’s admissibility in criminal proceedings might be debatable. But it would be VERY admissible in
civil proceedings. Over three hundred families have been defrauded by your so-called church; I imagine that they’d be rather angry, if they knew that your husband accepted some of that cash.”

“That falls on my husband, not me.”

“You’re living in a house that was paid for by fraudulently-obtained funds, Miss McCalmon. I would say that the only reason you’re still here is that the authorities haven’t thought to look.”

“I had nothing to do with any of that.”

“It will take a very impressive lawyer to explain that. Not to mention an expensive one. And they will fail, because the fact of the matter is that you’re benefitting from your husband’s crimes. Those poor parishioners will be very angry when they find out.”

“A lawyer will be expensive for them, too. None of those peasants can afford legal services.”

“Neither can you, Miss McCalmon. And if you don’t do what I say, we’ll be paying their bills for them. It won’t cost them a dime, and you’ll lose everything.”

“I don’t care. That is MY grandson, and I’m not going to... what is that?”

“Before you finish that sentence, you should open this envelope, too.”

“... that’s not me.”

“Keep going. The investigator took some very high-resolution pictures of your face. And Mister Montenegro’s, as well.”

“How did you-”

“Again, you’re asking irrelevant questions. I have them, and that is what you need to worry about. What will happen when those pictures make their way into his wife’s hands, do you think? Do you suppose Elder Xavier’s daughter won’t go straight to her father, when she finds out that you’re sleeping her husband?”

“I still don’t care. You will not keep my grandbaby from me. That little apostate bitch is not going to keep him and sink her filthy ideas about my husband and son into his head.”

“You drive a hard bargain, Miss McCalmon. I honestly didn’t think I would need the third envelope.”

“... what the hell is this?”

“A picture of the shiv that they’ll find in your husband’s neck this weekend.”

“He’s in jail! You can’t-”

“Finding a prisoner willing to kill a convicted child rapist won’t be difficult. And the warden finding the bloody shiv in your son’s bed is a simple matter of money changing hands, as is the guard who will testify to the intense argument they had preceding the assault.”

“...”

“Your son is currently scheduled to be released in six years. When they find the shiv, he’ll be sentenced to prison for the rest of his life. And I’ll be making sure that he spends a fair amount of it rotting in solitary, alone in an eight-by-eight metal box. Even if, by some miracle, he does make
parole? You won’t recognize the man that comes out.”

“You can’t do this.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time. Your family’s lives or your grandchild, Miss McCalmon; make your choice.”

After forty-five minutes and six more cars, there was still no sign of her.

Emily decided to be proactive, and check the inside of the police station. She returned after about ten minutes. “She’s not inside,” she reported as she slid back into the driver’s seat, blowing into her hands for warmth. “Just a few cops and a couple of people making statements.”

“It’s been about an hour now.” Regina looked at Brooke, her expression anxious. “What do we do? Do we call Max?”

“I... I’m not sure,” Brooke admitted. “Max didn’t say what would happen. I don’t know what to do.”


Regina nodded and retrieved her phone from her coat, dialing her lawyer. “Mister Wolchowski?” she asked in a small voice. “I, uh, I’m here. At the police station. And... that woman is not.”

She listened carefully.

“No. We were a few minutes early. We’ve been waiting for an hour now, and she’s still not here.”

She listened some more.

“Okay... um, how long should we...” she trailed off as the lawyer spoke into her ear. “Right. Yea, okay,” she sighed. “Thank you.”

“What did he say?” Brooke asked, as Regina hung up.

“He said he’d call her lawyer, to figure out where she was.” She seemed to deflate, as she clutched Aaron tighter. “And he said we shouldn’t leave yet. The judge told us that we had to be here, and if he finds out that we left without handing Aaron over, we might get in trouble.”

“Great,” Emily muttered. “We should’ve just left. Now he’s going to call Cuntface and remind her that we exist.”

Brooke shot her a glance. “Something tells me that she didn’t exactly forget.”

“I don’t-”

“Max said to trust her.” Brooke turned back to the front of the car. “She said we’d be okay. We’re going to be okay.”

“... I hope so.”

They fell silent again. No more cars came into the lot, as they alternated between watching traffic and tracking the time on their phones.

Ten minutes passed.
Then twenty.

Brooke was getting ready to ask Regina to call the lawyer back when a ringtone cut through the silence, almost half an hour later. Her and Emily both watched Regina answer the phone with anxious expressions.

“You’re sure I should be here?”

Jane nodded, as she looked over her shoulder at her husband. “You know how upset they’re going to be. They’ll need both of us when they get back.”

“... yea.” Pete lifted the glass of bourbon, taking a healthy swallow. “Christ, this is bad business.”

“Agreed. But there’s nothing we can do about it.” Jane turned back to the stove, as she absently stirred their lunch. “I’m probably making too much of this. They’re probably not going to be very hungry.”

“They will be, eventually.” Pete finished his bourbon and dropped the empty glass in the sink. “Has Rachel called?”

“No. She said she’s been busy with something, probably whatever Brooke did last weekend.” Jane turned the stove off, moving the pan to a cold burner. “Did you ever find out what Brooke had?”

“She never told me. I suspect we’ll find out this weekend, though.” Pete glanced back out the window, then pushed himself back upright. “They’re back.”

Jane looked and saw the car pull into the driveway. “I wonder what took so long,” she said quietly. “I didn’t think it would take more than... oh.” Her breath hitched. “Oh. Oh, my God.”

“What?” Pete stood back up. “What is it?”

His wife didn’t answer as she made her way towards the door, throwing it open as they all came in. Including Aaron, now awake in Regina’s arms as tears rolled down her face. The teenager’s breathing was hitching as door closed behind her.

“What happened?!” Jane exclaimed. “Regina, why do you still have Aaron?! You were supposed to give him-”

“She signed away her rights!”

Regina snorted deeply, as she rubbed her nose. “We called Wolchowski when that woman didn’t show up for the first hour,” Emily picked up, her smile about to break her face. “He called us back, and said that her lawyer had gotten paperwork to file, basically saying that she was terminating any rights she had to Aaron!”

“And giving up her custody,” Brooke added. “He’s never going to see her.”


“It was Max.” Regina sniffled as she wiped her eyes. “Oh my God. I don’t know what she did, but she saved him. I’ll owe her forever.” She glanced to the side. “And you, Brooke.”
Brooke squirmed. “I didn’t do much.”

“You did enough.” Regina took a big step and threw her free arm around Brooke’s shoulders. “Thank you. Oh my God, thank you.”

Rachel: She wasn’t lying.

Rachel: Wolchowski just sent me a copy of the paperwork Mrs. McCalmon signed.

Jane: And it’s legit?

Rachel: It is. I had my father confirm it with the judge. Regina doesn’t have to give up Aaron.

Jane: Oh, thank God.

Jane: Not that I didn’t believe them. I just don’t want these kids to get in trouble.

Rachel: I understand. Are they doing okay?

Jane: They’re great. All sitting on the couch, talking about the apartment and how they’ll move stuff over.

Rachel: Has Brooke decided on a move-out date? I need to know for our paperwork.

Jane: It doesn’t sound like it. I know she’s still packing.

Jane: I think she wants to be out by the weekend, though. Probably Friday or Saturday is my guess.

Rachel: Gonna bring it down to the wire, huh?

Jane: I think it’s more about having a bedroom to herself again.

Rachel: I thought they had a two-bedroom. And Regina isn’t moving out until she finishes school anyway.

Jane: They can only afford one mattress at the moment.

Rachel: Ah.

Jane: Look, I had another question. Since we’ll only have one teenager soon, should we prepare to see a second?

Rachel: No.

Jane: Really? Why not? I mean, I don’t know exactly how this weekend is going to go, but I can infer that you’re going to need beds.

Rachel: How often do Brooke and Emily come over?

Jane: Daily, really. Emily’s actually spent a couple of nights. But Brooke is leaving soon.

Rachel: You think she won’t visit too?
Jane: I’m sure she will.

Rachel: That’s why not.

Jane: You’ve lost me.

Rachel: Brooke is going to be a huge target for the next couple of weeks. Stacy and I have decided that while she’s still spending a significant amount of time at your house, we’re not sending anyone else from First Light there. It’s too big of a risk; some of those teenagers are pretty conditioned, and they might blame her for what happens.

Jane: ... I suppose that makes sense.

Rachel: As much as it sucks, because we probably will need beds, it’s the safest course of action.

Jane: God, that’s terrible. She’s only eighteen.

Rachel: Yea. I know.

Jane: Is there anything we can do?

Rachel: Try to keep her safe. And hope that it’s enough.

Chapter End Notes

Another time jump :)

Everyone was there for the trip to Portland and the interviews, so I didn't feel that there was anything else worth writing about it.

And no, the story isn't almost done just because they're close to the end of Escaping the Light. I've written a lot more detail about what happened afterwards. There's still plenty more to read.
“Holy shit.”

That was all Rachel could say, as she drove towards the church. The flashing lights almost blinded her. No less than ten police cars were surrounding the building, as well as a couple of black SUVs and an armored truck she assumed belonged to the SWAT team.

“I’ve never seen so many cops in one place,” Stacy commented from the passenger seat. From the back seat, two other social workers made noises of agreement as the absorbed the scene in front of them. “Looks like we’ve got our work cut out for us.”

“I’ll say.” Rachel glanced at her. “How many kids do you think we’ll be talking to?”

“Enough for them to bring in our entire office.” Stacy thumbed over her shoulder; the rest of their coworkers were in the three cars behind them. “We’re definitely not screwing around anymore.”

“Any idea what the plan is?”

“Nope.” Stacy shook her head. “I’ll try to find someone in charge once we’re in the church, and get some guidance.”

They parked in a line near the church, where they were directed by an officer in a tactical vest who was carrying a black rifle. Stacy gestured for everyone as they all got out, and they followed her towards the church.

Except Rachel. Her eyes widened, and she stepped away for a second. “Juliet?” she asked, walking up to the reporter. “I didn’t think you would still be here.”

“I’ve been on my best behavior,” Juliet replied. “Agent Graham hasn’t given me the boot yet. What are you doing here?”

“We were called in to-” she stopped herself. “Crap. I don’t think I’m supposed to talk to you.”

Juliet raised her hands. “I won’t tell anyone, I swear.”

Rachel glanced around, making sure they were alone before she answered in a low voice. “They called our office an hour ago,” she said, nodding towards the cops. “They’ve got a bunch of children and teenagers, showing signs of abuse. We’re here to talk to them.”

“Oh.” Juliet blinked. “Well, don’t let me stop you, then. I don’t want either of us to get in trouble. Agent Graham was very clear that I not interfere.”

“Yea.” Rachel nodded. “I’ll find you later.”

Everyone clustered near the doors inside the church, as Stacy finished speaking to an FBI agent before returning. “What rules are we playing off of here?” one of Rachel’s male co-workers asked. “This isn’t really how we normally do business.”
“We’re still going by the playbook,” Stacy assured everyone. “You all know what to look for. But children whose parents have been arrested will be coming with us regardless of nearby family; there’s too much in flux to place them with anyone who’s a parishioner. Grandparents don’t like it, they can sort it out with us after the police have finished arresting people.”

She looked around, making sure everyone was listening before she continued. “You see ANY signs of abuse, you bring them straight to the EMTs and have it documented. If the cops want to talk to any of the kids, you make sure you’re with them. Children who we decide to remove are going to be sequestered in the back offices until we can get them out of here.”

“How many do you think we’ll be taking tonight?” Rachel asked.

“That’ll be up to the FBI.” Stacy paused. “But given the number of people they’re arresting, I wouldn’t be surprised if we took in at least twenty kids.”

Everyone started muttering. “How are we going to get them back to the office?” Rachel asked. “Or place them? We don’t have enough secure homes to put them in.”

“I know.” Stacy nodded. “I’m going to figure that out while you guys talk to the kids.” She looked at the others. “Rachel knows these people better than anyone else. If any of you have any issues, and I’m not around, ask her.”

“Where do we start?” Another social worker asked.

Stacy pointed, and they followed her finger. A large group of children, ages ranging from toddlers to teenagers, were sitting in a front section of pews. “Any questions?”

No one had any.

“Then get to work.”

Stacy walked away, as they all began heading towards the children. Rachel was leading the group, scanning the kids as she heard a small voice from the other side of the pews.

“Miss Amber?”

She turned, noticing a young, black-haired girl sitting in a pew by herself. She frowned, about to ask who she was before the realization smacked her in the face.

“... Linda?” she whispered.

Her former ward, the only teenager from First Light to have ever gone back, looked at her with wide eyes as Rachel took her in. And realized that the girl wasn’t by herself. A young baby, less than a year old, lay sleeping in her arms.

Rachel immediately stepped into the pew in front of her, kneeling on the bench as she got a good look at the girl. The other social workers continued to walk past her. “Are you okay?”

Linda dropped her gaze, as she shifted her grip on the baby. “... yea,” she muttered.

“Oh my God.” Rachel couldn’t take her eyes off the girl. “Linda, I can’t believe you’re here. We’ve been so worried about you.”

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly.

“That’s okay. I’m just happy to see you.”
“No, I...” Linda swallowed, looking back up at Rachel. “I’m sorry I ran away.”

Rachel slowly looked back at the child in her arms. “Who is this?”

Linda tightened her grip.

She was thirteen when she left the church. She ran back right after her fourteenth birthday. That was back in the summer of 2018. Two and a half years ago. So that makes her... Rachel’s gut clenched. Oh, fuck.

“Linda,” she asked carefully, “is this your baby?”

The teenager didn’t answer.

Rachel stood, making her way around the pew and taking a seat next to the girl as she got a better look at the short-haired child. “How old is he?”

“She,” Linda whispered. “Eight months. Her, uh... her hair just started growing.”

“She’s adorable.” Rachel smiled. “What’s her name?”

“Annabeth.”

Rachel reached over, lightly grasping the baby’s foot. The child flinched slightly in her sleep, but didn’t stir as she rolled further into her mother. “That’s a beautiful name,” Rachel commented. “She’s big for her age, too.”

Linda nodded silently.

“I really am so happy to see you, Linda.” Rachel looked back at her. “I was worried for you, when you ran back. I can’t tell you how glad I am to see you again.”

“I...” Linda took a shallow breath. “I’m sorry, Miss Amber. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Rachel placed her hand on the teenager’s forearm and squeezed. “Linda, all I wanted was for you to not get forced into anything you didn’t want. If being back at First Light was-”

“I never should have come back.”

Rachel paused as Linda snorted, wiping her eyes with her free hand before she looked back at the social worker. “I just missed people,” she said in a broken voice. “I missed my parents, and my sister, and my friends. And I couldn’t stop thinking that I’d made a mistake by leaving.” A lone tear carved it’s way down her cheek. “I just wanted to see my family again.”

“What happened?” Rachel asked gently.

Linda’s lips trembled. “My mom and dad made me marry Eugene,” she whimpered. “I told them I didn’t want to. But they said I had to, because the dowry had already been paid. But once I moved in with him, they refused to see me anymore. And Eugene and his parents wouldn’t let me leave except for the doctors and services.”

Rachel exhaled slowly. “Linda...”

“I know. I know I screwed everything up.” Linda sniffled, looking at Rachel with moist eyes. “I’m sorry, Miss Amber. I should’ve talked to you first, I know I should have. I’m so sorry I ruined everything.”
“Hey. Hey, stop that.” Rachel put her other arm around Linda’s shoulder. “It’s not your fault.”

“Yes, it is.” Linda snorted again. “I was so stupid.”

Rachel looked back at Annabeth. “This is your baby? And Eugene’s?”

Linda nodded. “He was... pretty mad, when she was born,” she added.

“Why?”

“He wanted a boy.” Linda shrugged. “He only wanted a boy. He wanted to make sure their family bloodline lived on. We thought she was a boy, at first, but... the nurse misread the ultrasound. When she came out, he was really mad at me. So were his parents.”

Rachel kept her anger in check, as she took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. “Where’s her father now?”

“He got arrested. Him and his parents both worked in the church offices.”

“Good.” Rachel nodded. “I’m so sorry, Linda.”

The teenager looked back at her baby silently.

“How old is your husband?”

“Twenty-three.”

_Eugene. Worked in the office. Definitely remembering that._

“You, uh...” Linda sniffled again, her voice hitching. “You should take Annabeth, Miss Amber. You should bring her back to Jeff and Diane’s.”


“I don’t want her to grow up in the church.” Linda wiped her eyes again, before meeting Rachel’s gaze. “I don’t want her to be like me. Just take her and-”

“Linda.” Rachel squeezed the teenager’s shoulder. “I am not taking your baby away from you.”

“Please, Miss Amber,” Linda sniveled. “I’ll surrender her, or do whatever you-”

“What? Why?”

“Sweetie, you’re sixteen years old,” Rachel reminded her. “You’re still a minor, and you don’t belong to Eugene, no matter what him and his family say. If your parents won’t have you, then your well-being falls under my office. And when I tell the District Attorney that your baby’s father is an adult, he’ll have charges brought against him.” She paused. “You’ll never see him again, I promise.”

The teenager sniffled, as she looked back at her baby. “What about-”

“Her, too.” Rachel nodded. “You’re her mother; I’m not going to separate the two of you. If you want to come with me, I’ll bring you both back to your foster home right now.”

“... you will?”
“Yes.”

“But...” Linda’s voice trailed off, as she looked back at Rachel. “I ran away. I left out my window in the middle of the night.”

“I remember.”

“You’ll still take me back?”

“I will.” Rachel nodded. “Under one condition.”

“What?”

“That if you think about leaving again, you talk to me first.”

Linda snorted, wiping her nose on her sleeve. “I learned my lesson the first time,” she muttered.

“Come on, Linda.” Rachel stood, holding her hand out. “Please, let me take you home.”

The teenager only hesitated for a second, before she reached up and took it. Rachel pulled her upright and placed hand on her back, guiding her past the police officers.

Her boss was in the office speaking to an FBI agent when Rachel approached her. “Stacy?”

“Hmm?” Stacy turned to face them. “What is it, Ra-” She did a double-take. “... Linda?”

“... hi Miss Hemingway,” the teenager said quietly.

“Oh my God.” Stacy stepped over and laid her arms on Linda’s shoulders, looking her up and down as she took in her and the baby. “Oh my God, I can’t believe it.”

“Stacy, I’ll be back in a couple of hours,” Rachel informed her. “I’m taking Linda and her daughter to her old foster house.”

Stacy tore her eyes from the teenager, looking back at Rachel. “... okay,” she agreed. “But you make sure they’ve got everything they need, before you come back.”

“I will.” Rachel glanced at the FBI agent. “Did you arrest a man named Eugene in the church offices? He would have been with his parents.”

“We did.” He frowned. “They’re all on their way to a detention center right now. Why?”

“That’s his baby.” Rachel nodded at Annabeth. “He’s in his early twenties, and Linda here is only sixteen years old. You need to make sure that he’s not released on bail. And his parents sanctioned their relationship, so they should to be charged as accessories.”

The agent looked at the teenager and baby, before nodding. “I’ll make a phone call.”

“Is Isabelle still there?”

Rachel glanced over as she drove. “Hmm?”

“Does Isabelle still live with the Carters?” Linda asked quietly, as she shifted her hold on Annabeth; the baby was awake, though she was content to quietly relax in her mother’s arms.

“She does.” Rachel nodded. “There’s another First Light teenager there, too. A girl about your age
named Sienna.”

“Sienna Kline?”

“You know her?”

“Of her.” Linda shrugged. “I think she was supposed to marry one of Eugene’s friends, before she
ran away. So... am I going to stay on the couch, then?”

Rachel frowned. “Why would you?”

“Because Jeff and Diane only have two spare bedrooms,” she answered. “And if there are already
two girls there, then I don’t see where-”

“You’re going to be staying in Isabelle’s room,” Rachel interrupted. “She’s volunteered to sleep on
the couch.”

“She did?”

Rachel cocked her head. “You sound surprised.”

Linda looked down at her lap. “... I thought she’d be mad at me,” she muttered. “Her, and Jeff, and
Diane.”

“They’re not.”

“Are you sure?”

“Sweetie, you have no idea how excited they were, when I called and told them that I was bringing
you back.” Rachel smiled. “They missed you terribly. Especially Isabelle, she missed you more than
anything.”

“... what about you?”

Rachel raised an eyebrow. “Do I sound like I’m mad?”

Linda bit her lip. “I’m just waiting for the lecture,” she admitted quietly. “And for everyone to start
yelling at me, for going back to the church and ruining my life.”

It took a few seconds for Rachel to respond, as she took a turn. “Linda, nobody is angry at you,” she
stressed. “We were just incredibly worried. Nobody heard so much as a hint about you, except for
whispers about you marrying Eugene. Everyone feared the worst, and I cannot tell you how happy
we are to have you back.”

“Even though I ran away without telling anyone?” Linda asked.

“Nothing about what you’ve done has been easy, sweetie.” Rachel pulled into the Carters’ street.
“But nobody in the world has any right to judge you for your choices. You had an incredibly hard
decision to make, and you were trying to do the best you could; nobody will ever fault you for that.”

“Yea, and look where it got me,” Linda muttered.

“Do you love your daughter?”

“Yes.”
“Do you regret having her?”

“... no,” she admitted quietly. “I could never.”

“Maybe you didn’t make the best decisions,” Rachel allowed, as she turned into the driveway and parked. “It’s okay to admit that. But try to focus on the good things that come with them.”

“Okay,” Linda breathed, as Rachel turned the car off. “Okay.”

“Good. Come on, let’s get inside.”

They got out, Linda following a few steps behind her. They were almost to the bottom of the porch steps when the front door of the house flew open. Rachel barely saw the red hair streak by her, as Isabelle raced around her and threw her arms around Linda’s shoulders. Linda returned the hug with one arm while neither teenager spoke.

“Please don’t leave again,” Isabelle whimpered after a few seconds.


“You left me alone with these wackjobs.” Isabelle sneived. “Jeff still tries to convince us that Santa is real.”

Rachel watched Linda’s shoulders shake with a laugh. “He is real,” she replied in a thick voice. “You just have to believe in him.”

“Please shut up.”

“Okay.”

The two girls separated after a couple of seconds, Isabelle finally getting a good look at the baby. “... is this...”

“Yea.” Linda nodded. “This is, uh, Annabeth.”

“Oh.” Isabelle wiped her nose. “Wow. She’s so small.”

“Okay, how about we get inside,” Rachel interrupted. “Come on, Isabelle, let’s go.”

“You don’t have any paperwork?”

Rachel shook her head, as she spoke to Jeff and Diane Carter in their kitchen. The three girls were all in the other room, so they spoke in hushed tones. “I’m sorry, I don’t. I brought her straight here; we didn’t go by the office.”

“Is that... okay?” Diane had a very concerned look on her face, as she folded her arms. “That guardianship paperwork protects everyone here. You and Stacy hammered that into us, when we started training for this.”

“Under normal circumstances, no,” Rachel admitted. “But... look, if you saw what we had on our plate, you’d understand.”

“What if we have to bring her to a doctor?” Jeff asked. “We don’t have any standing to get her treated. And what about the baby?”
“The baby won’t be a problem, since Linda’s her mother,” Rachel reminded him. “She can make medical decisions for Annabeth. You will have all the right paperwork for Linda as soon as I can get it together, I promise.”

“How long will that take?” Diane asked. “I’m sorry, Rachel, I hate bugging you about this. But without that, we’ve got no authority here. I mean, her parents could say that she was kidnapped, and we’d have no leg to stand on otherwise.”

Rachel smirked. “Well, you don’t have to worry about that.”

“Why not?”

“Because every cop in a hundred-mile radius is tearing apart the church. And I’m going to put her parents on a list of people to be interviewed for child neglect. And if the police DO show up, when you tell them that she’s a ward of the state, the first number they’ll call is ours.”

“... oh.”

“Look guys, really, I am SO sorry,” she repeated. “But I am literally the only person at my office who is not talking to other First Light kids right now. We’re expecting to take in upwards of twenty of them tonight.”

Jeff blinked. “Wow.”

“Not... you know, here, right?” Diane asked. “Not that we wouldn’t love to help, but we’ve got a full house as it is.”

“I know. We’re working on that.” Rachel nodded. “Listen, we’re going to be swamped for a few days. But I promise, I will get the guardianship paperwork to you within the next seventy-two hours.”

The Carters exchanged glances, finally nodding in acceptance. “We can call you, right?” Jeff asked. “If there’s any kind of issue, and you can explain to the police or whoever that we’re not her abductors?”

Rachel reached into her purse and produced a pair of business cards. “Here,” she said as she handed them over. “One’s mine, and the other is my boss’s. Between the two of us, we know most of the cops in this county.”

They nodded, satisfied, as they looked back into the other room. Linda was sitting on the couch, sandwiched between Isabelle and Sienna as the girls fawned over Annabeth. “I can’t believe we’ve actually got her back,” Diane remarked quietly. “I still remember going to fetch her for breakfast, and seeing her empty bed and the open window. Isabelle didn’t speak for three days, she was so heartbroken.”

“Please don’t give her any grief for what happened,” Rachel implored. “You guys have no idea how scared she was to come back. She’s terrified that everyone’s going to be mad at her.”

“We would never.” Diane shook her head. “We’ll do whatever we can for her and the baby.”

Jeff’s phone buzzed in his pocket. “Perfect timing,” he remarked, as he read the text and looked back at Rachel. “Our daughter just got home from work. She’s going to pull out our grandson’s old crib and bring it over.”

“Linda’s going to need everything else, too,” Rachel added. “The police wouldn’t let us into her
home, so she doesn’t have any spare clothes, or diapers. They wouldn’t even let me get her toothbrush.”

Diane nodded. “We’ll take care of it.”

“Good.” Rachel checked her watch. “I have to get back. Call me if you need anything else.”
Rachel: No Vacancy

“You have got to be kidding me.”

Rachel looked around the office in horror. Thirty children were scattered about the room, either sitting silently or having hushed conversations amongst themselves. “Where in the world are we going to put them all?” she whispered to Stacy.

Her boss checked a clipboard in her hands. “We can place six of them in the secured foster homes,” she answered. “The Millers have two bedrooms free, the Hardys and Bavins have one each, and two more can use the bunk beds at the McGill’s.”

“Great. What about the other two dozen?”

Stacy took a deep breath. “I’m working on trying to track down a couple of buses,” she said. “The State Police have volunteered the use of their office above us, for the space. We just need to secure a few beds, or some inflatable mattresses.”

“That’s a temporary solution,” Rachel countered. “We do not have enough secure foster homes for them, and I don’t... oh, for the love of God.”

Her boss deflated a little more, as another social worker brought two more children into the room and sat them against the wall. She walked back after a few seconds. “Kyle and Willow Jenkins, age ten and twelve,” she reported quietly to Stacy. “The cops just put their parents in handcuffs.”

“What for?” Stacy asked, her voice tired.

“They were the ones scanning EBT cards at the grocery store, to skim off the leftover funds.” The social worker shrugged. “Sorry.”

“Wonderful.” Stacy scribbled their names and ages down, glancing at Rachel. “We’re going to have to place the rest of them in regular foster homes. Or group facilities.”

“I don’t-”

“I don’t want to either, Rachel, but we don’t have a choice,” Stacy interrupted. “Those two bring us up to thirty-three. Like you said, we’re out of secure foster homes, and we can’t keep them in our building forever.”

Rachel sighed, glancing back into the crowd. “Yea. I guess we don’t have any other options.”

“It’s not going to make you feel better, but some of them will only be our problem for a few days,” Stacy told her. “I’m sure we’ll have a mob of angry relatives in the lobby tomorrow morning.”

“You’re right. That doesn’t make me feel better.” Rachel looked at the other social worker. “How many kids are left to talk to?”

“About a dozen or so,” she answered. “But the FBI keeps bringing us more. The one agent said they’ve arrested thirty-four people.”

“Okay.” Rachel glanced around the room again, feeling an incredible weight on her shoulders. “I’m going to get some coffee.”

She walked out, down the short hallway to another room where the FBI had set up a sort-of
command center. Agent Graham was in the middle of it, seemingly juggling calls on his cell phone and a radio while listening to three agents speak at once. Wouldn’t want to be in his shoes right now, Rachel thought wryly, as she poured some coffee from a portable dispenser someone had brought in.

“You look tired.”

Her father was right behind her, as she glanced over her shoulder. Why am I not surprised? “I feel tired,” she muttered as she sipped her coffee. “I was awake at five this morning.”

James frowned. “I thought they didn’t call you guys until ten?”

“I knew it was coming, remember? I couldn’t sleep.”

“Right.” He sighed, as he stepped around her and got his own cup. “Me either. Even though they just called a couple of hours ago. Where have you been?”

“I was bringing Linda back to her old foster house,” she answered.

He blinked. “Linda? The girl who ran back?”

“Yea. It’s a long story.” Rachel cocked her head. “What are you doing here, anyway? I thought this was all federal.”

James smirked as he drank his coffee. “Given the sheer scale of what they’re finding, Mister Jones has asked if I would step in to take over some of the smaller crimes,” he replied. “Chief Watson is around here somewhere, too.”

“Ah.” Rachel took another sip. “Like what?”

“Cases of abuse, mostly.” He nodded. “You weren’t here, but some of your colleagues interviewed children who were showing signs of domestic violence. And a couple of adults.”

Rachel shook her head. “Try and put them away for a long time, would you?” she asked. “The more kids we can get away from this church, the better.”

“Of course. How many-”

“James?”

They both turned, as Agent Graham called out her father’s name. “Yes?”

“They cracked the password for her phone.”

“Oh, good.” James put his cup down. “And?”

“You were right.” Graham nodded, as he listened to whoever was on the other end of his cell phone. “Miss Caulfield didn’t delete her messages. They confirm the conspiracy, and the affair.”

Rachel frowned. “Wait. Max’s mom was having an affair?”

“Jones is going to add a murder charge,” Graham continued, ignoring their conversation. “And we’re going to want Teresa held as a possible accessory.”
James nodded. “And the child?”

“Well will you tell Miss Hemingway that she needs to send someone to retrieve her?” Graham asked. “I’m a little swamped at the moment.”

“Of course.”


“A lot.” James sighed, as he stopped and turned back to Rachel. “Actually, you should probably get the fully story, for Maxine.”

“Why?”

“Because I think it would be better heard coming from you, that her mother is likely dead.”

Rachel’s throat tightened. She stared at her father with wide eyes, comprehension soaking in as she tried to formulate a response. “Vanessa is... dead?”

“Come on.” James took her elbow and guided her out of the hallway, towards the pews. “Let’s sit, so I can tell you everything.”

“Christ, it’s uncanny.”

Rachel stared into the baby carrier, examining the sleeping infant. The hair was much lighter than her friend’s; a pale shade of blonde, just like her mother. But the face and light dusting of freckles was an incredible likeness of Max.

“I’ll take your word for it,” Stacy allowed, as she looked at the First Light teenager beside her. “When was she last fed?”

“Around twelve-thirty,” the girl answered quietly. “She took her bottle, burped, and passed right out. She always sleeps like a rock in the afternoon.”

“And her last diaper change?”

“Right before I fed her.”

“Good.” Stacy glanced back at Rachel. “Did you call Alicia?”

“Yea, they’re expecting her.” She stood back upright. “Do you want me to take her?”

“No. I’ll have Melissa do it.” Stacy nodded. “Go call Max.”

Rachel frowned. “Right now?”

“I’d rather you do it sooner than later,” Stacy explained. “The bus will be here to start taking kids back to the office in an hour or so. We’ll need you then, and probably overnight. Get this out of the way, so you can focus on everything else.”

“... okay.”

The other social worker picked up the baby carrier as Rachel turned, walking outside. She stepped into the chilly night air and inhaled, closing her eyes.
I have no idea what I’m going to say.

How the fuck do you even start a conversation like this? “Sorry, Max, but you remember the mother you hated, who beat the crap out of you? Turns out, your dad killed her. Then made another baby with a girl who’s even younger than you are.”

... Christ, that’s creepy as fuck.

“Rachel?”

Her eyes popped open. Juliet stood on front of her, camera hanging from her neck and a notepad in one hand. She looked at her with concern in her face. “Are you okay?”

Rachel sighed. “Sort of,” she allowed. “I didn’t realize you were still here. Thought you would have left by now.”

Juliet shook her head. “MSN wants to do a live telephone interview for Max’s news segment,” she informed her. “We want to be able to say I’m on-scene, so I’m not leaving until that’s over. What are you doing?”

“I...” Rachel hesitated. “Are you asking as a reporter, or friend?”

“A friend,” she said immediately.

Rachel chewed on the inside of her cheek, as she examined the reporter.

“Hey, we don’t have to talk if you don’t want to,” Juliet said, as she seemed to sense Rachel’s apprehension. “But if you do, everything will be between you and me. I have no interest in burning anyone’s trust, I swear.”

“... okay,” Rachel exhaled. “Well... Max’s mother is dead, for starters.”

“Oh. Yea, I knew that.”

Rachel arched her eyebrows. “You did?”

“Agent Graham told me,” Juliet explained. “He’s been more-or-less keeping me in the loop, though I haven’t seen him in about an hour or so.”

“Ah.” Rachel nodded. “Then you know that Max’s dad apparently remarried? And had a baby with his new wife?”

“Yep.”

Rachel scoffed. “You might know more than everyone else here, then.”

Juliet shrugged. “It is my job. So... why are you stressing out?”

“Because I was asked to tell Max,” Rachel replied. “And I have no idea how to even start.”

“Mm.” Juliet pursed her lips. “Yea. That’s... hell, I don’t either.” She paused. “You want me to do it with you? I’ve texted her a couple of times since I’ve been here.”

“... know what? Yea.” Rachel nodded, as she pulled out her phone. “I wouldn’t mind the help.”

“Sure thing.”
“Let me text Chloe really quick, just to make sure she’s next to her.” Rachel started typing. “I’ll video call right after.”

“Quite simply, Rachel, you and your office have so greatly overstepped your authority that I can’t fathom how you were able to sleep last night.”

Rachel shrugged, as she stood in front of a lawyer from Portland. They were meeting in an empty office on the first floor of her building, early Monday morning. Behind him was an older man and woman, both with their arms crossed and angry looks on their faces.

“I fail to see how taking custody of children is beyond the scope of our office, John” she said absently as she flipped through the paperwork in her hands. Her phone vibrated, and she retrieved it from her pocket, glancing at the text before putting it away. “It is, after all, our job.”

“Not when there is family nearby who can accept them,” John countered. “That is one of the steps in your process, isn’t it? To see if there are any nearby relatives? Franklin and Jonah might have mentioned that their grandparents lived down the road from them when you took them.”

“They did, actually.” Rachel tapped the paperwork. “I see here that they informed the social worker that their Grandpa Miles and Grandma Gail were nearby.”

“Then why were they not brought to them last night?” John asked accusingly. “And instead forced to come here, to sleep on what I suspect was the floor of your office?”

“It was actually the State Police offices on the third floor,” Rachel corrected him, still not making eye contact as she continued to peruse the file on Franklin and Jonah Statler. “And they were each given an air mattress. According to the social workers who watched them last night, they slept very well.”

“They should have been given to their grandparents,” John told her. “Given the circumstances, we’re willing to overlook your office’s serious breach of protocol. But we insist that you produce the two of them immediately; otherwise this will go to court.”

Rachel looked up at him. “How was the drive in, John?”

He blinked. “Excuse me?”

“From Portland,” Rachel elaborated. “I imagine you had to get up very early this morning, to be here so promptly. Or did you drive in last night, and stay in a hotel?”

“While I appreciate your attempt at small talk, Miss Amber, I would rather you didn’t ignore our very generous offer.”

“Threat, John.” Rachel went back to the folder and slowly flipped a page. “I’m pretty sure when you tell me to hand over the kids or else we’ll get sued, my father would call that a threat. He doesn’t appreciate when other lawyers make them, and quite frankly, I don’t care for it either.”

John narrowed his eyes. “Call it whatever you wish, Miss Amber. But I want you to take it seriously, because my patience is wearing thin.”

“Well, I would say that I’m sorry about that, if I was.” Rachel finally closed the file and looked up at him. “But I’m afraid that Franklin and Jonah will not be leaving with their grandparents. They’re going to be placed with a foster family until.”

“The FUCK they will!!” the older woman screeched.
“Those are OUR grandchildren!” The man yelled. “You will NOT kidnap them from-”

John held up his hand, silencing them as he glared at Rachel. “Does this mean I’m going to be filing an official grievance with the court, Miss Amber? Both for refusing to return those children, and wasting my time?”

“Probably not.” Rachel glanced over his shoulder. “And I wasn’t wasting your time. I was stalling.”

“I beg your-”

The door behind them opened, and the three of them turned around as four police officers filed into the room. “Miles and Gail Statler?” one of them asked.

“What the fuck is the meaning of-”

“You’re both under arrest for accepting stolen property and money laundering.” The man and a female officer drew handcuffs. “Turn around and place your hands behind your back.”

John blinked in surprise as his clients were handcuffed, both of them yelling all the while that the police would regret what they were doing. Rachel watched indifferently as they were dragged back through the door, down the hallway.

“You didn’t answer my question.” John looked back at her silently, as she tucked the file under her arm. “Did you drive in this morning, or stay the night?”

“This morning,” John answered. “I, uh, didn’t get the call until about three AM.”

“Bummer. Sounds like a bitch of a drive.”

“It was.” John paused. “Sorry about the threat.”

Rachel shrugged. “Sorry for leading you on.”

“How did you know they were about to be arrested?”

“Everyone coming to claim children today is having their names run past the FBI’s task force.” Rachel explained. “Some of the people they were looking to arrest weren’t located last night. The text I got earlier was from the police, asking me to stall until they got down here. Also, John, I appreciate that we weren’t really using the proper playbook, but given the sheer number of arrests being made, we’re not giving any kids back until we’re positive that their families won’t be charged with any crimes. And I expect that the courts will have our backs on that.”

“Yea, I know.” John sighed, as he ran a hand through his hair. “I was bluffing.”

Rachel smirked. “Strong bluff. I would’ve bought it if I didn’t know better. Are you representing anyone else out there?”

John shook his head. “Just them. Though I wasn’t hired to fight criminal charges.”

“You should take off, then. No reason to be here.”

He nodded. “Do you mind if I take the back exit? I really don’t want to deal with any more of those nutjobs.”

“Sure. I’ll walk you out.”
Max: Twenty-nine? For real??

Rachel: After the ones who could be picked up left, yea.

Max: Where are they all going?

Rachel: All over the place.

Rachel: The ones we don’t want their parents to find will go into the secured homes; there were a couple of kids that were being abused pretty bad, one who’s gay, and two of Elder Xavier’s grandkids. The rest will be going to normal foster houses and group homes.

Max: Orphanages? Really?

Rachel: Hey, I don’t like it any more than you do. But we don’t have a choice. Some of these kids have been sleeping on the floor in our office for three days now.

Max: Wow.

Max: ... what about Faith?

Rachel: She’s already been brought to a group home that specializes in caring for abandoned infants.

Max: Oh.

Rachel: Are you okay? I know it was a lot to take in.

Max: ... not really. But it’s less about Faith and my dad, and more about the lawsuit.

Rachel: Right. Have you met with the lawyer yet?

Max: I called her, and she set up a time to Skype with all of us in a few days.

Rachel: Is she a good one?

Max: I don’t know. Samantha says she’s supposed to be really good. I guess she’s faced off against First Light before, and won.

Rachel: ... it’s not Megan Weaver, is it?

Max: How’d you know?


Max: You know her?

Rachel: She was Brooke’s lawyer. She rocked your dad’s WORLD in that courtroom. You guys are going to be just fine.

Megan: <pic.jpg>

Brooke: Ha! I knew my family would have kept it. Smug fuckers probably still thought they would get me back.
Megan: So... that’s it?

Brooke: Yep. That’s the marriage license my grandpa showed me.

Megan: Good. Between that and the official statement from the FBI, we’ll get you dropped from this lawsuit in no time.

Brooke: Thank God. What about the others?

Megan: Samantha’s fine, too. The police found more than enough evidence to corroborate her recollection of the fraud. And I’ve already arranged a deposition with the Schliep boy, to question him about what happened when he was taken by Frank’s father as a child.

Brooke: And Max?

Megan: Her situation is a bit more complicated. But I have every confidence that we’ll get her resolved, too.

Brooke: Good. So... now what? Do I get to testify against my grandpa? Or my parents, or Henry?

Megan: It’s a possibility. It depends on whether or not they’ll elect to plead out.

Brooke: Would I need you for that?

Megan: You’d be wasting your money, unless you think the FBI is going to charge you with a crime.

Megan: But if your family has any sense, they’ll take whatever plea deals they get offered. The IRS investigator and FBI Cyber Crimes found literal mountains of evidence in your grandfather’s office.

Brooke: Well, I know my brother doesn’t have any common sense. Maybe I’ll get to testify against him.

Megan: You really think so?

Brooke: My understanding was that he made the bare minimum GPA to graduate high school. And I’m 99% positive that my parents interceded for that; I don’t remember him doing ANY of his own homework for his last year.

Megan: Huh. I wonder how he landed a job as Ryan’s assistant?

Brooke: Nepotism’s a bitch.
Max: Did you get my email?

Megan: I did. And the video. It’s perfect.

Max: Really? It’ll get the lawsuit dropped?

Megan: Absolutely. All I have to do is tell the judge that Teresa corroborated your story, and given the circumstances, there’s no way the two of you could have rehearsed it beforehand.

Megan: I’ve filed the motion to dismiss already. We should be in front of the judge in about a week.

Max: Whew. I was getting nervous.

Megan: Well, you can take a deep breath now.

Max: While I’ve got you... do you know of any good Oregon lawyers that specialize in adoption?

Megan: A couple. Why?

Max: My fiancée and I are looking into adopting my little sister.

Megan: Oh, wow.

Max: I asked a friend of mine for some referrals, but she only came back with a couple of names. Jack Axeberry and Jean Higgins?

Megan: Okay, definitely not Higgins. She’s a crook who charges for every second you spend with her, and her skills aren’t good enough to justify her rates.

Megan: I don’t know Axeberry. But I’ll tell you what; give me a day, and I’ll see what I can dig up.

Max: Thank you so much.

Megan: No problem.

Tucker: Dude, is your liver made of titanium or something?

Jake: What? No. Why?

Tucker: Then how many friends were you with at Railroad? I hope it was at least nine or ten, for all the booze you guys drank.

Jake: Excuse me?

Tucker: Railroad? Last weekend? Hundreds of dollars in booze?
Tucker: Do you remember? Because with the total you spent, I’d understand if you blacked out.

Jake: Back up. What the hell are you talking about?

Tucker: I’m looking at the corporate expense report for this month. More specifically, your charge at Railroad for almost nine hundred bucks.

Jake: Okay, that’s not right.

Tucker: Wrong amount?

Jake: I haven’t gone drinking at Railroad in weeks. And last time I did, it was only for a couple of beers. I have NEVER spent that kind of cash at a bar in my life.

Tucker: So this isn’t you?

Jake: No. When was it?

Tucker: The eighth.

Jake: I wasn’t working that night. Could it have been Penny?

Tucker: She says no way in hell would she put that much money on the corporate account.

Jake: So was my card hacked?

Tucker: It wasn’t your card. It was submitted via POS terminal. Someone charged the ticket using your password.

Jake: I’d love to know how they did that.

Tucker: You want the info?

Jake: No, I’m swamped. Give it to our junior executive, tell her to handle it.

Tiana: We’re out of our house.

Samantha: Congrats! You made a clean break?

Tiana: We did. It was much easier since we didn’t actually own it.

Samantha: Wait, really? Then who did?

Tiana: First Light. We rented through the church office.

Tiana: Walker met with a lawyer a couple of weeks ago, and had him look over the lease we signed. He said it was absolutely laughable, in violation of a number of landlord-tenant laws, and completely unenforceable.

Samantha: That seems about par for the course. Nobody hassled you on your way out?

Tiana: Nobody knew to hassle us. Walker’s been packing everything in boxes for a couple of weeks. We woke up at two this morning to pack the truck, and left before anyone else on the block
was awake. We dropped the house keys in the mailbox on our way out of the neighborhood.

**Samantha:** Slick. Where are you guys now?

**Tiana:** We’re sharing a two-bedroom apartment with another family who left. The living room is absolutely full of everyone’s stuff.

**Tiana:** But this is temporary. The legal team working the class-action said that they expect First Light to settle in the next few weeks. We should be getting a pretty substantial payday before summer starts.

**Samantha:** Awesome! I’m so happy to hear that.

**Tiana:** Us, too. And we can’t thank you enough, for what you and the others did.

**Samantha:** ... it wasn’t that big of a deal.

**Tiana:** Are you kidding? They were stealing food right out from under our noses. And our rent was 200% higher than comparable houses. AND they were killing people.

**Tiana:** I think everyone knew some shady stuff was going on behind the scenes, but nobody knew it was that bad. As far as I’m concerned, the further away we get from that church, the better.

**Samantha:** On that, we can both agree.

**Samantha:** You considering moving to Portland? I’d love to see you guys again.

**Tiana:** We’d love to see you, too. And you still have to meet Alicia.

**Samantha:** How is she? I can’t imagine moving with a newborn was easy.

**Tiana:** No, Walker definitely did all the heavy lifting. But she’s good. She actually slept through the night last night.

**Samantha:** Bet that was nice.

**Tiana:** You have no idea.

**Tiana:** Anyway, we were thinking about Portland. Walker’s only got a couple of classes left for his degree, and it seems like it’ll be easier for him to find work in the city. But housing is expensive.

**Samantha:** True, but there are some affordable options. Even on one salary.

**Tiana:** I’ve actually been thinking about getting a part-time job. Since nobody’s telling me that I can’t, the idea of earning two paychecks does appeal to us.

**Tiana:** Where are you working? Any chance you could help me out?

**Samantha:** ... maybe not where I work.

**Tiana:** Why not?

**Samantha:** I don’t think you’d be interested.
Tiana: In tending bar? Probably not. But waitressing doesn’t sound hard. Are they hiring?

Samantha: Not waitresses.

Tiana: Kitchen staff, then? I’m a pretty good cook, according to Walker.

Samantha: Tiana, I work at a strip club.

Tiana: ... wait, really?

Samantha: Not as a stripper. I don’t take my clothes off. I just work the bar. But most of the other girls are dancers.

Tiana: Wow.

Samantha: Yea.

Tiana: ... do they make good money?

Samantha: OMG TIANA NO

Tiana: Joke! That was a joke!

Samantha: That wasn’t funny.

Tiana: I’m sorry. I was just trying to make light.

Tiana: Why didn’t you ever say anything?

Samantha: Because it’s humiliating. I go to work every day and dress up as a slutty schoolgirl for money.

Tiana: Why don’t you find something less embarrassing to do?

Samantha: Because I’m still twenty-seven credits from my degree. And tending bar in Portland doesn’t usually pay bills AND tuition. Strip clubs are the best place for me to make enough money both.

Tiana: Samantha, that’s not embarrassing. You’re doing what you have to do. Besides, I can only imagine the confidence you need to wear an outfit like that in public.

Samantha: It’s not really in public.

Tiana: Strange men are still leering at you. I don’t know much about strip clubs, but I imagine that the patrons are slightly chauvinistic and sexist?

Samantha: Some more than others.

Tiana: And yet you keep doing it anyway. I don’t think I have the courage to wear something like that where anyone besides Walker would see me.

Tiana: Also, you said you met your boyfriend at work? I assume he’s not a dancer.

Samantha: Nope. Bouncer.
Tiana: Then it sounds like you working there was a good thing, in the end.

Samantha: ... I never thought about it like that.

Tiana: You’re welcome :) 

Samantha: That still wasn’t funny.

Tiana: Oh, it was a little funny.

Samantha: We’ll see what Walker says when I send him that screenshot.

Tiana: NO NO NO

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Max: It’s done.

Jake: What is?

Max: The fraudulent charges to your corporate account. I handled it.

Jake: Already? It’s only been two days.

Max: It wasn’t hard. I had Tucker get me the exact time of the transaction, and I checked the bar’s security cameras. There were only two bartenders working, and I could see the POS screens, so it was easy to figure out who charged the account.

Jake: And you handled it already?

Max: Didn’t you ask me to?

Jake: I guess so. I just figured you’d tell me first, when you found out who it was.

Max: Sorry.

Jake: Meh. So, who was it?

Max: One of the newer bartenders, a woman named Brenda. She was the one who put in your corporate password last time you were there, and remembered what it was.

Jake: Brunette with big boobs? Wears yoga pants and a shirt that’s two sizes too small?

Max: I see Hayden’s HR memos are getting ignored again. But yes, that was her.

Jake: And why did she charge nine hundred bucks to the corporate account?

Max: A bunch of her sorority sisters were out on a ladies night while she was working. Apparently, she didn’t want to be left out, so she had them come over and drink for a few hours on the house.

Jake: ... did she think we wouldn’t notice?

Max: I don’t think she considered the consequences of her fuckup.

Jake: Okay. Well, how did you handle it?
Max: When she came in for her shift, Angel put her in the office and I showed her the security footage. Then I gave her two choices; she pay it back on the spot and we fire her, or we call the cops and have her arrested for second-degree theft.

Jake: I take it she chose option one?

Max: She did. Wanna know the best part?

Jake: What?

Max: She didn’t have enough cash or credit to cover it, so she had to call her parents to help.

Max: It was glorious. She got chewed out so bad by her mother and father. They actually apologized to me, because they thought they’d raised her better.

Jake: And you didn’t call me down to come see it?!

Max: I’m pretty sure Larry was recording on his phone. Ask him.

Rachel: So... I may have fucked up.

Steph: Why? What did you do?

Rachel: I kind of made the assumption that when I came down for the wedding, I would be staying with you.

Rachel: But I just realized that your dad and his wife are invited too, and they might want a place to sleep.

Steph: They’re not staying the night.

Rachel: No?

Steph: They only live an hour away. And Max said the reception is gonna end around nine. They’re driving up and back on the same day.

Rachel: Ah. Cool.

Steph: Of course, you never did ask if you could stay at my place.

Rachel: ... is it a problem?

Steph: Hey man, maybe someone else is. A few people are coming in from out of town, you know.

Rachel: Steph, may I please crash at your place for a few days?

Steph: See? That wasn’t so hard, was it?

Rachel: Listen, Miss Ball-Buster, who else would be really staying with you?

Steph: Victoria and Kate are coming up from LA.

Rachel: If you think Victoria hasn’t rented a penthouse suite somewhere, you’re delusional.
Steph: Kate’s family is coming up. Her dad and two sisters.

Rachel: You don’t even know them. You guys met for three days while Max was in the hospital.

Steph: Remember Juliet? She’s invited, too. Coming down from Seattle.

Rachel: Yea, and last time she went to your place, Chloe almost broke her arm.

Steph: Dana? Taylor? Courtney?

Rachel: Wow. Just when I didn’t think you could reach any further, you went for Victoria’s friends that almost beat your ass in high school.

Steph: Shut up.

Emily: Do you have a color preference for bed sheets?

Regina: Not really.

Emily: What about material? Brooke found some microfiber sheets.

Regina: Those are fine.

Emily: There’s also a couple of sets of jersey sheets.

Regina: Whichever ones are cheaper.

Emily: That’s not what we asked.

Regina: Seriously, whatever’s on sale.

Emily: Regina, tell us what kind you want.

Regina: Whatever’s easiest to afford. I will learn to live with it.

Emily: Okay. Egyptian cotton it is.

Regina: Emily, seriously, you don’t have to spend a ton of money for me.

Emily: We’re not buying bargain sheets. We didn’t even buy a bargain mattress. We’re going to be spending a third of our lives on these beds for the foreseeable future, so you can bet your ass we’re getting the good stuff.

Regina: You should. You’ve earned it.

Emily: Do you think just because Brooke and I are the ones making money that you don’t deserve it?

Regina: ... it’s your money.

Emily: Maybe you missed the part where we’re in this together. Where all three of us are going to make this work. Because we’re all going to need each other for what comes next.
Emily: Besides, you’ll be working once you get out here, too. It won’t be long before you’re contributing.

Regina: I still don’t need anything fancy.

Emily: Too bad. Brooke just put the really good sheets in the cart, to prove a point.

Regina: Seriously?

Emily: Don’t feel bad. She got two sets. We want nice shit, too.

David: Hey, how’s Max doing?

Chloe: She’s... good? Why?

David: James just told us that her father plead guilty.

Chloe: Ah. I didn’t know that was happening already.

David: Twenty-five years for conspiracy to commit murder, embezzlement, wire fraud, soliciting false testimony, and tax evasion.

David: If he’s still alive, he’ll be in his eighties by the time he gets released.

Chloe: It’s still not long enough.

David: It never is, kiddo.

Chloe: Did Rachel’s dad say anything about any of the others?

David: Oh, yea. He’s keeping us up to speed. The federal cases are still moving slowly, as they do, but they’ve got a whole bunch of people pleading out left at right at his level.

David: And some of those deals involve snitching on others at the church. James said they’ve got charges lined up on close to seventy people right now.

Chloe: What about all their money?

David: There’s a class-action against the church right now. It’s pretty much a slam-dunk case, so most of their money will go back to the people they stole it from.

David: The ones who’ve joined the suit, at least. James said not everyone has.

Chloe: Seriously?!

David: Apparently there are a fair amount of people who won’t do it. They’re standing with the church.

Chloe: Wow. They really are brainwashed.

David: I think that’ll change when they find out how much the other victims are getting back.
**Kate:** Please bring Pepto Bismal home with you.

**Victoria:** What’s wrong? Are you okay?

**Kate:** My stomach is SO upset right now. I can’t keep anything down.

**Victoria:** I thought morning sickness was only in the morning?

**Kate:** Tell it to the baby.

**Victoria:** Um, I just Googled it. I don’t think you can take Pepto while pregnant.

**Kate:** Oh, God, seriously? It’s so bad right now! What CAN I have?


**Kate:** We literally have none of what you just said.

**Victoria:** How the hell are we out of toast?! It’s bread!

**Kate:** REMEMBER WHEN I ASKED YOU TO GO BY THE STORE ON YOUR WAY HOME YESTERDAY AND YOU DIDN’T?!?!

**Victoria:** ... oops.

**Kate:** “OOPS” DOES NOT SETTLE MY STOMACH VICKY!!

**Victoria:** Okay! I’ll handle it!

**Victoria:** I found a grocery delivery service online! I’ll have them bring everything I said!

**Kate:** I want ice cream, too.

**Victoria:** We have ice cream! There’s an entire gallon in the freezer!

**Kate:** Not anymore.

**Victoria:** I thought you couldn’t keep anything down!

**Kate:** I CAN’T

**Kate:** THAT DOESN’T MEAN I DIDN’T WANT IT

**Max:** FOR THE LOVE OF GOD HELP ME

**Joyce:** What?! What’s wrong?!

**Max:** SHE WON’T STOP CRYING

**Joyce:** Faith?

**Max:** IT’S BEEN TWO HOURS
Max: I CHANGED HER AND FED HER AND BURPED HER BUT SHE STILL WON’T STOP AND CHLOE ISN’T HERE AND I DON’T KNOW WHAT TO DO

Joyce: Swing her back and forth gently while shushing her. And give her a pacifier.

Max: ... oh my God it worked.

Joyce: Atta girl. Put something on the TV so that she’s distracted. Doesn’t matter what, but Chloe liked old sitcoms.

...

Max: Sorry I freaked out.

Joyce: You’re fine, sweetie. New moms always freak out.

Max: I’m not a mom.

Joyce: You’re raising an infant. Same same. Is she doing better?

Max: Yea. You called it. I found a sitcom on Netflix, and she’s doing this little giggle with the laugh tracks.

Joyce: Good. And hey, at least she hasn’t pooped on you yet.

Max: We had to throw away Chloe’s jeans after that incident. And her shirt. So hopefully she doesn’t poop on me, ever.

Joyce: Oh, sweetie. You’re adorable.

Lisa: Gotta make this quick. I know where they’re hiding Peter Xavier.

Sienna: For real?! Where??

Lisa: He’s living in the attic space at the Parsons’ house. And I think they said he’s got his father’s laptop with him. I’ll bet it’s got all kinds of evidence on it.

Sienna: Shit, dude. The cops will love to hear that.

Lisa: Yea. You’d better call them quick. I don’t know how frequently they move him.

Sienna: I will.

Sienna: And I think it’s time for you to leave, too.

Lisa: Not yet.

Sienna: Really, Lisa, you’ve given us a ton of info. And there’s only so many places that info could come from. Miss Amber is starting to question how we’re getting it.

Lisa: I’m okay. My mom and brother don’t suspect a thing.

Sienna: Maybe for now. But you’re on borrowed time, especially since that raid. If I tell Miss
Amber what you’ve done, she’ll be at your house with cops in ten minutes.

**Lisa:** I can still be useful here. I’ll let you know when it’s time for me to leave. But right now, I’m still trying to figure out where they...

**Sienna:** Lisa?!

**Sienna:** LISA!!

**Sienna:** LISA IF YOU DON’T REPLY BACK RIGHT NOW I’M CALLING THE COPS!!!
This was a nice party.

Juliet let a slight smile play over her face, as she sat on the bench behind the golf course. The sun had long since gone down, and the lights around the venue property were very peaceful to look at. Behind her, inside the building, the party continued to wind down ten minutes after Max and Chloe had made their mad dash for freedom.

They looked pretty happy. Juliet smirked as she continued to puff on her cigarette. And their kid was pretty cute.

Not kid. Sister.

Jeez, that’s gonna take a lot of explaining when she’s older.

Juliet checked her watch. Man, it’s early. Too early to call it a night. I wonder if there’s a bar nearby I can hit up. Maybe I’ll ask the others from back home; I don’t even remember the last time I spoke to Courtney and Tay-

The door opening distracted her, and she glanced over her shoulder to see Dana close the door behind her. The brunette bit her lip as Juliet looked her over.

“Hey, Jules,” she greeted quietly.

Juliet glanced around pointedly, before turning back to Dana. “I’m sorry, are you talking to me?”

Dana blinked, a puzzled look on her face. “Um... yea?”

“Ah.” Juliet pressed her lips together. “You can see how I might have gotten confused, on account of you ignoring me for most of the party.”

“... right.” Dana sighed. “Um... sorry.”

“Cool.” Juliet crushed out her half-finished cigarette, flicking the filter into the bushes. “What do you want?”

“To talk.”

“Oh, really?” Juliet stood. “What about?”

Dana seemed to be struggling for words, as she squirmed silently.

“Not the Junior Prom, I’m assuming?” Juliet asked. “You do remember that night, don’t you? When you had me pushed up against the bathroom sink, with your tongue down my throat and your fingers buried to the second knuckle in my-”

“I remember,” Dana finally interrupted. “That’s... no.”

“Do you? Because if I recall correctly, you refused to ever mention it again.” Juliet folded her arms.
“I tried to talk, like a mature adult, and you always seemed to have someplace else to be.”

“I know.” Dana scratched her arm. “... I just didn’t want to talk about it.”

“Yea, I got that.” Juliet nodded inside the venue. “So. Was that just an experiment, to figure out if you liked girls before you found a boy?”

“... I don’t know,” Dana admitted. “I don’t even know what I was thinking, when I did that.”


“On what?”

“You know what.” Juliet nodded at Dana’s stomach. “How far along are you?”

Dana did a double-take. “How did you know I was-”

“Because there’s an open bar and you’re a lush for white wine, but all you’ve been drinking since we got here is sparkling cider.”

“... oh.” Dana glanced at her feet. “You’re... a lot more observant than my husband.”

“He doesn’t know?”

“I just found out a few days ago.” Dana shrugged. “I did the test right before we got on the plane. I’m still figuring out a way to surprise him, when we get back to Seattle.”

“Nice.” Juliet turned and sat back down on the bench. “Good for you.”

Dana was silent as she walked next to her slowly. “Can I sit?”

“Why?”

“... I wanted to talk to you.”

“You weren’t done? Figured you would have run off by now.”

Dana ignored the jab and sat down, smoothing out her dress. “How have you been?”

“Peachy.” Juliet leaned back on the bench. “There are six or seven people that want me dead, but other than that my job’s a lot of fun.”

“Yea. I heard you made some enemies.” Dana nodded. “I’ve, uh, read your stories. They were pretty good.”

“Thank you.”

“I liked the one about the state congressman.”

“I hope so.” Juliet glanced at her. “That one cost me three days in the hospital.”

Dana’s eyes widened. “Really?”

“Yea. Turns out, pimps don’t like their girls talking to reporters.” Juliet turned back to the golf course. “Asshole one-punched me. Gave me a concussion and a knot the size of a grapefruit on my head.”
“Shit,” Dana remarked.

“Yea. No kidding.”

“... I’m sorry.”

“It was whatever.” Juliet waved her hand. “Doctor only kept me so long because he didn’t like my MRI. And my boss kept insisting that I—”

“No, I...” Dana’s eyes fell to her lap. “I’m sorry I ghosted you,” she muttered. “I should’ve done better. I would’ve gone to see you in the hospital, or... something.”

Juliet studied Dana carefully. “Why did you?” she asked after a few seconds.

“I don’t know.” Dana exhaled as she picked her head back up, not making eye contact. “At first, I was... Christ, I was so embarrassed, I didn’t even know what to say. Or think. And everyone busting my balls didn’t help.”

“You think they didn’t bust mine?” Juliet scoffed. “I heard Zach Riggins call me the Second-Floor Screamer a few times. Thanks for that, by the way.”

Even as dark as it was, Juliet could see Dana’s cheeks flame up. “... sorry.”

“Hey, I wasn’t exactly complaining at the time.”

“... right.” Dana picked at her fingers. “Anyway... I don’t know. Eventually I realized so much time had passed, and I didn’t think I’d ever be able to talk to you again. Or that you’d even want to talk to me. And I figured you’d already made new friends, and wouldn’t care for me to just call out of the blue.”

Juliet sighed. “... less friends than you’d think.”

“Huh?”

“Nothing. Dana, you were one of my best friends growing up. You pretty much carried me when my parents divorced, and started using me as a weapon against each other.” Juliet shook her head.

“Pretty sure you were the only one keeping me sane, when we were freshmen. I don’t know why you’d think that I didn’t want to talk to you anymore.”

Dana bit her lip. “I’m sorry. I... guess we should’ve talked, after the party.”

“Yea. No kidding.” Juliet shook her head. “You could’ve at least taken me to dinner or something, after a night like that.”

Dana finally looked at her. “Are you, like... actually gay?”

“I prefer the term ‘enthusiastically bisexual’.”

“Sooo...” Dana tilted her head. “Boyfriend? Girlfriend?”

“Neither.” Juliet shook her head. “I don’t want to be tied down. I’m trying to focus on my career, especially with the new job coming up.”

“You got a new job?”

“MSN offered me an associate producer slot,” she said. “I won’t be writing as much, but it’s better
money, and I reach a wider audience. And it opens the door to maybe getting a correspondent position someday.”

“What, like an anchor or something?”

“Maybe. At the very least, a spot in front of the camera.” Juliet leaned back into the bench. “Not exactly the way I thought my career was gonna go. Figured I’d be in print for most of my life. But the money is really good, and my boss told me that I’d be an idiot if I didn’t take it.”

“Does that...” Dana hesitated. “Never mind.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Dana.”

She sighed. “I don’t have any justification to be upset if you were, but... does that mean you’re leaving Seattle?”

Juliet raised an eyebrow. “We’ve lived seventeen miles apart for the past four years, and you’ve never reached out. Now you’ll be sad if I leave?”

Dana hung her head. “I really am sorry, Jules.”

“Mm.” Juliet pursed her lips. “No.”

“No... what?”

“No, I’m not leaving Seattle. The job is at the local network.”

Dana exhaled slowly. “Cool.”

“What does that mean?”

“... that means I really am sorry, about ditching you. And I’m sorry I waited so long to try and reconnect.” Dana bit her lip. “Um... when we got back home... do you think you’d be up for grabbing a drink or something, so we can catch up?”

Juliet snorted in amusement. “You’re pregnant, you idiot.”

“Ah, shit.” Dana hung her head. “I’m gonna be a terrible mother.”

“Yea, probably.” Juliet paused, chewing on the inside of her cheek. “I did miss you. And I really want to catch up again. So... I would be down for dinner, or something.”

She looked back at Dana. “Assuming you’ll return my texts, anyway.”

“I will, I swear,” Dane said defensively. “I missed you, too. And I want you to meet my husband.”

Juliet arched an eyebrow. “Does he know we got shit-faced and fooled around in Nathan Prescott’s guest bathroom?”

Dana’s face flamed up again. “Maybe you could not mention that. I’ve never told him.”

“You totally should. He’d probably think it was hot as hell.”
“Jules...”

“Relax, I’m kidding.” A malicious smirk came over her face. “Hey, wanna go to the bathroom and finger-fuck for old time’s sake?”

“JULES!!”

---

**Steph:** Are we meeting for dinner tonight?

**Max:** I’m still mad at you.

**Steph:** Oh, come on.

**Max:** You’re leaving San Francisco! We won’t get to see you anymore!

**Steph:** Do you think Rachel and I won’t come down to visit together?

**Max:** We used to go months without seeing Rachel, remember?

**Steph:** Okay, maybe it won’t be as frequent as it used to be, but I PROMISE we’ll still see each other.

**Max:** We’d better.

**Steph:** You guys could visit Portland too, you know.

**Max:** I’d honestly rather not. I’d like to avoid Oregon for the foreseeable future.

**Steph:** ... that’s fair.

**Max:** But Chloe says that when you guys come down, you need to bring Voodoo Donuts with you.

**Steph:** Well, I figured that went without saying :)

**Max:** So... are you and Rachel finally going to start ACTUALLY dating when you get back up there?

**Steph:** This is SO not a conversation I want to have over text.

**Max:** Fine: But we’re talking about it over dinner. Chloe and I have questions.

**Max:** Also, she says you’re buying?

**Steph:** I’m what now?

**Max:** She says you owe her fifty bucks.

**Steph:** Tell her I said to kiss my ass.
April 2021

Brooke sighed in relief, as she parked Emily’s car outside Jane’s house.

She’d finally gotten her full license that past week, right after she’d come back from Max’s wedding. But she still wasn’t entirely comfortable with driving on her own. Normally Emily went with her, but she’d been assigned an extra shift at the restaurant. And Brooke didn’t want Regina and Aaron in the car with her yet, so she’d taken the ninety-minute drive by herself to pick up what was hopefully the last few things they’d forgotten.

*Least I didn’t crash,* she thought idly as she got out of the car. *Last bits of stuff, before we close the book on this part of our lives.*

As soon as she knocked on the door, it practically flew open. Jane stood in front of her, blinking. “Oh, Brooke. It’s you.”

“Uh... you asked me to come this morning.” Brooke frowned. “Are you expecting someone else?”

“Yes, actually, any minute now.” Jane gestured for her to come inside. “It doesn’t matter. I have your guy’s stuff here.”

“Did you find Aaron’s bear?” Brooke asked as she stepped inside. “Regina still can’t find it in her boxes, and he’s driving us nuts. We really need to either get it back, or get him a new one.”

Jane smirked. “I did, in fact, find Sprinkles. He fell behind the dresser.”

“Oh, thank God.” Brooke sighed in relief. “I think Emily was considering infanticide.”

Jane chuckled as she led the way into the kitchen. A cardboard box sat on the table, the brown teddy bear sitting prominently on top. Brooke peeked inside to see a few articles of clothing, Emily’s spare charging cable for her phone, a couple of baby bottles, and her old eyeglass cleaning kit. “I was wondering where that was,” she commented as she picked it up. “I figured it walked away.”

“No, I found it under your old bed.” Jane nodded. “That should be everything that was left.”

“Oh?” Brooke looked at her. “Doing some late spring cleaning?”

“Yes. Miss Amber is bringing over a First Light teenager sometime in the next half-hour.”

Brooke’s eyebrows shot up. “Really?”

“We got the call a little bit ago.” Jane went back to the kitchen counter, moving some more stuff around to make it neater. “I was just getting ready.”

“Oh.” Brooke looked around. “Where’s Pete?”

“At a friend’s house, helping him with a car.”
A thought struck her. “... why was he never around when we were brought here?”

Jane glanced up. “Sorry?”

“Pete wasn’t here when Miss Amber brought me over,” Brooke elaborated. “Or Regina. And Emily mentioned too, that she didn’t see him until the next day. Why does he not stick around when Miss Amber brings over new kids?”

“Because Miss Amber and Miss Hemingway told us that most of the kids that come from First Light are abused,” Jane answered, as she continued to neaten up the counter. “Pete decided, when we agreed to do this, that he wouldn’t be around for the first day when a new teenager came in. That way I could get them comfortable with the home, and with me being here, to the point that they wouldn’t be scared of my husband.”

Brooke blinked. “... wow.”

“What?”

“We really didn’t appreciate you guys enough.”

Jane smirked and opened her mouth to answer, but the doorbell rang. “There she is,” she muttered. Brooke scooped up her box and followed behind Jane. Her foster mother opened the door to reveal her former social worker, standing on the doorstep.

And right beside her was a teenaged girl with bright red hair, done up in a ponytail. But Brooke’s eyes fastened themselves on the swollen-shut black eye, bruises on both sides of her neck, and the sling on her left arm. She was wearing green sweatpants and a too-large shirt, and her right hand held a backpack loosely by her side. There was also a piece of white gauze on her hand that looked like it was left over from an IV, as well as a hospital wristband.

“Hey, Jane.” Miss Amber smiled. “This is Lisa.”

“Well, how nice!” Jane smiled back, as she stepped aside. “Why don’t you two come in?”

Miss Amber gently nudged the girl forward. She looked like deer caught in the headlights as she silently walked inside, and Brooke felt a pang of nostalgia. I know the feeling, dude.

“Brooke?” Miss Amber’s eyebrows went up as she saw her. “I didn’t know you’d be here.”

“I, uh, was just getting the last of our stuff.” Brooke held up the box.

“Oh. Well, good.” Miss Amber nodded. “Lisa will need a clean room. Lisa, this is Brooke Scott.”

Lisa blinked, as she finally focused on Brooke and her good eye widened. “... you were the one on TV.”

“That’s right.” Brooke smiled. “You saw me?”


“Mm.” Brooke nodded. “How did I look?”

She shrugged silently.

“Why don’t you wait here for a minute.” Miss Amber looked at Jane. “I have some paperwork I
need you to sign. Can we do it in your kitchen?”

“Yes, of course.” Jane nodded, and led Miss Amber out of the room, leaving Brook alone with the girl. She stood still, appearing very nervous.

“You, uh...” Brooke hesitated. “You’re probably still in shock, aren’t you?”

Lisa didn’t speak, as she tightened the grip on her bag. She seemed to be trying to determine if Brooke was a threat.

“It’ll go away after a couple of days. You probably won’t sleep tonight, though.” Brooke shook her head. “Look... you probably don’t have a reason to, but trust Jane. And Miss Amber, too. They’re the good ones.”

Lisa shrugged. “I don’t really have much of a choice.”


“My family found out that I was talking to a couple of the girls that ran away, and giving them info about what was happening in the church.” She paused. “And that I was the one who told the police where my dad hid his laptop. And his gun.”

“His... gun?”

“Yea. He stuck them in a lockbox underneath the house. The police are charging him with fraud and extortion.” Lisa sighed. “Word got back to my brother, about what I did. And then they caught me on my mom’s laptop, talking to another girl who left.” She glanced at her injured arm. “They were pretty pissed.”

Realization hit Brooke as Lisa finished. “You’re... Lisa Carson? The one who was talking to Sienna?”

She blinked. “How’d you know?”

“Because I was one of the ones Sienna was talking to on our end,” Brooke answered. “That info you gave us helped get me on TV.”

“Really?”

“Yea.” Brooke nodded. “I, uh... shit. We wouldn’t have been able to do it without you.”

“... oh.” Lisa bit her lip. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to downplay that. It’s awesome. But I don’t feel really good right now. The doctor gave me some pretty intense meds.”

Brooke looked at her arm, and the bruises on her neck; she hadn’t realized it before, but they were definitely made by someone’s fingers. “Did your brother do that to you?”

“Him and my mom. They’re in jail with my dad now.” She paused. “Miss Amber won’t make me go back, right?”

“Did she say you wouldn’t?”

The teenager nodded.

“Then you won’t.” Brooke smiled. “Miss Amber keeps her word. If she told you that you’re not going back, then you’re not going back.”
“Really?”

“Hey.” Brooke pushed herself off the wall and took a step closer. “I know what you’re feeling. Like you’ve made a terrible mistake, and you should figure out a way to make it right?”

Lisa nodded slowly. “I mean, I didn’t. I know I didn’t. But…”

“Yea, I know. It’ll take a few days, but that’ll go away. You’re gonna figure out that you did the right thing, and you are SO much better off with Jane and Pete than you would have been with your family. They were better parents than mine ever were.”

“… okay.” Lisa seemed to relax, a miniscule amount.

Miss Amber and Jane came back into the room. “Lisa, Jane’s going to take you upstairs, and show you where you’ll be staying for a little while,” Miss Amber explained. “Lunch will be ready in a few minutes.” She glanced at Brooke. “I don’t mean to be rude, Brooke, but we have a lot to go over. Do you mind…”

“Yea. Sure.” Brooke adjusted her grip on the box of stuff. “It’ll go away after a few days, Lisa. Remember that.”

“I will.” Lisa smiled and waved with the hand in the sling. “Thanks.”

“Anytime.”

“So, we’ve already been replaced.”

Brooke nodded, as she took another bite of her pizza. “You should’ve seen that girl,” she mumbled. “I really wanted to give her, like, a hug or something.”

Emily smirked. “But you didn’t.”

“No, of course not.” Brooke rolled her eyes. “I remember how I would’ve reacted if a stranger tried to hug me when I got to Jane and Pete’s house.”

Regina walked back into the kitchen, dropping down into the chair. “Oh my God, he grabbed his bear and fell asleep in five seconds,” she sighed. “I love you, Brooke.”

“Aw, sweetie, I just like you as a friend.”

“Shut up.” Regina reached over and pulled a slice of pizza away from the pie. “Seriously, though, thank you so much for going back and grabbing everything.”

“No problem.” Brooke nodded. “Aaron doesn’t really need anything else right now, does he? It looked like we had enough diapers for the apocalypse.”

Regina smirked. “Yea, Jane might have gone a little overboard. But no, we’re fine.”

“You’ll let us know, right?” Emily asked, as she wiped her mouth with a napkin. “Now that we’re actually making half-decent money, we can afford to get some–”

“Can I ask you guys a question?” Regina blurted.

Emily paused at Regina’s interruption. “Uh… yea?”
“Did you guys tell Miss Amber what my father-in-law did to me?”

Brooke choked on her pizza, as Emily froze. Regina glanced between the two of them, an unreadable expression on her face.

“What do you mean?” Emily finally got out, as Brooke coughed.

“I’ve thought about it a lot, since that day. I’m pretty sure Miss Amber already knew what had happened, otherwise she wouldn’t have bought Miss Hemingway and the cops. I mean, there was no reason for them to be there unless they needed to hear what I said.” Regina tilted her head. “You two did tell her, didn’t you?”

Emily glanced at Brooke with a terrified expression. Brooke imagined that hers looked pretty similar as her mind raced, and she tried to come up with a response.

After several seconds of silence, Regina sat back in her seat. “I guess I was right.”

“Regina, we- I- it wasn’t-” Emily stuttered frantically, before finally taking a breath. “We are so sorry.”

“We had to,” Brooke said quickly. “I swear to God, we were just trying to help.”

Regina took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “All the help you guys have been giving me. The car seat, the stroller, everything.” She glanced at them. “Is it because you feel guilty?”

Emily glanced back at Brooke, a look of desperation on her face.

“No,” Brooke said forcefully as she leaned forward. “Regina, I’m sorry we went behind your back. But I’m not sorry for what we did.” She inhaled through her nose before she continued. “Those fuckers needed to go to jail, and you needed to get some real help. We had to tell Miss Amber what you said, and I don’t feel guilty that.”

Regina leaned back in her chair, not saying anything as she studied Brooke carefully.

“Please say something,” Emily said after several seconds.

“I’m trying to figure out what to say.” Regina looked at her. “You guys are my best friends. The two of you have done so much for Aaron and me. I can’t possibly hate you. And... you were right,” she admitted. “I did need real help.”

“But...”

“I don’t know.” Regina sighed. “I’m conflicted. I think I’m a little mad, even though I know I shouldn’t be. I’m also incredibly grateful for what you guys have done.” She glanced back at Brooke. “You were on the Honor Roll. What’s the word for that?”

Brooke smirked. “I don’t think they have one.”

“We should make one up, for situations like this.” Regina turned her gaze back to her lap. “Maybe I shouldn’t have brought it up. It’s been eating at me for over a year, and... you guys talking about buying more stuff for Aaron just made it boil over, I guess.”

Nobody spoke for several seconds.

“I’m not going to say ‘thanks’,” Regina finally stated. “But... I still love you guys. I don’t know where Aaron and I would be without the two of you.” She looked back up, focusing on Brooke.
“And I’ll definitely owe you for the rest of my life, for whatever you did to make that woman go away.”

“We both owe Max,” Brooke said. “I didn’t do anything.”

“If you hadn’t been there, she wouldn’t have stepped in. I owe you, too.”

“So...” Emily hesitated. “Are we... cool?”

Regina snorted, as she picked her pizza back up. “Yes, Emily, we’re cool.”

“Oh, thank God.” Emily slumped in her chair, putting a hand on her chest. “I really didn’t want to have to get to know a new roommate.”

“I wasn’t going to just up and leave,” Regina protested. “I can’t afford to live anywhere else either.”

“Good.” Emily paused. “Though, at the same time, it would have been nice to have a bed to myself. I’m not a big fan of this ‘sister-wife’ thing Brooke and I are doing.”

Brooke shot her a glare. “I told you to get a king-size.”

“It was an extra four hundred bucks we didn’t have.”

“Then you’ll have to come to terms with your latent sexual confusion, and accept that we might accidentally bump into each other while we sleep.”

Regina rolled her eyes. “Why didn’t you guys just get two twin beds?”

“They wouldn’t have left room for the dressers,” Emily answered. “Trust me, we wouldn’t have gotten a queen bed if it wasn’t the best option.”

“What about bunk beds?”

Brooke and Emily both looked at her with blank expressions.

“... you guys did consider those, right?”

Emily hung her head. “Fuck.”

Max: So when do classes start?

Brooke: Not for a couple of months. Emily and I are going to start in the fall semester, but Regina wants to wait until spring, so she can bank some cash.

Max: For tuition?

Brooke: That, too. There’s still a few things we need to get.

Max: Like what? I thought you guys had finished furnishing the apartment.

Brooke: Well, yea, but just the basics. We thought a TV might be nice, too.

Max: Ah. Yea, staring at a blank wall is pretty boring.

Brooke: We thought so. We also want to get a couch, and there’s a debate about getting a
PlayStation. Emily and Regina need laptops, too, for school.

Max: I bet the scholarship is looking pretty helpful right now.

Brooke: Very. Actually, since they help with daycare, I wonder if they’ll help with laptops?

Max: Let us know if they don’t. Chloe says she can work a deal down here, to get you guys some cheap computers.

Brooke: Appreciate it.

Max: What’s the debate about the PlayStation?

Brooke: Emily wants one, because she got a chance to play one back at Blackwell and really liked it. I kind of do, too. Regina doesn’t, though; she says it’ll rot our brains.

Max: Well, Chloe plays hers a lot. Her brain’s still intact.

Brooke: ... have you met your wife?

Max: Okay, fair point.

Chapter End Notes

So. There won't be any more notes about where the story is relative to EtL. Mostly because we're past the point where anything would match up; there is an eight-year gap between chapters, and a lot happens in those eight years. Like I've said, I'm going to expand a lot more on what happens after the raid & wedding.
Steph & Rachel: What now?

June, 2021

She was SUPPOSED to be reviewing the files in front of her.

Each one was for a different First Light teenager her office had custody of. And there were thirty files had to be gone through, with updates and notes made about their status and their continued placement in the foster system. All of which were due by the end of the week.

But Rachel couldn’t concentrate, as she sat at her kitchen table in sweatpants and a tattered t-shirt. Her mind kept wandering, and she couldn’t stop glancing at her apartment door.

*Come on, focus,* she chided herself. *She’ll get here when she gets here. You want to work on these with her here, or you want to get them done before she arrives?*

She sighed and went back to the file of Lisa Carson, which was at least an easy one. She turned back to her laptop and typed in a short statement.

Lisa Carson’s father has been remanded to FCI Sheridan. He will not be eligible for parole until February of 2032. Her mother has been remanded to Pine Creek Correctional Facility, and won’t be released until May of 2026 as per her plea deal. Her older brother took a similar plea deal, and also will be released from Sheridan in May 2026.

Her maternal grandparents are deceased, as is her paternal grandfather. Her paternal grandmother and maternal aunt have made it clear that they will not accept her into their homes (see interview notes #20-2984 and #21-0018). No other family is available. Further, the knowledge that Lisa was feeding information of church workings to outside teenagers has spread through the First Light community; sending her back has been deemed too dangerous.

It is recommended that Lisa remains in foster care at Secure Home #4 until she graduates high school, turns eighteen, or leaves to pursue higher education.


*And let that be the last she sees them,* Rachel thought to herself as she saved and closed the file. *Your turn, Benjamin Stachowski.*

Still occasionally glancing at the door and checking her watch, she tried to concentrate on her work. Some files took longer than others, but she made her way through a solid chunk of the stack before someone knocked.

Rachel didn’t even think as she jumped up, abandoning the laptop as she scrambled for the door. She paused to collect herself, then turned the knob. Steph was waiting on the other side with a backpack over one shoulder.

“Hi.” She smiled. “I’m here about the room for rent?”

Rachel reached out and grabbed her collar. “Get the fuck in here.”
Steph let herself get yanked inside. Rachel slammed the door closed behind her before grabbing the back of her neck and kissing her passionately. Steph returned the kiss, dropping her backpack on the floor as she pulled Rachel tightly by her shirt.

“I think you missed me,” she said huskily as they separated. “And it’s only been a couple of-”

“You talk too much.” Rachel tugged her towards the bedroom.

They laid in bed forty-five minutes later, facing each other. Their hands were linked together under the covers, as they faced each other without speaking, smiling contently.

“I like this,” Steph finally said softly.

“Me too.” Rachel leaned forward and kissed her lips. “I, uh... I wish we’d started doing this sooner.”

“Mm.” Steph scooted closer, squeezing Rachel’s hand. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too.” Rachel grinned. “I’m only a little frustrated that it took you two months to get your ass up here.”

Steph rolled her eyes. “I had projects to finish and hand over,” she pointed out. “Trust me, if I could’ve just up and left, I would’ve.”

“I know.” Rachel nodded. “How was Max, when you left?”

“Pretty bummed. Her and Chloe insisted on taking me to breakfast before I got on the road.” Steph snorted. “You should have seen Faith try to eat her little cereal bites. It was adorable.”

“I bet it was.” Rachel smiled. “Excited for your new job?”

“Very.” Steph grinned. “But it doesn’t start for a couple of weeks. So I’ll be kind of a freeloader, until then.”

Rachel pursed her lips. “I think I can come up with some creative ways for you to earn your keep.”

“Oh, yea?” Steph’s grin widened. “Like what?”

“Gimme some time. I think I’m gonna have to do a little research.”

“Well, so long as it doesn’t involve whips and chains. Or a dog collar.”

Rachel pouted. “Shoot.”

Steph chuckled, then bit her lip as she took a short breath. “So... can I ask an uncomfortable question?”

“Sure.”

“What are we now?”

Rachel pulled back, so she could get a better look at Steph’s face. “How do you mean?”

“Well... we’re gonna live together,” Steph said. “And, well, obviously there are gonna be some benefits. But... we haven’t dated. Or really talked about, you know, anything moving forward. Or what this means.” She nodded between them. “Am I... are we, uh-”
“Do you remember the day we graduated high school, back in that shack at American Rust?” Rachel interrupted. “When you said that you really liked me, and you wanted more?”

Steph’s cheeks turned red. “I don’t think I’ll ever forget.”

“Like I told you, I did, too.” Rachel paused. “I hated myself too much to admit it. I didn’t think I deserved anything good. And I’ve really, really regretted that choice ever since. I feel like... I don’t know. I think we both missed out on so much because I was a stupid, slightly suicidal, self-hating idiot.”

Steph squeezed Rachel’s hand tighter. “Please don’t talk like that. I hate hearing you say those kinds of things.”

“Well, like it or not, it’s true.” Rachel squeezed Steph’s hand back. “I’m almost twenty-seven, Steph. I’m too old to screw around anymore. And I know what I want more than anything.”

“What?”

“You.” Rachel’s one-word answer came immediately. “You’re what I want. You’re all I’ve wanted for the past few years. And... oh, hell.” She sighed. “I love you, Steph.”

The brunette stared at her silently from across the pillow.

“You don’t have to...” Rachel struggled for words. “Maybe that was too soon. It’s okay if you don’t feel-”

Steph’s lips crushed hers, silencing her. Rachel blinked in surprise.

“I... I love you too,” Steph said quietly, sniffling as they separated. “Rachel, I can’t tell you how badly I’ve wanted this.”

Rachel felt her eyes getting moist, and quickly wiped them with her fingers. “So... uh... you want to go on a date?”

Laughter exploded from Steph’s mouth. Rachel followed, burying her face into the pillow as their shoulders heaved.

“Oh my God, we said that before we even had our first date,” Steph gasped. “We are THE most stereotypical lesbians ever!”

“Right?” Rachel laughed back. “Wait until we get you all caught up with Orange Is The New Black, so you can really fit the bill.”

“Jesus Christ.” Steph covered her mouth, as her eyes widened in realization. “I literally have a U-Haul hooked up to my car right now!”

Both of them dissolved into giggles, which took several minutes to subside.

“Hey,” Rachel finally got out as they calmed down. “All jokes and stereotypes aside. I am dating the FUCK out of you this weekend.”

“Oh, yea?” Steph rolled over onto her stomach, looking at Rachel with big doe eyes. “Where are you taking me?”

“Well, I figured you haven’t been to the Two Whales for a while.” Rachel smiled. “How about some waffles and a cheesy movie?”
“Ooh, dinner and a movie.” Steph smirked. “How utterly generic of you.”

“God, you’re a really unappreciative girlfriend.”

“Mm.” Steph scooted up and laid her head down on Rachel’s shoulder, closing her eyes as she nestled into her. “I could get used to being called that.” Her eyes opened back up after a few seconds. “Wait, we’re not going to tell Max and Chloe about this conversation, are we?”

“Fuck no, are you kidding me?” Rachel rolled her eyes. “After all that Amberich crap they’ve been pushing on us for the past few years? We’d never live it down.”
“Wow, they live in a really nice building.”

Lynn nodded, as she parked in the lot. “I know. Wait until you see their apartment.”

Jessica looked up through the windshield of Lynn’s new car, Kate’s old Volvo. “Which floor are they on?”

“The sixth.” Lynn killed the engine. “Victoria was telling me that her dad owns the entire building, but they keep one of the top apartments for themselves.”

“Can’t blame them.” Jessica got out of the car, admiring the area as she closed the door. “Cool pond, too.”

“Yes.” Lynn smirked as she retrieved their stuff from the trunk, passing Jessica’s violin case to her. “You want to know something funny?”

“What?”

“The phone Mom and Dad gave Kate when she turned eighteen is at the bottom.”

Jessica’s head swiveled back to her older sister. “It is? Really?”

“Yea. Don’t bring it up, though. Bad memories of Mom.”

“Mm.” Jessica glanced back at the pond, as they walked toward the building entrance. “I don’t miss her,” she admitted quietly. “And I don’t know if that’s weird or not.”

“It’s not,” Lynn assured her. “Nobody does, Jessica. Not even Dad. And honestly, the best thing we can do is forget about her.”

“... right.”

Lynn kept an eye on Jessica, as they walked inside and took the elevator. Her sister had changed dramatically since their mother had been sent to prison the previous year; she’d come out of her shell a lot, was way more talkative, and she’d cut back on her medication. It was becoming difficult to remember that she had an anxiety disorder.

_More proof that Mom was toxic to everyone_, Lynn supposed, as they got off the elevator.

“Which one?” Jessica asked, looking both directions down the hallway.

“There. At the end.” Lynn led the way. “Kate said we can just let ourselves in; they don’t want the doorbell to wake the baby if he’s napping.”

Jessica walked behind her, stopping as Lynn got to their door and used a key to unlock it. As she pushed the door open, she froze, and held up a hand to stop Jessica.

Lynn spun after a couple of seconds. “Follow my lead,” she whispered. “Stay quiet. And don’t you
DARE ruin this for me.”

Jessica blinked in surprised and nodded. Lynn finally opened the door all the way, revealing the scene inside.

The first thing Jessica noticed was Victoria, passed out on the couch. She lay on her side, one shoe off, her head on a throw pillow as she slept. Around her, the normally well-kept apartment was in disarray; loose towels were everywhere, dirty dishes were stacked in the sink, and there was discarded diaper packaging on the coffee table.

Across from her, Kate was asleep on the love seat, sitting upright against the corner with her head thrown back. In her arms was little Kevin, also sleeping peacefully as Kate held him loosely but securely.

Lynn motioned for Jessica to stay still, as she crept over to Kate. At an almost glacial pace, she carefully pushed her hands under Kevin, lifting him from her sister’s lap; neither Kate nor the baby stirred, as Lynn carried him away, depositing him gently in Jessica’s arms.

She then nudged her younger sister back outside, quietly closing the apartment door. Jessica frowned, trying to figure out what was going on as she cradled her nephew.

“KATE!!” Lynn screamed from behind the door, after a few seconds. “VICTORIA!! WHERE’S KEVIN?! WHERE’S THE BABY?! WHERE DID HE GO?!”

Jessica’s eyes widened, and she was about to open the door before Kevin started fussing in her arms at the noise. She quickly shushed him, rocking the baby as all hell broke loose inside the apartment.

“VICKY!! VICKY, WHERE IS HE?!”

“You had him!! I thought you had him!! You were holding him!!”

“He fell!! Oh my god he fell!! Where is he?? Did he crawl?!”

“He can’t crawl yet!!”

“He must have!! We don’t have a gate!! Look in the bedroom!!”

Jessica listened to something crashing, then stampeding footsteps as someone ran across the apartment. Not knowing what to do, she split her focus between paying attention and trying to soothe Kevin, who was starting to squirm.

“He’s not here!! I don’t seem him!!”

“Keep looking!! Check the bathroom!! Kevin!!” Kate screeched. “Kevin!! Where are you?!”

That finally did it. The noise pierced through the door enough to make Kevin start wailing.

There was silence behind the door, for a second. Then more stampeding footsteps, and the door was thrown open. Jessica looked up to see a heavily-breathing Kate on the other side, her eyes wide with worry. Victoria materialized behind her, hair completely tousled as she looked at Jessica.

“I didn’t do it,” Jessica said immediately. “It was Lynn. It was all her idea.”

That was when Victoria and Kate finally heard the laughter coming from behind them.
Kate’s face melted in relief, as she darted forward to her son. Victoria’s expression turned dark. “LYNN!!” she yelled, as she vanished back into the apartment. “You’re DEAD!! You are SO fucking DEAD!!”

Jessica listened to what sounded like an impressive scuffle, as she carefully handed Kate the baby back. “I had nothing to do with it,” she repeated quickly.

“I know. I know you didn’t.” Kate hugged Kevin, bouncing him gently in her arms. “Shhh, it’s okay, baby, Mommy’s got you.”

“What is WRONG with you?!” Jessica looked over Kate’s shoulder to see Victoria pinning Lynn against the couch with one hand and using the other to hit her in the head repeatedly with a pillow. “I’m going to KILL you! That was NOT FUNNY!!”

“Yes, it was!” Lynn gasped, as she laughed hysterically while being struck with the pillow. “You should have seen your faces!”

Kate ignored them, bouncing Kevin up and down as he settled. “Your Aunt Lynn my not be your godmother for much longer,” she cooed. “No, she won’t. We might make your Aunt Max and your Aunt Alyssa fight for it.”

Victoria finally stood, breathing heavily as she hurled the pillow at Lynn’s head for a final time. “You are SO going to pay for that later,” she snapped.

“Oh, come on.” Lynn was still grinning, as she pushed herself upright. “That was revenge, and you know it.”

“Making us think our child vanished is NOT the same as-”

“Thinking I was about to get robbed and murdered?” Lynn interrupted.

Victoria blinked, and tilted her head. “... still not the same.”

“You must be a terrible lawyer, if you really think that.”

_____________________

Everyone got back to normal after a few minutes. “When are Max and Chloe coming down?” Lynn asked, as she gathered up and bagged the loose trash.

“Day after tomorrow.” Kate adjusted her shirt, as she nursed Kevin under a blanket. “You guys are going to have to share the pull-out couch when they get here.”

“What about Alyssa?”

“She’s in Miami this week. I don’t know when she’s coming back.” Kate looked up. “When do you have to go back to Cal Tech?”

“The semester doesn’t start until Monday after this one.” Lynn shrugged. “Unless you guys kick me out, I figured I’d help until then.”

“Don’t tempt me,” Victoria scowled, as she returned from their bedroom; she’d taken the opportunity to shower and change. “I’m still not going to guarantee that you’ll survive the night.”

Lynn rolled her eyes. “Lighten up. Didn’t I say I was sorry?”

“No. You didn’t.”
“That’s because I owed you one.”

“I did NOT-”

Kate interrupted, before they got going. “What about you, Jessica?” she asked, as she turned to the kitchen, where her other sister was elbow-deep in the sink. “When are you leaving?”

“My flight isn’t until the twenty-second.” Jessica replied, as she scrubbed a pot. “Speaking of which, if someone could give me a ride to the airport…”

“Which one? LAX?”

“Yea.”

“We can take you.” Kate nodded. “You’ll come back for Christmas, right?”

“Dad told me that he’d pay for my ticket home.” Jessica moved the pot to the drying rack. “He wants me to come back for the summer, too, but I don’t know about that yet.”

Victoria frowned. “Why not?”

“There are some summer performances, I guess.” Jessica shrugged. “I don’t know if they’ll want me for them or not. But I’m not making plans until I find out.”

“Ooh, that would be cool.” Victoria smiled. “Maybe we’ll come see you, then. I haven’t been to New York in ages.”

“We passed through on our way home from our honeymoon,” Kate reminded her.

“It was less than twenty-four hours. It doesn’t count.”

“Fair enough.” Kate smiled. “I would like some more of that pizza. I still miss it.”

Lynn plopped a full bag of trash down by the door, frowning as she picked up a jacket from the floor. “How did you guys let this apartment go to hell?” she asked, looking at Victoria. “This is seriously the most cluttered I’ve ever seen it.”

“Because we’ve been focusing on a baby that needs too much attention,” Victoria retorted, as she started sorting the mail on the kitchen table. “If he’s not hungry, or crying, he’s shitting.”

“Vicky!” Kate gasped. “That’s not-”

“Don’t EVEN tell me that’s not true.”

Kate paused. “... fine.”

Lynn and Jessica both laughed at that. “Is he at least sleeping through the night?” Lynn asked.

“No,” Victoria and Kate said in unison.

“He gets hungry around one in the morning,” Kate said. “Then again at two thirty. And three. And at five he needs a diaper change, but I usually make Vicky do that.”

“Because, you know, I don’t wake up when he gets hungry either,” Victoria grumbled. “Kate, we got a card from Stella.”
“Oh, that must be the info for her bridal shower.” Kate looked over. “Can you leave it out? We need to make sure we get that weekend off.”

“Stella’s getting married?” Jessica looked from the sink. “I didn’t know that.”

Victoria smirked, as she continued to go through the mail. “Yea, her and Eric weren’t expecting it either. Their engagement was rather sudden.”

“Why?”

“Well, you know, some fathers prefer that their pregnant daughters be married before they pop the kid out.”

“Stella’s PREGNANT!?” Jessica exclaimed.

Lynn raised an eyebrow. “How did you not know that?”

Jessica’s face colored. “I don’t... I mean, I haven’t spoken to her in months.”

“Aren’t you friends on Facebook?”

“I don’t have a Facebook account.”

“Well, you need to make one.” Lynn looked back at Kate. “It’s next month, on the fifth. I got the letter last week. Little behind on your mail?”

Victoria shrugged, as she continued to go through the envelopes. “Like I said, we’ve been busy. Babe, can I throw these out?”

Kate looked over the catalogs in Victoria’s hands. “Yea, go ahead. The sales are probably over anyway. Anything important in there?”

“Not really. Couple of bills, some more mailers...” Victoria frowned, as she held up a large white envelope with a barcode. “And you’ve got a letter here from a law firm.”

“I do?” Kate cocked her head. “Really?”

“Sawyer and Hartmann? Never heard of them.” Victoria flipped it around. “Want me to open it?”

“Yes please.”

Victoria tore it open and slid out the paperwork. She flipped through it, reading silently.

“... huh.”

“What?” Kate craned her neck to look at her wife. “What is it?”

Victoria set the paperwork down and pulled out her cell phone. “I need to make a call.”

“Babe? BABE!”

Victoria paused mid-turn. “What?”

“What IS it?”

Her wife sighed, as she picked the paperwork back up. “Look, Kate, you don’t need to worry about it. I’ll have the lawyers make it go away. There is not a chance in hell this will ever work.”
“What will ever work?”

Jessica and Lynn both stopped what they were doing as they watched Victoria walk over to the couch and sit down next to Kate. “It’s your mother.”

“My... mom? What about her?”

“She’s suing for visitation.”

Kate blinked. “Excuse me? I’m an adult. She can’t force me to visit her.”

“Not you, babe.” Victoria nodded at the baby. “Kevin.”

Kate froze, her eye blinks the only movement she exhibited. Lynn and Jessica straightened back up, watching the two of them very carefully.

“My mother.” Kate swallowed. “Is suing to see... our son?”

Victoria nodded.

“Okay.” Kate exhaled. “Okay, then.”

“Babe, once I give it to the lawyers, they’ll-”

“Turn them loose.”

Victoria paused. “Huh?”

“Turn your family lawyers loose.” Kate shot her a hard look. “Take their leashes off. I want them to destroy my mother so badly that she never comes back. I don’t care what they do, how they do it, who they bribe, who they have to beat up, or who they have to kill.”

A grin came over Victoria’s face. “Really?”

“WHATEVER it takes,” Kate said.

Victoria stood back up. “Excuse me.”

Kate watched her walk out onto the balcony, then turned back to Kevin as she lowered him, closing her shirt and lifting him to her shoulder. “Are you okay?” Jessica asked.

“I’m fine,” Kate replied, as she patted Kevin’s back gently.

“Are you sure?” Lynn put her garbage bag on the floor and walked over to the couch. Jessica joined her, and they both sat down. “I know our Mom is-”

“The lawyers Vicky and her dad keep on retainer are the best in the state.” Kate smiled as Kevin finally burped. “I have every confidence that they’ll handle this. That woman will see our baby over my dead body.”

Kevin immediately started to squirm and fuss, as Kate took him off her shoulder. “Shh, shh, it’s okay,” she cooed. “It’s okay, sweetie.”

It didn’t work. Kevin continued to fuss, and started squalling. “Oh, no, I’m sorry,” Kate moaned, as she started to rock him. “Once he starts, he’ll do this for hours...”
Jessica stood and walked to her bag. She undid the zipper and rustled through it, coming back with her violin case. “Is it, uh, okay if I—”

“Yes,” Kate said immediately, as she continued to rock Kevin in her arms. “Try it, please.”

Jessica immediately removed her violin from the case, setting it to her cheek and laying the bow on the strings. She waited her usual couple of seconds before she started playing, a very low and peaceful melody flowing from her instrument.

Almost immediately Kevin stopped crying and squirming, and stared at his aunt’s violin as she played. Jessica stepped closer, bending over to let Kevin watch her bow fly over the strings. A happy expression came over his face for several minutes.

When the song finally ended and Jessica lowered her bow, Kevin made a noise of contentment as he settled into Kate. “Wow,” Lynn chuckled. “I think he liked it.”

“Oh.” Kate looked up at Jessica. “You’re not allowed to go to New York. You have to stay here.”

Jessica rolled her eyes. “Right.”

“I’m not kidding. At the very least, we need to record you doing that.”

Her sister smirked, as she put her violin back in its case. “Sure thing.”

“You can’t be serious.”

Victoria nodded, as she leaned on the balcony railing. “We got it a couple of days ago.”

“It won’t work, right?” Chloe leaned forward, staring at Victoria with a piercing gaze. “That bitch tried to kill your wife. And mine. There’s no way any judge with a lick of common sense will allow this.”

“Not a chance.” Victoria smirked. “Grandparent’s rights exist, but you need to have a pre-existing relationship with the baby in order to claim them. That woman has never even seen Kevin. Besides, the Supreme Court says that parents have the ultimate say in who a child does or does not see, so we can tell her to take a flying leap.”

“Good.” Chloe sighed, as she ran her hand through her hair. “How’d she even know about your kid? I’m assuming they don’t have Facebook in jail, and I know her family isn’t speaking to her anymore. For that matter, how did she even hire a lawyer?”

“Yea, I was kind of concerned about that,” Victoria acknowledged. “Apparently her sister, Kate’s aunt, went to see her in jail and told her about the baby. And paid for the lawyers to take the case.”

Chloe arched an eyebrow. “Your mother-in-law has a sister?”

“Yea. Kate’s Aunt Catherine.” Victoria shook her head. “My wife and her aunt aren’t close, but they are Facebook friends. And apparently, Aunt Catherine’s a little pissed off at us, on account of putting her sister in jail; in her mind, we should have rug-swept, because that’s what family does for each other.”

“Christ. Your lawyers are handling it, right?”

“Oh, yea. They already spoke to the law firm she contracted, to make sure they had the full story.”
Chloe cocked her head. “Did they not?”

“No. Kate’s aunt fed them some bullshit line about her mother having raised that baby for years. Once they found out that Kevin is barely six weeks old, and got her mother’s full criminal record, they decided to drop the case and fire her as a client.” Victoria’s grin turned conniving. “We’re also pulling some strings with a judge to have her declared a vexatious litigant.”

“Fuck does that mean?”

“It means that she won’t be able to take any more legal action without the permission of a senior judge. And any lawyer that helps her runs the risk of being disbarred. She’ll essentially be legal kryptonite.” Victoria shrugged. “Usually you need multiple instances of legal abuse to be declared one, but... well. Being super-rich has it’s perks.”

Chloe smirked. “And auntie?”

“Was sent a very strongly-worded Cease and Desist letter. The lawyers basically said that if she tries anything, or makes contact with us ever again, we’ll bury her in so much legal debt that she’ll be forking over the money she earns panhandling on the side of the highway.”

“Hmm.” Chloe leaned against the railing. “Normally I don’t condone abuses of power through financial means.”

“But in this case...”

“Your mother-in-law almost killed my wife. I hope they fuck her with a rusty mace.”

Victoria shook her head. “Your level of class is truly impressive.”

“Big talk from a woman who’s bribing a judge to declare her persona non grata with the court.”

“Fair enough.” Victoria glanced over her shoulder. “I think they’re doing the picture. Let’s go back inside.”

They headed back into the living room, where Max and Kate were trying to position the babies on the couch. “Come on, Faith, stop squirming,” Max coaxed as she tried to sit her upright.

Her sister didn’t listen, as she babbled and tried to roll on top of Kevin. For his part, the boy wouldn’t stop kicking. “No, sweetie, please, just sit still,” Kate begged, as she tried to put him back in position while Max wrangled Faith.

“How’s it going?” Chloe asked, as they walked around the couch.

“Like nailing Jell-O to a tree.” Max didn’t look up, as she took hole of Faith’s hands. “Faith, just-dang it, kid, could you sit still for five seconds?”

Across from them, Lynn rolled her eyes as she held the camera. “I told you this wasn’t going to work.”

“This WILL work, and it will be such a cute picture,” Kate scolded her. “We- no, Kevin, stop that. We just need a distraction.”

Lynn turned to her right. “Jessica?”

She lifted her violin, setting the bow and beginning a fast-paced melody. Faith and Kevin immediately stopped squirming and faced her as they listened.
Max and Kate took the opportunity to quickly sit them upright, against the back of the couch cushion, and stepped away. Lynn took a spot behind Jessica and stuck the lens of the camera over her shoulder, snapping several photos. She swapped out with Max and Kate as they both took photos on their cell phones.

“That is adorable,” Kate gushed, as she looked at her phone. “We are so having that framed.”

“Oh, yea. Us too.” Max nodded as she flipped through the photos on her own phone. “If we can find room, anyway. We have so many pictures of her on the wall already.”

Jessica stopped playing and lowered her violin. The two babies quickly began squirming again. “Oh, I know,” Chloe exclaimed, as she scooped up Faith. “The mean lady stopped playing for you. How dare she?”

Kate laughed, as she walked forward and picked up Kevin. “Have you had any more Chernobyl incidents since April?”

“It was NOT Chernobyl,” Max said, exasperated.

“You weren’t there,” Chloe shot back. “Only me and Steph. It was totally Chernobyl. And no, she hasn’t taken that huge of a dump on either of us since then.”

“How about her words?” Victoria asked. “Has she said either of your names?”

“Eh... sort of.” Chloe turned Faith and pointed at Max. “Who’s that, kid? Who is that?”

“Mats!” Faith exclaimed, gesturing wildly with one arm.

Max sighed. “Getting closer.”

“What about me?” Chloe asked, bouncing Faith in her arms. “What’s MY name?”

Faith looked at her and blinked silently.

“We’re pretty sure ‘Chloe’ is a little much for her right now,” Max said after a few seconds. “She can’t seem to grasp it.”

“Either that, or she’s trying to remember ‘muppet-head’,” Victoria chortled.

Chloe shot her a look and turned Faith to see her. “What about her? Who’s that, kid?”

Faith looked at Victoria and blinked some more, before she smiled. “Vic!!”

Kate choked on laughter, as Victoria did a double-take. “Did... you mother f- you were serious?! Did you really teach her that my name is Vic?!”

“I show her your picture and repeat it.” Chloe grinned mischievously. “It’s imprinted now. No going back.”

Victoria took three big steps over and took Faith’s little fist, getting very close to the toddler’s face. “Vic-tor-i-a,” she pronounced loudly. “Say it, Faith, before I kill your sister-in-law! Vic-tor-i-a!”

“Vic!” Faith exclaimed happily again, reaching up and touching Victoria’s nose. “Vic!”

Kate and Lynn both started snickering, and Victoria turned to them with narrowed eyes. “The two of you are NOT helping!”
“Vicky, she’s fifteen months old,” Kate replied, amused. “Give her a break.”

“This isn’t funny!” Victoria retorted. “That is NOT my name!”

“If she can’t handle ‘Chloe’, what makes you think she’s going to say ‘Victoria’?” Lynn asked.

“I don’t care! She’s NOT going to grow up calling me Vic!” Victoria turned back to the toddler. “VIC-TOR-I-A!!”

“Vic!”

“Son of a...”

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**Taylor:** BOW, BITCHES!! BOW BEFORE ME AND DO MY BIDDING!!

**Dana:** ... no?

**Victoria:** Yea, I’m gonna pass.

**Courtney:** Why the hell would we do that?

**Taylor:** <ring.jpg>

**Courtney:** WHAT

**Dana:** ARE YOU ENGAGED?!?!

**Victoria:** DO I GET TO BE A MAID OF HONOR AGAIN?!

**Taylor:** YES TO ALL!!

**Taylor:** Except you, Court. That’s kind of an awkward response.

**Dana:** Wait, why the hell does Victoria get to be the MOH?!

**Victoria:** Because she was mine! I called it!

**Dana:** What the fuck?! Why does everyone get to be a MOH but me?!

**Taylor:** Well, maybe if Courtney got off her ass and found a fiancé you would have by now.

**Courtney:** Oh, look at miss high and mighty, on her pedestal just because she found a boy who would put up with her shit.

**Taylor:** Literally nothing you just said was a bad thing, and yet you made it seem like it was.

**Dana:** Dammit Court, hurry up and make your BF propose already!

**Courtney:** Dude, Bryan and I have only been together for eight months. We’re just now TALKING about moving in together.

**Victoria:** Ooh, still. Big step.

**Dana:** Gonna move in with him? Or he moving in with you?
Courtney: Definitely not with him, he sublets. Either he’ll come to me, or we’ll find a new place when my lease expires.

Dana: Another condo? Or are you looking at a house?

Courtney: Definitely a condo. Housing around here is expensive as fuck.

Victoria: My parents used to know a really good realtor back in Seattle, do you want his number?

Courtney: Hmm. We might. Does he do, like-super-expensive places, or stuff we can afford?

Victoria: A little of both.

Taylor: EXCUSE ME, I JUST GOT FUCKING ENGAGED!!

Taylor: I AM THE FOCUS OF THIS CONVERSATION!!

Taylor: NOT COURTNEY!!

Victoria: Sorry! How did he do it? Was it romantic?

Taylor: Meh. He made like he was tying his shoe in front of the Washington Monument, and came up with the ring. I don’t know about romantic, but it was a hell of a backdrop.

Dana: Nice! I actually kind of wish Trevor had done it someplace nicer than a restaurant. It would’ve made for a better picture.

Taylor: You guys took pictures?

Courtney: ... did you not?

Taylor: Shit. Should we have? I don’t know!

Victoria: At least, like, a selfie or something to remember the moment?

Taylor: No! I didn’t even think about it!

Dana: Okay, did you put anything on Facebook yet?

Taylor: I was going to do it after we called our parents.

Dana: Then go back. Get someone to take a picture of you and do it again.

Taylor: But it won’t be the moment!

Victoria: Then call it a dramatic re-enactment, because you were too busy being swept off your feet to remember to take a photo.

Taylor: Mm. That works.

Courtney: Make sure he does the whole thing over again, though. Where he bends over to tie his shoe, then pops back up with the ring box.

Taylor: He didn’t have a box.
Dana: He didn’t?

Taylor: He just came up with the ring.

Victoria: ... where was the ring before he gave it to you?

Taylor: His hand.

Victoria: Are you sure?

Taylor: ... oh, God.

Dana: Are you wearing a ring that spent time in your fiancé’s SOCK?!

Taylor: NO

Taylor: NO NO NO

Taylor: PLEASE GOD NO

Courtney: OH MY GOD YOU ARE SO WEARING A SOCK RING RIGHT NOW

Taylor: SHUT UP NO I’M NOT

Victoria: WAS IT MOIST WHEN HE GAVE IT TO YOU??

Taylor: YES

Taylor: I THOUGHT IT WAS BECAUSE HIS HANDS WERE SWEATING

Dana: OMG YOU’RE WEARING A RING COVERED WITH STINKY FOOT JUICE

Taylor: NO!! NO I AM NOT!!

Courtney: ASK HIM ASK HIM ASK HIM

Taylor: HE WON’T TELL ME!!

Victoria: THIS IS THE BEST ENGAGEMENT ANNOUNCEMENT EVER!!
SENTENCING, CLOSURE, REIMBURSMENT FOR CHURCH VICTIMS

Story by Darcy Patel & Juliet Watson

It’s been nine months since the police raid that rocked the followers of First Light of Christ, and the dominos have been falling ever since.

Within the twenty-four hours following the early-morning raid on the church property, as well as the properties of the church leadership, more than sixty people were arrested for a wide variety of crimes, running the gambit from simple theft to First-Degree Murder. In the weeks that followed, more than a hundred people were also charged with accessory crimes as the initial arrestees made plea deals that involved full confessions that implicated others.

In total, almost three hundred years of prison sentences have been handed out, according to federal prosecutor Otto Jones.

During the raid, the FBI recovered more than fifty computers. Agent Warren Graham, the agent in charge of the task force, reported that the electronic evidence they uncovered was massive, and uncovered an elaborate money-laundering network that spanned the globe, with offshore accounts in the Bahamas, Hong Kong, Cayman Islands, and Lichtenstein. Graham informed the Seattle Times in an exclusive interview that between First Light’s fraud, theft, and financial investments, the FBI had recovered more than thirty million dollars.

He also reported that they were still examining the evidence, and believed that not all of the stolen funds have been recovered.

The masterminds behind First Light’s financial crimes have reportedly said very little about the church dealings. Of the four men who held Elder positions in the church, only two have made plea deals. Richard Jefferson accepted a twenty-year sentence for conspiracy to commit kidnapping, wire fraud, and multiple counts of aggravated assault; Ryan Caulfield accepted twenty-five years for conspiracy to commit murder, as well as lesser charges.

Preston Xavier, the man who ran all of First Light’s business holdings around Oregon, has thus far refused to cooperate. His son, Peter, and daughter, Melody, have also refused to speak with the police on any church matters.

James Scott, the financial mastermind behind the money-laundering network, has likewise refused to speak with investigators. His son and daughter-in-law have already accepted ten-year prison sentences, and his grandson has received a twelve-year sentence for his role in the fraud, as well as for assaulting an officer who tried to arrest him.

Despite their non-cooperation, the FBI is confident that they have enough to proceed with trials, which will begin later this year. “We intend to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that Mister Xavier and Mister Scott knowingly stole money from both the state and federal governments, as well as their own parishioners,” Jones told us. He also acknowledged and publicly thanked the district attorney, James Amber, for his assistance in rendering justice.

As for the money, most of what was recovered will be returned to the people it was stolen from. Within the month following the raid, once their crimes had become known, a large number of
parishioners left the church while filing a class-action lawsuit. That suit was settled, and all of the former members who joined it had their stolen money returned.

Mitchell Pearson, one of the former parishioners, agreed to speak to the Seattle Times on the condition that his location not be revealed; he was concerned for reprisals by current First Light members against him, his wife, and their two-year-old daughter. He confirmed that First Light has not only stolen money from his tax returns, which the church insisted on filing on behalf of all their members, but from the food stamps they were supposed to be receiving.

“We weren’t even aware that we were supposed to receive a debit card,” he told us, referring to the Oregon Trail card that the state hands out to those receiving SNAP benefits. “The church had it sent to one of their addresses instead. Then the charged it for all the money in the account, and used a third of it to buy a small amount of food for us.”

He informed the Times that part of the church settlement involved a non-disclosure. But he was able to say that he got his money back, as well as punitive damages; enough for him and his young family to start over in another city.

So what does the future of First Light hold? The church is still active, and continues to hold services, despite hundreds of people having left their congregation. But with federal investigators from the FBI and IRS still going through their books, the church is not bringing in anywhere near the amount of money as they used to be. Already, they’ve been forced to sell their interests in two businesses to pay for legal fees and penalties. And their car dealership, which was staffed entirely by parishioners, has been forced to stop operating for multiple counts of fraud.

But they seem confident that they will overcome. Already, two new men have stepped into Elder positions; Thomas Maxson, the man who managed two of First Light’s businesses (who has not been implicated in the widespread fraud), and Eric Jefferson, the oldest son of former Elder Richard Jefferson. Both men have made statements to their congregation that they would “guide them through the storm”, and that their church “would emerge stronger than ever”.

Max: Thomas Maxson and Eric Jefferson? Really?
Juliet: You know them?
Max: Of them. I remember my dad once called Maxson a wedge.
Juliet: A wedge?
Max: When I asked what the meant, he said that it was the simplest tool in the world, which was the best thing to call him.
Juliet: WOW. I wish you’d told me that before we went to print.
Max: That doesn’t seem like something you guys would’ve been allowed to publish.
Juliet: I still would’ve liked to try. So Maxson’s an idiot?
Max: I don’t know about that; he was one of the few people in the church to get a college degree. But they had him run the laundromats.
Juliet: How much managing does a laundromat need?
Max: Not much, I’d imagine. Probably why he was put in charge.

Juliet: Nice. What about Jefferson?

Max: I mostly remember him following his dad around like a puppy. And that the few times he did speak, the other Elders talked to him like he was a toddler.

Max: And his dad would make that face, like “please shut the hell up”.

Juliet: So he’s an idiot, too.

Max: More like desperate to be involved.

Max: Remember, the only reason that his dad was an Elder is because he’s related to Mark Jefferson. I’m pretty sure Eric figured that once his dad kicked the bucket, the title would be his by default.

Juliet: Would it have?

Max: Maybe. Probably. But I don’t think he would have had the same amount of influence his father held. The other Elders, and the Pastors, always made it clear that Eric’s input wasn’t wanted.

Juliet: But they’re in jail. So now it’s his time to shine.

Max: Yep. And given how little people thought of his input, I’m sure that he’ll have plenty of chances to fuck it up.

Chloe: So, how’s living with the girlfriend? :)

Steph: I feel like your and Max’s level of enjoyment about this is getting creepy.

Chloe: Maybe a little. Still.

Steph: I didn’t realize combining two households worth of crap would be so hard.

Chloe: Really?

Steph: Didn’t you and Max do this?

Chloe: She lived with Jake, remember? All she brought with her was her clothes.

Steph: Well, I didn’t. We had an argument when we started going through everything, about which kitchenware we would keep.

Chloe: Kitchenware? Really?

Steph: Yep. I went total Martha Stewart. All my stuff is ceramic, and I splurged on really nice kitchen knives.

Steph: Rachel, on the other hand, apparently thinks it’s the 1800’s. All of her pans are cast iron. And her knives came from Wal-Mart.

Chloe: So what did you do?
**Steph:** She won. My stuff was getting pretty old, and hers are seasoned, which I didn’t know was a thing. We donated her knives, though. And kept one of my smaller pans for eggs.

**Steph:** Then we got into a row about the TVs. Hers was bigger, but mine’s 4K and works with WiFi, so I won.

**Chloe:** I’m on your team. We need to get one of those 4Ks, actually.

**Steph:** You really should.

**Steph:** Anyway, the big argument was wall decorations, believe it or not. She has all this artsy stuff, and actual paintings. Like the kind you by at street fairs for a couple hundred bucks.

**Chloe:** And what do you have?

**Steph:** Posters of video games that I’ve worked on. And the Star Wars poster I found on eBay that was autographed by Daisy Ridley.

**Chloe:** I remember that! It’s badass!

**Steph:** Tell it to Rachel. I thought she was going to have conniptions when I tried to hang it in the bedroom.

**Chloe:** ROFL

**Chloe:** Did she let you keep it there?

**Steph:** Not yet. But she will if it kills me.

**Brooke:** What happened with my brother?

**Miss Amber:** How do you mean?

**Brooke:** I read the article Juliet helped write. He assaulted a cop?

**Miss Amber:** ... I thought you knew.

**Brooke:** First I’m hearing about it.

**Miss Amber:** Apparently, he was trying to wipe your grandfather’s hard drive when the cops came in. He stabbed one of them in the arm with a letter opener.

**Brooke:** Oh, God. Is he okay?

**Miss Amber:** He was fine. The officers subdued him quickly.

**Brooke:** I meant the cop.

**Miss Amber:** Oh. He’s fine, too. It was apparently a minor wound, and only needed a few stitches.

**Brooke:** Good.

**Brooke:** Should I send the cop an email or something?
Miss Amber: Why?

Brooke: To apologize for my brother being a dickhead?

Miss Amber: That’s not your fault.

Brooke: I still feel bad. I was the one who gave them the info for the search warrants.

Miss Amber: It really isn’t necessary, Brooke.

Miss Amber: But if it’ll make you feel better, you can send me your email. I’ll make sure it gets to him.

Brooke: Yea. Thanks.

Miss Amber: What about your brother?

Brooke: What about him?

Miss Amber: He’s going to jail. Do you want to talk about that?

Brooke: Nothing to talk about.

Miss Amber: Are you sure? I know it’s a lot to deal with.

Brooke: It really isn’t. I knew that what I had was going to put my family in jail before I handed it over to Agent Graham. And I figured that Henry would be a part of that, since he was working for Caulfield.

Brooke: Literally my entire family was full of criminals, who tried to force me to marry the psychotic motherfucker that set fire to Chloe’s truck. And my brother was trying to help Cuntface take Aaron away from Regina.

Brooke: As far as I’m concerned, they’re all exactly where they belong.

Miss Amber: Language.

Brooke: You’re not my social worker anymore.

Miss Amber: ... fair enough.

Miss Amber: But that doesn’t mean I won’t be here, if you ever want to talk.

Brooke: Yea, I know. I appreciate it.

Courtney: Are you coming up for Dana’s baby shower?

Victoria: Maybe. We’re not sure yet.

Courtney: Why? What’s wrong?

Victoria: I may be out of the country that weekend. And Kate doesn’t want to travel with Kevin by herself.
Courtney: Don’t you, like, own the company? Make some other schmuck do it.

Victoria: First of all, no, I don’t. Second, the trip would be to negotiate a contract in Japan worth millions of dollars, so I can’t really back out.

Courtney: Do you really not have any stake in your family business?

Victoria: Why the hell would I?

Courtney: I don’t know, because you’re Derek Chase’s only kid?

Victoria: Yea, that’s the message we want to send to shareholders, that we still promote people based on nepotism.

Courtney: Hey, if it works...

Victoria: I’m already working my way up faster than most people. But I’m only getting away with it because I’m busting my ass. And I’ve taken a lot of personal time on account of Kevin as it is. Missing this trip is not an option.

Courtney: ... fine. You’re at least going to send a gift if you can’t, right?

Victoria: Of course I am.

Victoria: I already placed the order. Whether I’m there or not, a freight truck is going to deliver a pallet of diapers on her front lawn.

Courtney: Seriously??

Victoria: Yep :)

Courtney: Oh my GOD I cannot wait to see the look on her face!

Courtney: You think they’ll go through it all?

Victoria: Trust me on this one.

Jake: Is it really three hundred years? That seems like a lot.

James: It’ll actually be closer to four hundred, once everything is said and done.

Jake: Wow.

David: It’s the people being charged with murder. They’ll drive the total up.

James: Exactly. And so will Jesse Bowers. We’ve got multiple counts of kidnapping and murder to slap him with.

Jake: How many years does that get him?

James: Hundred and thirty.

David: He killed three teenagers. You didn’t want to go for the death penalty?
James: Oregon is a pretty liberal state. Getting the death penalty isn’t really worth the effort. Besides, there’s a moratorium in place.

David: Too bad. In Arizona, we would’ve made him fry.

Jake: ... they still have the electric chair in AZ?

David: No. Figure of speech.

James: In any event, there’s really only a few of them getting double-digit sentences. Most of the parishioners we arrested only had minor roles in the fraud.

David: It was a RICO case, right? The top guys are being held responsible for most of it?

James: Oh, yes. Otto Jones is trying to put the Elders away for at least twenty years each.

Jake: What about the Pastors? The article didn’t mention them.

James: We asked Miss Patel and Miss Watson not to mention them. People tend to get antsy when they hear religious leaders are being sentenced for crimes.

Jake: So they are being tried?

James: They both accepted plea deals.

James: Thompson will get fifteen years, mostly for assault; we had a few people tell us that he was one of the main instigators of those Sinner’s Exorcisms. Rogan will only get five or so.

David: That’s it?

James: From what we uncovered, while he benefitted from the fraud, he didn’t really do anything to further it. And while Thompson’s been rather combative and indignant, Rogan’s actually been pretty cooperative.

James: Also, there’s not much point to put him away for longer. He’s dying.

Jake: He is? Of what?

James: He was diagnosed with Leukemia last year. He only has a few months to live.

David: Oh. Yea, it doesn’t seem worth it.

Jake: I thought Leukemia took longer to get to that level?

James: He hasn’t been getting it treated, except for pain medication. The doctors he’s been seeing said he’s not interested; he’s very insistent that he be allowed to reunite with his wife.

David: How’s that going to work for prison?

James: He’s not going to prison, he’s going to a state-run hospice. We negotiated that as part of his plea deal, in exchange for telling us everything he knew about the fraud.

David: What about the other two Elders? Scott and Xavier?
James: Jones is still working on that. Trying to get them to plead out, so he can avoid very expensive trials.

Jake: I think I’m a little confused. Which of you guys is handing what?

James: Jones is handling the big-league stuff, the Elders and the parishioners who were instrumental to the fraud. Less cases, but more work. My office has been handling the lesser charges.

James: Most of our work is done. There are only a few people who won’t plead out, and we’ll be taking them to trial. But they’re open-and-shut cases.

Jake: And the church?

James: As the article said, they’re trying to persevere. But they’ve lost hundreds of parishioners, and several streams of income, as well as all their hidden money.

James: They’re not dead yet; they still have thousands of other supporters in their community. But I think that when the history books are written, the raid will be annotated as the turning point.

David: You should write that in your memoirs.

James: You like it? I’ve been rehearsing.

Lisa: Okay, you guys were right. Doctor Greene is legit.

Sienna: Told you. How was it?

Lisa: She gave me a prescription for Klonopin. But she doesn’t want me to take it unless I really need it. Apparently, it’s got some uncool side effects.

Sienna: You’re still having trouble sleeping?

Lisa: It’s usually fine. But sometimes... it’s like my brother has his hands around my neck again, except it actually fades to black, instead of him getting tackled by a cop.

Sienna: ... I’m sorry.

Lisa: Not your fault.

Sienna: I didn’t help. I should’ve told Miss Amber way before your family found out.

Lisa: I asked you not to, remember?

Sienna: Don’t remind me. How long is he in jail for?

Lisa: Miss Amber said him and my mom took five-year plea deals, which include restraining orders. So I’ll never see them again.

Sienna: How’s the foster house? Brooke and Emily always talked about how cool Jane and Pete were.

Lisa: Pretty awesome. Pete’s actually teaching me how to box.
Lisa: And he taught me a couple of moves I can do if I ever see my brother again, that’ll make him wish he was dead.

Sienna: Like what?

Lisa: He said I’m not allowed to tell. But apparently, it’s pretty easy to break someone’s pelvic cartilage, if you know where to punch them.

Sienna: ... that hurt just thinking about it.
Steph & Rachel: "I want them back."

October 2021.

“Would you state your full name and occupation, for the record?”

Rachel nodded as she sat forward, towards the microphone in the witness box. “Rachel Dawn Amber. And I’m a social worker with the department of Child Protective Services.”

The ADA, Elizabeth Richards, nodded as she stood in front of her. “Are you familiar with the defendant in today’s case?”

She glanced across to the other lawyer and his client, both in suits and watching her intently. “I remember Mister Finnegan.”

“In what capacity?”

“I was called to his residence five months ago, in the late afternoon, to take temporary custody of his daughters.”

“For what reason?”

“Mister Finnegan and his wife were being placed under arrest for food stamp fraud, obstructing justice, destruction of evidence, and...” Rachel looked up in thought. “Another charge that I can’t recall at this time.”

Elizabeth smirked. “It was making a false statement.”

“If you say so.”

“What happened when you met their children...” the ADA paused, as she stepped back to her table and checked her notes. “Kinsey and Elisa?”

Rachel looked back into the crowd, past the lawyer and his client, to see Finnegan’s wife. The younger blonde woman was sitting behind her husband, clearly upset as she watched the proceedings unfold.

She cleared her throat and turned back to the ADA. “Their parents had already been detained, and the children were being kept in the kitchen under the supervision of the Arcadia Bay Police Department. I explained to them that they weren’t going to be able to stay with their parents for a little while, and asked if they had any family nearby. Grandparents, or any aunts or uncles.”

“And what did they say?”

“They both said that their husbands lived down the street.”

Hushed murmurs came from the jury box, as twelve people listened to her testimony. Elizabeth spared them a glance before she turned back to Rachel. “And, for the record, how old are Kinsey and Elisa?”

“Kinsey is nine years old. Elisa is six.”
“Children of that age tend to have active imaginations,” Elizabeth remarked. “How did you know they weren’t using them?”

Rachel cleared her throat. “The police had a warrant that allowed them to search the entire house for evidence,” she explained. “I asked the detectives if we could look for anything that might corroborate what they said. They had found some paperwork hidden in the air ducts of the house, and when we looked through it, we found two marriage licenses belonging to Kinsey and Elisa.”

“These are OFFICIAL marriage licenses?” Elizabeth asked pointedly, as the murmuring from the jury box increased in volume. “Not ones that were done up in Photoshop or something?”

“No. They were current Oregon marriage licenses that had both been signed a year or so prior,” Rachel answered. “The children told me that they were the ones they signed with a pair of eleven-year-old twin brothers that lived nearby.”

“Objection,” The opposing lawyer called. “Hearsay, your honor.”

Elizabeth seemed ready for the argument. “Your honor, the people would refer to evidence exhibits eight, nine, and ten,” she said, retrieving three pieces of paper and handing them to the judge. “You’ll note the first two are marriage licenses, one of which has been signed with what appears to be a green marker. The third is a transcript of the video statements given by Kinsey and Elisa, where they describe their wedding in very impressive detail for children of that age.”

The female judge studied the papers, frowning. She turned to Rachel after a few minutes. “The children remembered the ceremonies?”

“Kinsey more so than Elisa,” Rachel answered. “But yes. She describes, in the video, how she got to put on a white dress and pretend to be a big girl while Pastor Thompson married her to the other boy. And she remembered Elisa using a magic marker, because the pen her father had was too small for her hand.”

The judge’s lips were pressed together tightly, as she looked at the man on trial; the displeasure was evident in her face. But she kept a neutral voice, as she set the paperwork down. “You may continue, Miss Richards.”

Elizabeth nodded, turning and walking towards the jury. “Nine and six,” she repeated for them, before she turned back to Rachel. “Would you remind us what the minimum age to get legally married in Oregon is, Miss Amber?”

“Seventeen,” Rachel answered.

“Where are Kinsey and Elisa right now?”

“In one of our secured foster homes.”

“What, exactly, IS a ‘secured’ foster home?”

“It’s a home that we place children when the state has a greater than normal concern for their well-being,” Rachel said. “One that has extra security, for children who we feel are in danger of being adversely retrieved by their parents while-”

“Objection,” the lawyer called again. “Your honor, we object fiercely to the notion that Mister Finnegan is a risk to his children. He’s a loving father who was trying to do what he thought was best for his kids.”
The judge scoffed. “If that’s the best argument you have, counselor, then I suggest you sit back down and re-evaluate your definition of a ‘loving father’. Because mine doesn’t involve forcing a marriage onto a child who hasn’t finished learning the alphabet.” She looked back at Elizabeth. “Is there anything else related to this case, Miss Richards?”

“No, your honor.” Elizabeth shook her head. “I think we’ve made our point.”

“So, is he going to be found guilty?”

Rachel nodded, as she took another bite of her waffles. “Most likely. The guy’s lawyer couldn’t pick at anything when he cross-examined me. Elizabeth seems pretty sure that if the jury doesn’t convict him of anything else, they’ll definitely get him for child abuse.”

Steph tilted her head. “Seems like kind of a leap, to go from marrying off your toddler to child abuse.”

“Elizabeth is very creative. And my dad’s used the argument before.” Rachel shrugged, as she ate the last of her food. “Damn, I needed that. Enough about court. How was work?”

“Interesting. I finally got to see some of my characters in the VR environment.”

“Oh yea?” Rachel smiled. “How did they look?”

Steph sighed. “Like shit.”

“What?” Rachel stared at her. “You guys have been working on them for weeks! I thought they were going to look good!”

“The graphics engine is literally brand-new,” Steph explained. “They didn’t look TERRIBLE, but it’s not the quality I was used to back in San Francisco. The animators are still working on them.”

“Bummer.” Rachel sat back. “So what now?”

Steph shrugged, as she picked up and ate her last fry. “We keep working. If nothing else, we have a baseline that we can improve on. The animators will fine-tune the program, and those of us creating the content will press on with what we’ve got.”

Rachel pursed her lips and shrugged. “I guess that works. Are you ready to go home?”

She inhaled deeply as she drove them home, soaking up the crisp fall air that blew in through their cracked-open windows.

They’d been living together for almost four months, and everything was amazing. Rachel actually wanted to go home at the end of the day, rather than find reasons to stay at her office. Her mother had even commented that she seemed to be much happier.

_It is nice to come home to someone, instead of an empty apartment and Netflix._ Rachel smiled as she looked over at Steph, who was fiddling with the radio. _I can’t believe how close I was to getting a cat._

Steph sat back and noticed her. “What are you smiling at?”

“You.” Rachel looked back at the road. “Just thinking about how amazing these past few months have been.”
Her girlfriend cocked her head, flashing her own smile. “Are you angling to get something out of me?”

“Yes.” Rachel reached over and grabbed Steph’s hand, intertwining their fingers. “For you to take me to bed, so we can cuddle and watch more reruns of Glee.”

Steph rolled her eyes. “Christ, woman, you could not BE a bigger lesbian.”

“I could always get my hair chopped off into a buzz cut.”

“If you do, I swear to God I’m going back to San Francisco.”

Rachel snickered. “What about an undercut?” she asked, as she turned into the apartment parking lot. “Just a little patch, right above my ear. Chloe told me that she was thinking about doing it.”

Steph examined Rachel’s hair. “I... would be SLIGHTLY okay with that.”

“Really?” Rachel raised her eyebrows. “I was kidding.”

“Well, I mean, when you do an undercut right, it does look sexy.” Steph reached over and brushed Rachel’s hair off of her ear, studying the look. “Mm. I bet you could pull it off.”

“Only in your dreams.” Rachel shook her head, as she parked the car and killed the engine. “My office has a dress code that prohibits faddish hairstyles.”

Steph sighed. “How fascist.”

Rachel ignored the dig as they got out of the car, closing the doors behind them. She turned to lock it, and was just hitting the button on her keys when she heard it behind her.

“I want them back.”

She spun, and her heart stopped.

Finnegan’s wife was standing right behind her. And she had a knife in her hand.

The blonde was shaking, and Rachel could see the desperation in her eyes, as she held the large kitchen knife at her side. She could only see who it was from the apartment lights; the woman was wearing a sweatshirt, the hood flipped over her head. Her breathing was rapid, as she stared at her.

Rachel racked her brain quickly, trying to remember Finnegan’s wife’s name. “Amy,” she said after a second. “Whatever you-”


Steph looked up as she walked around the car and stopped, staring at them in horror. “... oh my God.”

“No!” The hand with the knife shot up, Amy pointing it at Rachel as Steph’s hand reached for the phone in her pocket. “Don’t you move!”

Her girlfriend froze, standing shock-still as she watched with wide eyes.

“Amy, you need to put that down,” Rachel breathed. “This is not going to get your kids back. You need to think about what you’re doing. If you hurt me, you’ll go to jail, and that will be way worse
“I didn’t do anything!” Amy’s outburst made Rachel flinch, and she watched the knife inch closer to her chest. “Jack arranged those marriages! I couldn’t stop him! I had to submit as his wife!”

Rachel watched the woman hyperventilate, and her mind raced as she tried to think about what to do. “Amy, I don’t know where your kids are. They were—”

“LIAR!!” Amy yelled. “You took them! I know you did! I know that you know where they are!”

She took a step closer. Rachel instinctively tried to back away, but ran into her car. Amy took the opportunity to press the knife into her shirt, just below her neck; Rachel automatically cringed away, as she felt the sharp metal.

“Tell me where you put them,” Amy said quickly. “I want my little girls back. Tell me where you took them, or I swear to God I’ll kill you.”

“Okay. Okay.” Rachel slowly, almost imperceptibly, nodded as she raised her hands. “I... I have to get it out of my phone. It’s in my purse.”

“Give it to me.” Amy held her other hand out. “Give me your phone.”

“I need to unlock it with my thumbprint.”

“Do it,” Amy whispered, glancing around nervously. “Get it right now.”

Rachel slowly took her purse off her shoulder, bring it around to her front. With her other hand, she reached inside and started digging.

“Hurry up!” Amy snapped after a few seconds.

“I’m trying to find it,” Rachel said quickly. “It’s in here somewhere—”

Before Amy could do anything, Rachel tilted the purse up.

BANG!!

Steph practically jumped out of her shoes as the gunshot rang out. Amy cried out in pain, collapsing at Rachel’s feet; the bullet had sliced into her thigh. The knife clattered onto the ground, bouncing away as Amy grabbed her leg with both hands and screamed.

Rachel dropped her purse, which now had a smoking hole in the bottom of it. She then jumped on top of Amy, clamping her hands around the woman’s leg. “Call nine-one-one!” she shouted at Steph.

Her girlfriend didn’t move, eyes wide as she stood, frozen, watching the two women on the ground.

“STEPH!!”

She blinked, finally meeting Rachel’s piercing gaze.

“Call nine-one-one!” she repeated frantically. “They need to send an ambulance!”

Steph quickly grabbed her phone from her pocket, dialing. Rachel turned back to Amy, taking one hand off her leg and reaching for her belt. In one fluid motion, she undid the buckle, whipped it off, and started fastening it above the gunshot wound on her thigh. She pulled as tightly as she could, and Amy’s screaming went up an octave.
Steph & Rachel: Rainy Day

The ambulance came quickly, followed closely by the police.

EMTs put a real tourniquet on Amy, as Rachel explained in hurried tones what had happened. When the paramedics put Amy on their stretcher, one of the officers immediately handcuffed her to it, then rode with her in the back of the ambulance.

Once she was gone, the remaining officers interviewed Rachel, taking her and Steph’s full statements. They also confiscated the pistol, carefully removing the gun from her purse.

James’ car screeched into the parking lot an hour after the ambulance left, and he practically leapt out of the driver’s seat. He made a beeline for Rachel, as she sat on a bench next to Steph.

“Rachel!” Her father grabbed her shoulders, the panic evident in his voice. “Sweetie, are you okay?!”

“I’m fine,” Rachel said quietly. “The, uh... the cops took my gun again.”

James took a deep breath, exhaling with relief. “It was Finnegan’s wife?”

“She wanted to know where I placed her kids,” she confirmed. “She said if I didn’t tell, she was going to kill me.”

He turned to the nearby officer. “How is Mrs. Finnegan?”

“It sounds like she’ll be fine,” the cop assured him. “They stopped the bleeding in the ER.”

“Is an officer with her?”

“Yes. And hospital security.” The cop nodded. “Once she’s released, we’ll book her for Assault with a Deadly Weapon.”

James exhaled slowly, nodding in return. “Are you guys done with them?” he asked, nodding at Steph and Rachel.

“We might need to take a more detailed statement.” The cop looked over Rachel, sitting with a blank look on her face, and Steph, trembling as she kept a death grip on Rachel’s hand. “But it can wait.”

“Alright.” James looked at them. “You two need to go up to your apartment and pack for a couple of weeks. You’re not staying here.”

“Dad-”

“They know where you live,” James said, interrupting. “You’re coming home with me. End of discussion.”

“... okay.” Rachel stood slowly, pulling Steph upright; her girlfriend still hadn’t spoken. “Come on, babe. Let’s go.”

“You almost died.”

Steph spoke quietly, as she hugged Rachel tightly from behind in her old bedroom. They’d been
lying in bed for almost an hour, neither of them close to falling asleep.

Rachel squeezed Steph’s hands. “I know.”

“That woman almost stabbed you.”

“I know.”

“I don’t want to live in that apartment anymore.”

“We won’t.”

“And I want a gun, too.”

Rachel paused, trying to think of a response. “Steph, you don’t-”

“I couldn’t do anything.” Steph squeezed Rachel to the point where she felt like her ribs might collapse. “That woman almost killed you, and I couldn’t do anything to stop it. I want a gun.”

“Babe, you smoke pot. A dealer won’t sell you a gun.”

“I won’t tell them.”

“If you lie on the application and they find out, it’s a felony.”

“Then I’ll give you the money, and you can buy one for me.”

Rachel pushed back on Steph’s hands, rolling over to face her girlfriend. She placed her hand on the back of her neck, stroking Steph’s cheek with her thumb. “Babe, that’s called a straw purchase, and it’s not legal, either.”

“Then I’ll buy a 3-D printer and make one,” Steph countered quietly.

“Steph, that isn’t-”

“I never thought about how dangerous your job was.”

Rachel breathed out slowly. “Babe, it’s not dangerous.”

“You almost died.”

“I-”

“And you almost shot that cop last year.” Steph sniffed, and Rachel could see the moisture forming in the corners of her eyes. “I don’t like that I can’t protect you. I love you, and if anything happened to you...” she sniffled again. “I can’t. I just can’t.”

“... okay.” Rachel sighed. “Then I’ll quit.”

Steph blinked. “Huh?”

“I’ll quit. I’ll find a new job. CPS isn’t the only-”

“No.” Steph grabbed Rachel’s hand. “Stop. You can’t quit. You love your job.”

“I do. But I love you more. And I hate seeing you like this.” Rachel bit her lip. “If me doing something else makes you happy, then so be it. CPS isn’t the only job I can do with a Social Work
“No.” Steph took a deep breath. “You’re not quitting. Too many kids count on you. You’re not leaving CPS just because I’m selfish.”


Steph sighed. “I want to move,” she admitted. “I don’t care where. I’ll pay to break the lease. But I don’t want to stay in that apartment anymore.”

“We can do that.” Rachel paused. “How would you feel about a house?”

“A house?”

She nodded. “The market around here is really good. I’ve got a decent amount of savings built up, it should be enough for a down payment. And a mortgage will probably be cheaper than rent anyway.”

Steph exhaled through her nose. “That’s... I don’t know. It seems like a big step.”

“Too big?”

“I didn’t say that.” She paused. “You know I love you, right?”

“So I’ve heard.”

“I’m committed to what we’ve got. No matter what.”

Rachel smirked. “Me too.”

“Good.” Steph nodded. “Then... I am totally down for getting a house. One with a back porch,” she added. “I’ve always wanted to throw a barbeque.”

“What about a hot tub?”

“I like that idea, too.”

Max: Are you okay?!

Rachel: ... how’d you find out what happened?

Max: Brooke just told me!!

Rachel: How did SHE find out?

Max: Who cares?! Someone tried to kill you! Are you okay?!

Rachel: I’m fine. She wasn’t trying to kill me.

Max: She had a knife to your throat!

Rachel: No, she didn’t.

Max: Did she have a knife?!”
Rachel: ... yes.

Max: THEN ENOUGH WITH THE FUCKING SEMANTICS!!

Rachel: Sorry. Yes, she was threatening me with a knife. She didn’t hurt me. She is now sitting in a jail cell with a hole in her leg.

Max: Thank God. How’s Steph?

Rachel: Better. She didn’t take it well at first.

Max: I fucking bet not. Please tell me you’re moving out of your apartment.

Rachel: I am moving out of my apartment. Steph and I are staying with my parents while we look for a house. And we are putting in the most expensive security system I have ever seen.

Max: Good. I hope that woman rots in jail.

Rachel: ... right.

Max: What?

Rachel: Nothing.

“Are you sure about this?”

Rachel looked at her dad. “You think this is stupid?”

“She held a knife on you, sweetie. I’m hardly inclined to show her any leniency.” James paused. “But... this isn’t the worst idea you’ve ever had.”

“Well, it’s gonna be hard to displace my gold medal,” Rachel said dryly.

Her father winced. “Sorry."

“Me too.” Rachel took a deep breath, as she looked at the police station in front of them. “Come on. Let’s see what she has to say.”

They walked inside. James spoke to the front desk officer quickly, who led them back to the jail cells. “How’s she been?” he asked, as they walked.

“Quiet.” The officer shrugged. “ Mostly just lays on the cot and stares at the ceiling.”

“Has the public defender been by?”

“As far as I know, she hasn’t been assigned one yet.” The officer glanced between the two of them. “We’re not gonna catch any heat for this meeting, are we?”

“No,” James assured him. “We’re allowed to offer her a plea deal. If she asks for a lawyer, we’ll just wait until later.”

“Good.” The officer stopped and used a key from his belt to open a door for them. “On your left, third from the back.”
The door closed behind them, as they walked towards Amy’s cell. Rachel led the way, slowing to a stop as she saw her through the bars.

Amy was doing just as the officer said. The young woman lay on the cot, hands folded as they rested on her stomach, staring at the ceiling morosely. Her orange jumpsuit barely clung to her thin frame, save for the one thigh that was noticeably thicker than the other... probably from the bandages, Rachel reasoned.

She didn’t seem to notice their appearance, until Rachel leaned against the bars, at which point she picked her head up and blinked.

“... you.”

“Hi, Amy.” Rachel looked her over, as she sat up and put her feet on the floor. “How are you doing?”

The woman had a very apprehensive expression on her face. “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to make sure you were okay.” Rachel nodded at her. “How’s the leg?”

“It hurts.” Amy looked at her lap. “But the doctor says it’ll be fine in a few weeks.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Rachel nodded. “I’m, uh... I’m sorry I shot you.”

Amy shrugged, not moving from the cot.

“Can we talk, for a few minutes?”

“Why?”

“We just wanted to ask some questions.”

Amy studied her for several seconds, before sighing. “... what do you want?”

“I read the file on your family,” Rachel said. “You were born in the church, right?”

“Yea.”

“How old were you when you married Jack?”

“Seventeen.”

“We’re not here to add more charges, Amy. To you, or Jack. And I know First Light a lot better than you think.” Rachel paused. “How old were you really?”

The blonde looked back at her lap. “It doesn’t matter.”

“I’m guessing ten?” Rachel cocked her head. “Or maybe younger? Were you Kinsey’s age?”

Amy flinched.

“How old were you when you had her?”

“Like I said, it doesn’t matter.”

James cleared his throat. “You’re twenty-five. Kinsey turned nine five months ago. Which would have made you...” he looked up. “Fifteen? Is that right?”
Amy didn’t answer, as she kept her eyes down.

“You know, I thought you were desperate to bring Kinsey and Elisa back to First Light,” Rachel said. “Until the cops told us that they found your brother’s car. With the bags that were packed, and maps printed out with directions to Canada.” She paused. “You didn’t want them to grow up in First Light, did you? Getting married at nine years old, having their first children before they could drive, never getting to go to coll-

“I wanted them back.” Amy looked up at Rachel. “I’m sorry I said I was going to kill you. But I had nothing to do with my husband’s crimes, and you took my children anyway.”

James folded his arms. “You let your husband force them into a marriage before they-

“I didn’t LET my husband do anyth-” Amy caught herself, as she was about to stand, and sat back. “... it doesn’t matter.”

“Why not?” Rachel asked.

“I’m not stupid. I know how much trouble I’m in.” She looked at James. “You’re that prosecutor everyone hates. Am I wrong?”

“No.” He stepped forward, next to Rachel. “We haven’t filed anything yet. But we plan on charging you with Assault with a Deadly Weapon, Menacing, and Harassment. And since Rachel is a government social worker, you can count on a sizeable jail sentence. As it stands, if you’re very lucky, you might get out of prison by the time Kinsey turns eighteen.”

Amy seemed to collapse on herself, as she dropped her gaze back to the floor.

“But my daughter has pointed out that you might have information that could be helpful to ongoing investigations,” James continued. “So I’m here on behalf of the federal prosecutor, to see if you want to make a deal.”

She looked back at him. “A deal?”

“You could get out of jail in less than a year,” Rachel explained. “We don’t keep children from their families forever, unless we have to. Once you’re out, and you start turning your life around, we can arrange supervised visits. We could even have them returned to your custody.”

“You...” Amy blinked. “I could get them back?”

“If you want that possibility to be on the table, you’re going to have to talk to me,” James said, bringing Amy’s attention back to him. “Like I said, we have questions we want answered.”

The blonde woman stared at him, not moving for several seconds. Finally, she got up, grunting with the effort. She favored her uninjured leg as she hobbled up to the bars, grasping onto them for support.

“What do you want to know?”

“Everything,” James replied. “But we’re mostly interested in Preston Xavier. He’s the only Elder who won’t plead out, and they’re taking him to trial next month.” He paused. “How much do you know about his business dealings?”

“My husband and I had dinner at his son’s house once a week,” Amy said instantly. “I became really good friends with his daughter-in-law. And I was usually in the room when everyone started talking...
James kept a straight face as he leaned closer. “What kind of business?”

“I know about Abel Industries; they talked enough about it.” She nodded. “And a couple of other companies, like Goldman Holdings, Maker’s Enterprises, and Premier Solutions. They talked a few times about diversifying cash between them.”

He finally blinked. “... Maker’s Enterprises?”

“Yea. They didn’t mention it often, but when they did, they used the phrase ‘rainy day’ a lot.” Amy paused, as she noted the look on James’ face. “You’ve never heard of it, have you?”

“I would like to.”

“Well, I’d like to see my kids again.”

James inhaled slowly. “If you give us good, verifiable information, we’ll drop some of the charges against you. You’ll be bumped down from a Felony to a Class A Misdemeanor. Maximum jail sentence is one year, less for good behavior.”

“And my kids?”

“That’s up to my daughter, and her office.”

Rachel cleared her throat. “When you get released, you’ll be sent to a halfway house, to get your life back on track. You keep your nose clean, do what the parole officer says, and I’ll arrange for supervised visitation.” She paused. “I’ll even bring Kinsey and Elisa to see you, before your sentencing, so you can say goodbye.”

Amy hesitated. “I don’t want them to see me like this,” she muttered, looking at her orange jumpsuit.

“Then I’ll give you some regular clothes.”

“... okay.” She looked back at James. “When I see it in writing, I’ll tell you everything.”

James looked pleased, as he stepped away from the bars. “I’ll be back to see you tomorrow then.”

Amy nodded, then turned her gaze back to Rachel. “Thank you. And...” she averted her eyes. “I’m really sorry. For everything.”

Rachel exhaled slowly. “You’re welcome. And I accept your apology. But you need to do something else.”

“What?”

“Never go back to that church.” Rachel met Amy’s gaze, as she looked back up. “I don’t care if you divorce your husband or not. But your children can never return to First Light. If we get even a whiff that they’re going back to services, or meeting up with other parishioners, or seeing those boys your husband forced them to marry? Then everything is off the table.”

“They won’t.” Amy shook her head vigorously. “I don’t want anything more to do with those people.”

“Good.” Rachel nodded. “Life will be a lot better without them, Amy, I promise.”
“Okay, that is a pretty nice house,” Victoria admitted as they pulled into the long driveway.

Kate nodded from the passenger seat. “Don’t mention it, though. Uncle Gerry built a lot of it himself, and if you give him a compliment, he’ll talk your ear off about all the work her put into this place.”

Victoria glanced at Kate. “Seriously? By himself?”

“You’re mostly. He did the heavy lifting, only brought in the guys he really needed.” Kate shrugged. “He didn’t always sit behind a desk. He started as a general contractor, before he got the loan to open Hill-Built Construction.”

“And most of the family works for him? Including Stella?”

“He hired her as soon as she got her engineering degree. And Eric, after he got his Plumber’s license.”

“Well, nobody ever said nepotism was dead.” Victoria smirked as she parked the car. “And you’re sure they don’t care that you’re married to a girl?”

Kate rolled her eyes, as she unbuckled her seat belt. “They do not. Uncle Gerry has apparently been bugging Stella, asking when I’m coming by with my wife.”

“Well, good. So long as I don’t have to slug anyone.” Victoria stepped out of the car, zipping up her coat. “What about your dad?”

“He’ll be here, too. And he said he was bringing Maria.”

“Your future step-mother?”

Kate sighed. “Don’t call her that. They’ve only been dating for ten months.”

“I won’t.” Victoria opened the back door on her side of the car, shouldering Kevin’s diaper bag. “How has he been? I know it was weird between him and these guys for a while, on account of your mother’s breakdown.”

“It was. I guess he sat down with Gerry a few weeks ago, and sorted everything out.” Kate opened the other back door and started unbuckling Kevin from his car seat. The baby squirmed as she picked him up and adjusted his jacket. “My dad and Gerry go way back, almost to their college days. He apologized to everyone for her behavior, including Stella. They just want to move on.”

Victoria raised an eyebrow. “So... your dad’s forgiven?”

“They’re back on speaking terms. Let’s not call him ‘forgiven’ just yet.”

They made their way to the front door, Kate shifting Kevin in her arms as Victoria rang the doorbell. “Oh, crap,” Kate breathed.

“What?”
“We should have brought wine.”

Victoria looked at her. “I’m driving, and you’re breastfeeding.”

“Still.”

The door flew open, and Victoria took in the large blonde man as he smiled widely. “Kate!!”

Her wife laughed as she was wrapped in a big hug. “Hi, Uncle Gerry!”

“Good God, it has been WAY too long!!” Gerry stepped back. “And you got a little Marsh!!”

“Chase,” Kate corrected. “I took my wife’s name.”

“Oh. I’m sorry, I didn’t know.” He looked at Victoria. “And this must be the missus!”

Victoria couldn’t help but snort in amusement. “Victoria.”

“Gerry.” He grabbed her hand and shook it vigorously. “So great to meet you. We’ve been dying to get you guys back here for the party, all the ladies are excited to see you two. Come in, please, it’s cold out there.”

Kate led the way inside, as Gerry shut the door behind them. “Are my sisters here yet?” she asked, as Victoria helped her out of her coat.

“Oh, yea. Jessica’s out back somewhere, and I think Lynn’s in the kitchen helping-”

“BABY!!”

The three of them were startled as Jaime materialized beside Gerry, with wide eyes and outstretched arms. “BABY!!” she squealed, practically vibrating with excitement. “LET ME HOLD HIM LET ME HOLD HIM LET ME HOLD HIM PLEASE KATE LET ME HOLD HIM!!”

Kate smirked, as she handed him over. Jaime immediately started fawning over the infant as she cradled him in her arms. “He’s all yours.”

“Babe, we have to take him back at some point,” Victoria reminded her.

“Oh my God, he is so ADORABLE!!” Jamie cooed, as she gripped Kevin’s little hand and shook it. The baby smiled, babbling as he stared up at her. She bounced him gently in her arms. “Gosh, he’s heavy!”

Chris appeared behind Jamie, and his face fell. “Well, there goes the evening,” he sighed.

Jaime didn’t look at him, as she rocked Kevin back and forth. She felt his face, and bounced him up and down gently, seeming to check his weight. “Are you doing an exam on our baby?” Kate asked.

She glanced up at them. “Um... would you be upset if I was?”

Gerry chuckled. “She hasn’t even been a doctor for six months, and she’s already giving out free exams.”

“Sorry. He is SO cute,” she gushed as she took Kevin’s hand back and shook it, glancing at Chris. “I want one. Or two. Or five.”

“Really,” he remarked dryly. “I never picked up on that.”
“Oh, congratulations, by the way!” Kate exclaimed. “Let me see the ring!”

Jaime turned, sticking her hand out from underneath Kevin and revealing the engagement ring Chris had given her earlier that month. It was a sizeable diamond in a gold band, and looked pretty old. “Is that an heirloom ring?” Victoria asked. “It looks vintage. Fifties?”

“You have a good eye. It was my mother’s,” Gerry affirmed. “Chris’s grandfather gave it to her at the port, when he came back from Korea.”

“Well, it looks amazing,” Kate smiled at Jaime. “You are so lucky.”

“Yes I am.” Jaime glanced back at Kevin. “Okay, I’m gonna steal your kid. I left my wine in the kitchen.”

“We need him back to feed him in half an hour!” Victoria called after her.

“I don’t know how you managed to do this.”

Kate smirked, as she leaned back into the couch. “I never said it was a cakewalk.”

“I’ll say.” Stella grabbed the arm of the couch and tried to push herself into a more comfortable position. Her other hand gripped the bottom of her baby bump. “I seriously cannot wait to evict this kid.”

“Only another month or so,” Kate reminded her. “Have you and Eric picked names yet?”

“Just for a girl. We can’t agree on a boy’s name.” Stella shrugged. “We both like Elizabeth. But he’s really stuck on Michael.”

Kate tilted her head. “What’s wrong with Michael?”

“Nothing. I just like Harper more.” She smirked. “We agreed that if it comes down to it, and we need to make a game-time decision, we’ll flip a coin.”

“Seriously?” Kate raised an eyebrow. “You’re going to decide your child’s name on the flip of a coin?”

“Hey, I’ve made more important decisions on less.”

Kate rolled her eyes. Next to her, Victoria leaned forward. “So, when exactly are you due?”

“January thirtieth, according to my doctor.” Stella paused. “But he gave me a plus or minus of two weeks. I’m hoping closer to minus, because I’m getting really tired of this kid punting my bladder.”

“Yea, I didn’t care for that part of my pregnancy, either.” Kate nodded. “Or recovering from the fourteen hours of labor. That was pretty miserable.”

Stella blinked. “Fourteen... hours?”

“Almost fifteen. I spent most of them screaming at Vicky.”

Victoria grimaced. “She was really mean,” she muttered.

“Oh, fuck that.” Stella shook her head. “I’m getting drugs.”
Kate smirked. “I DID get drugs.”

“So are you guys staying in your apartment?” Victoria interrupted. “Or are you moving into someplace bigger?”

Stella seemed grateful for the opportunity to think about something else, as she smiled. “We’ll be moving into the house in a couple of weeks,” she answered. “My parents gave us money for a down payment as our wedding gift. We found a pretty nice one.”

“In this neighborhood?”

“Oh, yea.” Stella smirked. “I don’t think anyone in the family is allowed to move out, at this point. We’re four houses down from my parents, nine from my other uncle, and only two blocks away from here.” She glanced around. “Smaller than this house, of course. And Eric’s already planning on how he’s gonna re-do our bathroom.”

Kate snickered. “The tribulations of having a family of construction workers.”

“No kidding,” Stella said dryly. “Uncle Gerry’s letting us have a bunch of leftover stuff from his older jobs. And my dad’s been hooking us up with discounts for the supplies we need.”

“Mm.” Kate crossed her legs. “Maybe we should have you guys come up to Los Angeles. We were just talking about the guest bathroom, and how it-”

Jaime chose that moment to re-appear. “He’s losing his magic, Kate,” she proclaimed, holding Kevin out to her.

“What do you-” Kate paused. “Oh.”

“Good LORD!” Stella gasped, pinching her nose, as Victoria sighed and grabbed the diaper bag. “What do you two feed that poor child? He smells like a dumpster fire!”

Victoria smirked, shaking her head as she stood and took Kevin back. “You know, Stella, sometimes it gets worse.”

Stella blinked. “How could it POSSIBLY get worse?!”

“Sometimes he blows out his diaper.”

“... he does what now?”

“We’re gonna rate that one an eight out of ten.”

Kate raised an eyebrow as she carried Kevin out of one of the Hill’s spare bedrooms. “An eight? That seems high.”

“ Mostly for the smell.” Victoria shrugged. “Stella was right, that did kind of smell like hot garbage.”

“Fair enough. Do you think Jaime will want him back?”

“I hope so. I was enjoying not having to worry about him for a few minutes.”

Kate shook her head as they walked back downstairs, running into Lynn at the bottom. “There you two are!” she exclaimed, as she brushed her hands on her pant legs. “Were you going to find us to say hi at all?”
“Of course we were.” Kate hugged Lynn quickly. “We were just talking to Stella, before Jaime gave us back Kevin to change. Are you still helping in the kitchen?”

“Not anymore. I was outside talking to Jessica and Dad.” She paused. “And Maria.”

“Oh.” Victoria nodded. “And... how is she?”

Lynn smirked. “She’s definitely not our mom.”

“Well, I figured. But how so?”

“She remembered what classes I was taking since the last time we spoke. And she told Jessica how beautiful her violin sounded, when her and my Dad watched one of their performances on YouTube. So at the very least she’s paying more attention to the younger two Marsh sisters, which is a nice change.”

“We should go say hello.” Kate looked at Victoria. “Unless you want to go help in the kitchen?”

“Hmm. Make awkward conversation with your dad and his girlfriend, or show off my sub-par cooking skills.” Her wife shook her head. “I’ll follow you two.”

The three of them slipped out the back door, Lynn closing it behind them as they listened to a woman laugh lightly. “Richard, stop, she’ll tell you when she’s ready.”

“But I want to know now, so I can do my background research on the young man.” Kate’s father folded his arms, as Jessica squirmed uncomfortably. “Now, what was his name again?”

“I didn’t say. And I’m definitely not telling you now.”

“Who’s name?” Kate interrupted.

“Hey!” Richard smiled as he saw his oldest daughter, reaching out and giving her a tight hug. “God, it’s so good to see you, sweetie.”

“You too, Dad.” Kate hugged him back with one arm, as she peeked over his shoulder. “Hi, Maria.”

“Kate, it’s so good to see you.” Maria brushed a lock of her brown hair behind one ear, as her and Kate exchanged a quick hug. “And you, Victoria. How have you girls been?”

“Good.” Victoria made no move to greet Maria, smiling tightly from behind her wife. “What was everyone talking about?”

Richard grinned. “I was trying to get Jessica to tell me the name of her boyfriend.”

“Her WHAT?” Kate, Victoria, and Lynn said simultaneously.

Jessica blushed, her face turning a dark shade of crimson. “Dad! Shut up!”

“I will not. Tell us more about the young man.”

“No!”

“Yes!” Kate exclaimed. “Who is he? What’s his name? What does he look like? Is he from your school? Is he a musician too? When did you guys-”

“Jesus, babe, are you okay?” Victoria interrupted.
Kate paused. “... maybe. But I want to hear more about my sister’s first boyfriend!”

“Yea, Jessica, tell us about your boyfriend,” Lynn chortled.

Jessica gave her other sister an evil eye. “Maybe you should tell us about John, first.”

“John?” Richard whipped his head around to his middle child, whose face had frozen in shock. “Who is John, Lynn?”

“... I swore you to secrecy,” she scowled at Jessica.

“I had my fingers crossed.”

“Oh, God.” Richard closed his eyes, turning his head to the sky and inhaling deeply. “Now there are two boyfriends I have to intimidate.”

“John is NOT my boyfriend,” Lynn said forcefully.

Jessica smirked, as she folded her arms. “No, he’s just the junior you have a massive crush on.”

“Shut up!”

Victoria smiled at Kate. “You were right. I am SO glad we came tonight.”

“Me too.” Kate looked at Lynn. “So. John?”

“Jessica has an ACTUAL boyfriend!!” Lynn exclaimed. “Interrogate her!”

“Hm. Good point.” Kate turned back to Jessica. “Boyfriend. Spill.”

“No.” Jessica stepped back. “I have to use the bathroom.”

They watched her walk inside, Victoria finally shaking her head as the door closed behind her. “Man, you guys lay it on thick.”

“Yea, maybe a little bit.” Richard paused. Then he turned to Lynn. “So. Tell us about John.”

“Dad!!”

Victoria went back inside ten minutes later to use the bathroom herself. She smiled at Jaime from across the room, the other girl waving back as she talked to Stella.

This is actually pretty nice, she thought as she headed down the hallway. I can see why Kate was so eager to come back. If we wanted to make this a yearly thing, I would totally be okay with it.

Though hopefully next time we can drink wine. This sobriety thing’s a bitch.

She was still smirking as she rounded the corner and came face-to-face with Jessica, as her sister-in-law walked out of the bathroom. The girl had her head down, and she was smiling as she typed rapidly on her phone.

“Ooh, who are we texting?” Victoria teased.

Jessica practically jumped out of her shoes, as she looked at Victoria in terror. “Nobody,” she said immediately.
Victoria responded by snatching the phone from her hands.

“Hey!” Jessica jumped up as the blonde held it high, out of her reach. “Gimme that!”

“Nu-uh.” Victoria spun, as Jessica’s hands clawed through the air for her phone. “I want to see the naughty things you’re texting your boyfriend.”

“No!” Jessica reached for her phone, Victoria keeping it away as her hands grabbed empty air. “Stop! Give me my phone back!”

“Aww, you miss him so much!” Victoria grinned at Jessica, using her other hand to hold the teenager back. “That is so adorable!”

“Victoria! I’m serious! Give it back!”

“Why? Are you worried I’ll read the sexting conversations between you and...” Victoria glanced back at the phone, her voice trailing away as she lowered her hand and got a good look at the name. “... oh.”

Jessica took the opportunity to grab her phone back, jamming it into her pocket. She then turned and stalked back into the bathroom, slamming the door shut behind her.

Great fucking job, Victoria. She looked at the closed door, exhaling slowly. Christ. We made so much progress, and you had to go be an asshole.

She knocked after a few seconds. “Jessica?”

Silence answered her.

“Jessica?”

“... leave me alone.”

“Jessica, I’m sorry.” Victoria paused, straining to hear anything; her sister-in-law’s voice had been heavily muffled by the wood. “Can you open the door?”

“No.”

“Please?”

“Go away.”

“I’m not leaving.” Victoria listened, but no sound came from the bathroom. She knocked again. “Jessica, I swear, I am so sorry. Can we please talk?”

“I don’t want to.”

“I know that’s not true, Jessica.” She jiggled the door knob, feeling it rattle against the lock. “Please open the door.”

There was several seconds of silence. Victoria was about to knock again when the lock clicked. She opened the door, slipping inside quickly and closing the it behind her. Jessica refused to meet her eyes, as she leaned against the counter with crossed arms and kept her face to the ground.

Victoria leaned against the wall across from her. “So...” she hesitated. “Hannah’s a pretty odd name, for a boy.”
“Shut up,” Jessica muttered, as she hugged herself tighter.

“Hey.” Victoria craned her neck, to try and meet Jessica’s gaze, but the teenager refused to look at her. “I really am sorry, Jessica. I, uh... that was kind of an asshole move.”

“Yes. It was.”

*Fair enough.* Victoria pursed her lips, trying to figure out what to say. “It seems like you really like her. I mean, from what I could read.”

Jessica didn’t reply, as Victoria watched her cheeks turn pink.

“Why haven’t you told anyone?” Victoria asked gently.

Her sister-in-law bit her lip and remained silent.

“Are you still scared?” Victoria continued. “Of what your dad might th-”

“I don’t know what to do.”

Victoria paused at Jessica’s statement. The teenager glanced away, wiping her eyes quickly as she sniffed. “What do you mean?” Victoria asked.

“... nothing.”

She waited for several second for a follow-up, but nothing came. “How did you and Hannah meet?” she finally asked.

“She plays the cello in my class,” Jessica replied quietly. “We became friends, after I got to Manhattan, and we always hung out. And got food at the cafeteria together, and went out to see movies together. And we talked, a lot. She told me a few weeks ago that she had a crush on me, and... I really liked her, too. More than anyone else I met. So... we kissed.” She scratched her neck, blushing as she kept her eyes on the ground. “And we’ve done it a bunch since then.”

*Christ, baby lesbians are adorable.* Victoria smiled. “Where is she now?”

“She went home to Memphis for Christmas.”

“Does her family know that she’s gay?”

Jessica finally picked her head up. “Yes. She told them the day before yesterday.”

*In one of the deepest parts of the south? That’s bold.* Victoria bit her lip. “And... what did they say?”

“That they loved her no matter what.” Jessica’s mouth twitched, as she sniffed again. “She said she was really scared, at first, because her dad and brother used to tell really bad jokes about it. But she said they apologized and swore they would stop.”

“Ah. Well, good.” Victoria nodded. “Do you think you’re going to tell your dad?”

“I don’t know.” Jessica shifted anxiously. “I wanted to, before... but then I saw how he was, after Kate came out to him and my mom. She screamed for almost an hour, about how Kate was sinning, and something about conversion therapy for adults, and Dad just... let her.”

“You know he’s different now, Jessica. You’ve seen how he-” Victoria stopped, a thought occurring to her. “... you were scared, after you saw how your mom reacted?”
Jessica nodded.

“So... you knew, back then? How you felt?”

She nodded again.

“Is that why you said you didn’t want your mom to come back, when we were at the hospital?”

The teenager bit her lip and looked away, nodding a third time.

“Jesus Christ,” Victoria breathed. “Jessica... did you really have an anxiety disorder? Or did you shut yourself away from everyone because you were scared of your mother?”

“... I think it was a little bit of both,” the teenager muttered, her voice barely audible.

_I didn’t have those prisoners hit her hard enough._

Victoria stood and walked over Jessica, wrapping her arms around her tightly. “I am so sorry,” she whispered.

“For what?”

“Everything. You closing yourself away for years. Being terrified of your mother. Taking your phone like an asshole.” She paused. “Making you think that you couldn’t talk about this. All of it.”

“I, uh... I never thought you would be interested in hearing me out.”

“Jessica, we’re family.” Victoria squeezed her, before she let go and stepped back. “Just because we went through a lot of drama doesn’t mean I don’t care. Or that I won’t listen.”

“Mm.” Jessica looked at her. “Are you going to tell Kate?”

“Not if you don’t want me to.”

“I don’t,” Jessica said quickly. “Or my dad.”

“I won’t tell anybody.” Victoria nodded. “But you know your dad will love and support you, too. Just like Hannah’s family. Do you really think he’d treat you differently than Kate and I?”

Jessica smirked. “You know you terrify him, right?”

“Do I really?”

“He probably thinks you might have him killed if he steps out of line.”

“Well, I’m sure he knows what I’m willing to do to protect Kate. And our son.”

Jessica shook her head. “I mean... I know he’d be okay with it,” she admitted. “But I’m still nervous.”

“I get it.” Victoria nodded. “I was too, when I told my parents. It took me three days to work up the stones to actually say it out loud.”

“You think I should tell him?”

“I think you don’t have a reason not to.” Victoria smiled. “Your mother is no longer a concern. Everyone can see how much happier you are. And your father will love you no matter what.”
“What if he doesn’t?”

“Then your sisters and I will. Kate and I will always be here for you. You know Lynn will, too.” Victoria smirked. “And if your dad DOES decide that he doesn’t care for having a second gay kid, your sisters will tear him apart.”

Jessica looked back down at her feet. “... thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Victoria hesitated, frowning. “Wait, why did you tell him that you had a boyfriend?”

“I didn’t.” Jessica shook her head. “Maria asked me, right before you guys showed up, how my love life was going. I wasn’t expecting her to ask, so I kind of stuttered, and... well, Dad is a therapist, so he latched onto that.”

“Ooh, right. I forgot.”

Jessica nodded. “He just assumed that I had a boyfriend, and... I kinda just went with it.” She shrugged. “Seemed easier, at the time.”

“Ah.” Victoria smirked. “Well, I’m sure he’ll feel silly, when he finds out the truth.”

“I guess” Jessica paused. “You’re still an asshole for taking my phone.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” Victoria moved her hand to Jessica’s back. “Now, I need you to get out.”

“Huh?”

“I didn’t follow you. I actually came down here because I had to use the bathroom, too.” She pushed Jessica away from the counter, towards the door. “Out.”
“Oh, this is so lovely!”

Maria held up the sweater Kate had gotten for her two days later, on Christmas morning. Her father’s girlfriend beamed as she felt the material. “It’s so soft, too! Thank you so much!”

“You’re welcome.” Kate smiled. “Dad said you guys were going to need some warm clothes for Montana.”

“Yes, it’s pretty bitter this time of year.” Maria sighed, as she folded the sweater in her lap. “My son told me yesterday that it dipped into the negatives last week, and hasn’t come back up since.”

“That sucks.” Lynn winced from her seat on the floor. “Is it snowing too?”

“No. He wishes it would, though, because then the base would close for a few days.” Maria shook her head. “Apparently, the Air Force doesn’t care how cold it gets until people can’t make it in to work.”

“Bummer.”

The sound of Kevin’s squealing laughter interrupted them, as he played with the stuffed rabbit Jessica had given him. He sat in her lap, shaking the toy and watching the limbs flop around. “No, buddy, you’re gonna shake him to pieces,” Jessica cooed, as she wrapped her arms around his stomach.

“He might,” Victoria agreed, as she sipped her coffee. “That kid has broken half the toys we’ve given him.”

Richard chuckled, as he balled up wrapping paper and put it in the trash in an attempt to clean up the living room floor. “Oh, here’s another one,” he mentioned, picking up a small box and tossing it. “Jessica, it’s for you, from Kate and Victoria.”

“I was wondering where that went,” Kate commented, as Jessica caught the box with one hand. “I hope you like it.”

Jessica ripped the wrapping paper off, throwing it back at her dad’s garbage bag as she opened the box. “Oh, wow!”

“Does that mean you like it?” Victoria asked.

“Yes! Totally!” Jessica lifted a silver necklace with a small diamond hanging from it. “Oh, jeez, please tell me this wasn’t that expensive.”

“It wasn’t,” Kate assured her. “And we thought you could use some nice jewelry, to wear for all those recitals you have coming up.”

“Absolutely.” Jessica smiled, as she strung the chain around her neck and did the clasp. “This’ll go perfectly with my black dress.”

Lynn smirked. “Or whatever you wear next time you see your boyfriend.”

“Shut up,” Jessica retorted.
“Ooh, she’s right.” Kate grinned. “Do you make him take you to places where you have to dress up?”

Jessica squirmed. “No.”

“Are you serious?” Kate raised an eyebrow. “What kind of boyfriend doesn’t-”

“Kate, they’re college students in one of the most expensive cities in the world,” Victoria interrupted. “Something tells me that it’s not a concern.”

“Nevertheless.” Kate folded her arms, then brightened. “Oh, maybe we should go visit over the next break. Then we can take you guys somewhere, and finally meet this mysterious boyfriend.”

“Well, hang on,” Richard protested. “I need to meet him first, so he’s properly intimidated.”

“I can intimidate people too!”

Richard tilted his head. “Can you really, sweetie?”

Kate pouted. “If I want to.”

Lynn couldn’t suppress a snort of amusement. “Sure you can.”

“Precisely.” Richard nodded. “I insist on being the first to meet this young man.”

“Assuming he actually exists,” Lynn added, as she turned and poked Jessica’s shoulder. “You won’t even give us a name. Or show us a picture. I’m starting to think you’re making him up.”

“I am not!” Jessica’s face started turning red.

“So what’s the problem then? Is he ugly or something? Does he talk with a lisp?”

“No!”

“Then why are-”

“I’m going to get some more coffee,” Victoria announced, standing up. “Anyone else?”

Jessica stood, shifting Kevin to Lynn’s lap. “Yea, me too.”

“You don’t drink coffee!” Lynn objected.

“I’ve decided to start.”

Laughter echoed behind them as they stepped into the kitchen. “Thank you,” Jessica said quietly.

“Well, you looked like you needed rescuing.” Victoria smirked as she took the coffee pot, refilling her cup. “Do you actually want some?”

“No, I’m good.”

She set the pot back down. “Have you thought about what I said?”

“... yea. For the past couple of nights.” Jessica bit her lip. “I want to. I just... I don’t know, like, when. Or how.”

“You’ll figure it out.” Victoria sipped from her mug. “Have you talked to Hannah about it?”
Jessica nodded. “After we got back from the party.”

“She have any thoughts?”

“Yes.” Jessica smirked. “She thinks you’re an asshole, too.”

Victoria rolled her eyes. “We’ve established that already. Anything else?”

“Nothing I didn’t already know.” Jessica glanced over her shoulder, listening to the others talk in the living room. “She said she spent a few days freaking out, like you did.”

“So what did she do?”

“Just came out and told them, when it felt like an okay-enough time.” Jessica shrugged. “She said planning it felt useless, so she just did it when it felt right.”

Victoria nodded. “That works too, I suppose.”

“Yea.” Jessica paused. “How did you do it?”

“I told my parents over dinner, at a restaurant.”

“Really?”

“Well, I knew they’d be fine with it either way.” Victoria paused. “But I figured if they weren’t, then they wouldn’t start screaming at me in public.”

They both snickered as Richard came into the kitchen. “You okay, kiddo?”

“Yea.” Jessica looked at him and nodded. “I’m fine.”

“If it’s any consolation, Kate’s interrogating Lynn about this John from her classes.” Richard smiled, as he placed his hand on Jessica’s shoulder and squeezed. “It’s okay if you don’t want to tell us anything about him. We’re all just giving you a hard time.”

“I know.”

“You like this boy?”

She nodded.

“Does he treat you right?”

“Yes.”

“Are you happy with him?”

“Yes.”

“Then that’s good enough for me.” Richard leaned in and kissed Jessica’s temple. “You have no idea how glad I am to see you doing better, sweetie. You really are growing up to be an incredible woman.”

Jessica dropped her eyes. “Thanks, Dad,” she muttered.

“You’re welcome.” He patted her shoulder. “Come on, let’s—”
“Dad, can I... um...” Jessica took a shaky breath. “Can I talk to you? In private?”

Richard frowned. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes. Just... really quick? Please?”

“Sure, of course.”

Jessica walked out of the kitchen, towards the back porch. Victoria reached out and put a hand on his upper arm, stopping him just as Jessica left the room.

“Richard?”

“Yes?”

“You fucked this up the first time.” Victoria met his eyes with the most intense look she could muster, and was satisfied to see her father-in-law look a little unsettled. “Do better. Because if you don’t, you’ll regret it.”

“What are they doing? It’s been, like, twenty minutes.”

Kate grinned, as she leaned forward to look at Lynn. “It’s not as fun when someone needs to rescue you, is it?”

“I’m mostly just tired of answering questions about a boy I have no intention of talking to.” Without looking, Lynn reached her hand out and stopped Kevin from leaning back too far and falling over as he sat next to her, still playing with the bunny. “It’s getting old.”

“Nice save,” Kate noted.

“Thank you.”

“Why don’t you talk to him?” Maria asked. “Maybe he likes you too.”

Lynn sighed. “I don’t know.”

“What’s the worst that could happen?”

“He rejects me, and the crushing shame destroys my self-esteem so badly that I drop out of Cal Tech, run away to a farming commune in Wyoming, and spend the rest of my life with a bunch of other sexless women growing produce.”

Maria raised her eyebrows. “That was very specific.”

“Well, I’ve had time to think about it.”

Kate shook her head, finally noticing that Victoria was staring towards the kitchen quietly while she drank her coffee. “You have nothing to add to this?”

“Hmm?”

“Are you listening to what we’re saying, Vicky?”

“Yea. Lynn’s going to run away and grow tomatoes because she’s a pussy.”

“Am not!!” Lynn protested forcefully.
Victoria looked between Kate and Maria. “Judges?”

“Taking the initiative wouldn’t hurt.” Maria agreed. “Boys are dense, Lynn, especially when they’re young. You actually have to tell them what you want, in order for them to figure it out. Ask him for help with your homework or something.”

Lynn rolled her eyes. “I don’t need help with my homework.”

“Ask him for his notes, then.”

“I don’t need those, either.”

Maria smirked. “Then ask him if he needs help with HIS homework.”

“He’s pretty smart, too,” Lynn countered. “What do I ask him for if he says no to that?”

“A night of enthusiastic and life-changing sex,” Victoria offered.

“VICKY!!” Kate gasped.

“What?” Victoria smiled smugly, as Lynn’s cheeks turned red and Maria struggled to keep a straight face. “He’s definitely not going to say no to THAT.”

“That is NOT how you get a boyfriend!”

Victoria raised her eyebrows. “If memory serves...”

“Ew.” Lynn jammed her fingers into her ears, as Maria laughed while Kate smacked Victoria’s knee. “Ew, ew, ew. Please stop talking.”

“Yes! Stop!” Kate said, her face turning red as well. “And that is NOT what happened!”

“Maybe, maybe not. I’m just saying, you should probably go back to that sidewalk outside of Denny’s and say thank you.”

Before Kate could smack Victoria’s knee again, they all heard the door to the back porch open and close. Jessica and Richard walked back inside after a few seconds, a look of relief on the teenager’s face. She carried herself like a huge weight was off her shoulders, as she easily sat back down on the floor next to Lynn. Richard took his seat beside Maria silently, a small smile on his face.

“Finally.” Lynn turned back to Jessica with a grin. “Where were we?”

Jessica sighed. “Nowhere.”

“Oh, right. We hadn’t established whether or not your boyfriend was real, because you won’t give us a picture. Or a name.”

“It’s Hannah.”

Lynn blinked, taken aback and clearly not expecting an answer. Kate, too, furrowed her brow as she turned her focus to Jessica. “Hannah?”

“Yes. Hannah.”

“That’s... not a boy’s name.”
Jessica took a deep breath. “That’s because Hannah’s a girl.”

“You’re...” Lynn struggled for words. “Wait, you’re dating a girl?”

“Yes.”

“Like... for real?”

Jessica finally looked at Lynn. “For real.”

“So, you’re... gay?”

“... yes.”

Lynn didn’t respond, as she stared at Jessica. Finally, after several seconds, she turned to her father. “Is there something in the water at this house?!”

Victoria broke down laughing, as Richard looked confused. “I’m sorry?”

“We’re two for three now!” Lynn pointed at Kate and Jessica. “Did my food come from a different refrigerator? Did you change the air filters in my room but not theirs? Did a different priest do their baptisms?”

“Lynn!” Kate scolded. “Stop it!”

“I am asking PURELY for scientific reasons,” Lynn assured her. “If I can find some kind of environmental factor, I’ll start working on a doctoral thesis TODAY.”

“How about you tell your sister that she has your love and support first?”

“Fine.” Lynn looked at Jessica. “Literally nothing has changed. I don’t care if you’re gay, or straight, or bi, or whatever; you’re still my little sister. That said, can I get a blood sample and a few strands of hair?”

Jessica looked amused, as she shook her head. “No.”

“It’s for science!”

“I don’t care.”

“Fine.” Lynn turned to Kate. “How about you? I probably don’t need much, just a few little drops.”

“First of all, absolutely not.” Kate folded her arms. “Second, aren’t you majoring in mechanical engineering? What are YOU going to do with blood samples?”

“I don’t know. I’ll figure it out while I’m writing my Nobel-prize-winning thesis.”

Kate shook her head, as she scooted closer to Jessica and laid a hand on her shoulder. “How are you feeling?”

“Good.” Jessica nodded, meeting Kate’s gaze. “A lot less anxious.”

“Well, you know we all still love you no matter what.” Kate smiled. “Do you want to talk?”

“Maybe,” Jessica allowed quietly. “But... can we do it later?”

“Of course.” Kate nodded. “What do you want to do now?”
“Go back to making fun of Lynn’s crush on John.”

Lynn sagged backwards. “God damn it.”
**Brooke: Apostate**

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**July 2022. Nineteen months after the raid.**

“The Red Robin burger, please.”

“Sure thing.” Brooke smiled as she scribbled on her notepad. “And you, ma’am?”

“Can I get the Black And Blue burger with a turkey patty?”

“Absolutely.” Brooke wrote her order as well. “Any refills?”

Both customers shook their heads.

“Okay. I’ll put those in and bring some fries out for you guys to munch on.” Brooke flashed her best smile as she tucked her notepad under one arm, then turned to head for the order terminal.

Another table flagged her down as she walked. “Excuse me, miss?” the woman called.

“Yes?”

“Where is our food?” she asked in a nasal voice. “We ordered twenty minutes ago, and we’re really hungry.”

Brooke changed her expression to one of sympathy; she’d gotten good at faking it since she’d started working there. “I’m terribly sorry about that, ma’am. You’re not in my section, but I’ll check on it for you.”

The woman appeared satisfied as Brooke walked away, reaching the terminal. Regina was just finishing an order as she got there. “Hey,” she greeted distractedly.

“Sup.” Brooke took her spot, her fingers flying over the screen. “Is table sixteen yours?”

“Yea. Why?”

“They’re asking where their food is.”

Regina rolled her eyes. “Considering that I put the order in less than five minutes ago, probably still being cooked.”

Brooke smirked. “She said it’s been twenty minutes.”

“And she told me that she’d been waiting for a waitress for ten minutes, two minutes after she was seated.” Regina sighed. “Bet she doesn’t tip, either.”

“Nah, probably not.” Brooke finished with her order and stepped aside. “This has to be better than retail, right?”

“If some of the stories I’ve heard are true, then probably.” Regina shook her head. “Alright, I’m gonna bring Miss Impatient a tray of fries. Hopefully, she’ll choke on them.”

Brooke snorted. “Probably blame you for it.”
“If she stops talking, it’ll be worth it.”

Brooke hummed as Regina walked away. She had to admit that her and Emily didn’t like how their waitressing gig made their friend a little rougher than usual. *Small price to pay for tuition and rent, I suppose.*

She brought her table their fries after a couple of minutes, then made her rounds, checking on her other tables. One of them had paid and left, and Brooke was happy to see a twenty-dollar-bill stuck under the ketchup bottle.

Until she pulled it out, and saw how small it was.

“Oh, for the love of...” Brooke unfolded it, noting the bible scripture on the other side about how there were things worth more than money. “Seriously?” she muttered. “Fuck you guys.”

A passing waitress stopped to look. “Oh, man, another one?”

“You got one too?”

“This morning.” She shook her head. “We finally figured out where they’re coming from. I guess that church on Eighth Street has been handing them out to all their parishioners. Friend of mine at the diner across the street says she’s been getting them, too.”

“Well, how noble of them.” Brooke shook her head as she started stacking plates on her tray. “What should I do with it?”

“Tony’s been having everyone put them in the box under the terminal.” The woman smirked. “Dunno what he’s gonna do with them, but a few waitresses have given him some pretty inappropriate ideas.”

Brooke chuckled as she finished clearing her table, then brought everything to the kitchen for the dishwashers. She was walking away when she heard the front door open and turned to look, emitting a sharp gasp.

“Jane!”

Her old foster mother smiled widely as Brooke raced over, embracing her. “Oh, sweetie, it’s so good to see you!” Jane exclaimed as she hugged her back. “We were hoping you guys were working today!”

Brooke glanced over Jane’s shoulder and saw Pete walk in behind her, holding the door for Lisa. The teenager looked much better without the cast and black eye, as she smiled.

“What are you guys doing here?” Brooke asked as her and Jane separated. “We’re pretty far out of your way.”

“I had to come down to see a friend of mine,” Pete explained. “Figured if we were in the neighborhood, we’d stop in and see how the three of you were doing.”

“Is it just you working?” Jane asked.

“No, Regina’s around here somewhere...” Brooke glanced over her shoulder, looking around the restaurant until she spotted her. “Regina!”

Her friend looked over, and her face lit up. She made her way across the restaurant quickly, reaching
“It’s great to see both of you.” Jane gripped Regina tightly. “How have you been?”

“I want to kill everyone in my section,” Regina muttered into Jane’s shoulder.

“Oh, my.” Jane slowly looked over at Brooke. “What about you?”

Brooke shrugged. “Right now, I could go either way. So let’s seat you at one of my tables.”

She placed waters in front of Jane and Pete, and a soda in front of Lisa. “Emily says she’ll be down in ten minutes,” Brooke said. “She was watching Aaron while he napped, and she’s gotta get him dressed.”

Pete raised his eyebrows. “She didn’t wake him up for us, did she?”

“I don’t think so.” Brooke shrugged. “But that’ll be Regina’s bone to pick if she did.” She paused, looking at Lisa. “Hey, how have you been?”

“Good.” Lisa nodded. “Starting senior year next month.”

“Cool.” Brooke looked her up and down. “You look a lot better.”

Lisa smirked. “I’d hope so.” She paused. “You were right, by the way.”

“... about?”

“What you said last time.”


Jane had a confused look on her face. “What did you say?”

“Nothing important.” Brooke nodded at their menus. “I’m gonna go check on my tables really quick, and then I’ll be back for your food orders.”

She left as they picked up the menus, stopping a few tables down. The couple that had come in earlier was just finishing their meal. “How was everything?” she asked sweetly.

“ Really good.” The man nodded. “Thank you.”

“Are we in the mood for dessert?”

“No, sorry.”

“No problem. Can I take your plates?”

“Sure.”

She collected them quickly, then gestured at the tablet on their table. “Your bill should be up whenever you guys are ready.”

They thanked her as she left, depositing the plates in the kitchen. She was just walking out when the hostess got her attention. “I just seated a family at table twelve,” the other girl reported. “They’ve got menus and silverware.”
“Thanks.” Brooke detoured to her new table, pulling out her notepad. She put her customer service smile back on as she walked up, noting the family; two parents, and a pair of daughters who didn’t look older than ten or so. “Good afternoon!” she greeted cheerfully. “Welcome to Red Robin! How are we doing?”

“We’re good, thank you, can we get-”

The father froze as he made eye contact with her.

“... I’m sorry?” Brooke asked after a few seconds, confused. “What did you need?”

The expression on the man’s face changed slowly, from shock to anger. Brooke started to feel very unsettled as his skin colored.

“You’re that fucking apostate.”

She did a double take. Then quickly looked at the man’s family.

Both his shocked wife and their two puzzled daughters were wearing dresses.

“You ruined EVERYTHING!” the man yelled as he shot to his feet.

Brooke retreated several steps before she ran into an occupied table. She barely got a look at the diners before she snatched one of their knives. The dulled utensil felt almost useless in her hands as she held it towards the father.

“IT’S ALL YOUR FAULT!!” The father screamed. The entire restaurant was now silent as everyone turned to the exchange. The man started walking towards her as he continued to yell, ignoring the knife in her hand. “YOUR SELFISHNESS RUINED THE COMMUNITY WE MADE!! YOU RUINED EVERYONE’S LIVES JUST BECAUSE YOU COULDN’T ACCEPT YOUR FUCKING ROLE IN SOCIETY!!”

The knife felt useless as Brooke tried to back up further, but ran into the wall. Her breathing was coming in short gasps as the man got closer. “GOOD PEOPLE ARE IN JAIL BECAUSE OF YOU!!” he ranted wildly. “YOU SHOULD BE DRAGGED THROUGH THE STREETS BY A MOB, YOU TRAITOROUS LITTLE B-”

Pete materialized in front of the man, stopping him as he got to within a few feet of Brooke. “Back up,” he said forcefully.

“Get OUT of my way!” The man tried to maneuver around Pete, but her former foster father moved to block him. “You have NO IDEA what that little bitch has done!”

“Go back to your table,” Pete ordered. “Get your family and go eat somewhere else.”

“I said, MOVE!!” The man screamed as he stepped up to Pete, the two of them practically nose-to-nose.

Pete didn’t bat an eye. “Go back to your family,” he repeated forcefully. “You’re not-”

It happened so fast, Brooke almost missed it.

She saw the man throw a wild punch. Pete’s movement to block it was fluid, almost like water, as he used his left hand to sweep it aside. Then he stepped in close, and delivered three lightning-fast strikes to the man’s face and neck, concluding with a solid punch straight to the center of the man’s
chest. Brooke watched his feet leave the ground as he flew back, sprawling across the floor.

The whole restaurant gasped, a few women yelling in exclamation. The man’s wife screamed, and their two daughters started wailing. Brooke just glanced between Pete and the man on the floor.

“... holy shit,” she breathed. “Did you kill him?”

“No.” Pete ignored the noise around them, as he stepped over to check on him. “But you should probably call an ambulance anyway.”

“I hate missing when cool shit happens.”

Brooke frowned as she glanced at Emily, the two of them sitting in a corner booth. “I don’t think this qualifies as ‘cool shit’.”

“Really?” Emily folded her arms. “Pete knocked a First Light asshole out in three hits, and you don’t think that was cool?”

“... maybe a little.” Brooke sighed as she looked around the restaurant. The cops had come quickly, and the diners who’d been seated had either elected to cut their meal short or leave without ordering. As a result, there weren’t very many customers left, save for the ones who’d come in after the fight.

And near the back of the restaurant, at the kitchen entrance, a pair of police officers spoke with Pete quietly. The manager, Tony, stood beside them silently. Jane had already left with Lisa, since the teenager was also on First Light’s bad side.

The man’s wife had left as well, taking their daughters with them to follow the ambulance that had driven the man away.

“You think they’ll arrest Pete?” Brooke asked quietly.

“Nah. I mean, they’ve got footage of what happened.” Emily looked pointedly at the security cameras in the ceiling. “Once they figure out that it was self-defense, they’ll let him go.”

“... okay.”

As she predicted, the cops stepped back after a few more seconds, seemingly satisfied as they walked away. Tony motioned for the two of them to come over, then turned and beckoned to Regina as well, who’d been tending to Aaron near the back offices.

“Are you in trouble?” Brooke asked Pete as she approached.

“Not from the cops.” Pete looked amused, as he glanced at Tony. “Though your manager has asked that I frequent a different establishment from now on.”

“Only because you’re not from around here, and it’ll make corporate feel warm and fuzzy.” Tony nodded. “You’re sure you’re okay, Brooke?”

“I’m fine.” Brooke bit her lip. “But, uh... I don’t think I can work here anymore.”

Tony tilted his head. “You’re not in trouble, Brooke. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I still don’t want those people to know where they can find me.” Brooke shook her head. “Too many people want me dead.”
Emily and Regina traded glances. “Maybe we should find new jobs, too,” Regina supposed.

“You two are probably fine,” Pete assured them. “Neither of you were on that segment. First Light doesn’t have any issues with you guys.”

“And we still have to pay rent and tuition,” Brooke reminded them. “I’ll find something else.” She looked at their manager. “Sorry, Tony.”

“I understand.” He nodded sympathetically. “I’ll mail you your paycheck. And let me know if you have trouble finding work,” he added. “I know a couple of managers in the area who could use another good waitress.”

“Thanks, Tony, I really appreciate...” her voice trailed off, as she shifted her focus past Pete. “Oh, hell no.”

“Huh?”

Brooke didn’t respond, as she spun on her heel and stalked over to the terminal, grabbing the cardboard box beneath it. Then she turned and marched past the group, towards a table with a nicely-dressed family; two teenaged boys, as well as their mother.

Who was still folding up the small bill with a kind smile, speaking softly to the two boys as she was slipping it under a plate. Until she was rudely interrupted by Brooke slamming the cardboard box on the table, then snatching the fake twenty-dollar-bill.

“Does this make you feel like you’re doing a good deed?!?” she demanded, as she held up the bill. “Leaving fake money and false hope for servers who are busting their ass for less than minimum wage?!!”

The mother was clearly taken aback. “Excuse me-”

“No, you’re not excused!” Brooke crumpled the bill in her hand and threw it back at her. “What the fuck am I supposed to do with this? You think my landlord will take it in lieu of rent money?!”

Conversations were stopping as people turned to stare. The teenaged boys squirmed uncomfortably as their mother grew flustered. “We’re just trying to spread the word of-”

“Then do it with a fucking pamphlet like everyone else!” Brooke yelled.

“You can’t talk to me like-”

“Your fake money doesn’t put groceries in my fridge! Or pay for my tuition!” Brooke pointed at Regina behind her. “She’s a single mother with a baby! Can she spend your fake money on diapers?! Or what about her?!!” She pointed to a different waitress, who was staring with everyone else. “No big deal, she’s only working a second job to help pay for her mother’s cancer medication! Maybe she should go into the Oncologist’s office and see if he accepts these as payment!”

With that, she upended the cardboard box onto the table. A mound of the fake bills spilled out, several of them going into the woman’s lap.

“You’re not spreading God’s message,” Brooke finished, glaring at the woman intently. “You’re just a fucking cheapskate who’s looking for an excuse not to tip.”

The woman’s face was a deep shade of maroon as Brooke turned to walk back towards the others. She took off her apron, folding it as she handed it to Tony. “You can take the cost of her meal out of
my check if you have to,” she muttered.

“Don’t worry about it,” Tony said quietly, as he accepted the apron. “Just go home.”

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**Miss Amber:** Okay, as much as I disapprove of what she did, I can only imagine how satisfying that was to watch.

**Emily:** Very. Especially since I’ve gotten three of those bills as tips in the last week.

**Emily:** You should’ve seen the look on that woman’s face, though. I don’t think I’ve ever seen someone so mortified.

**Miss Amber:** So, did she tip for real?

**Emily:** Of course not.

**Miss Amber:** Yea, go figure.

**Emily:** Though one of her sons did leave ten bucks on the table when her back was turned. So at least he’s got a sense of shame.

**Miss Amber:** Good for him. Is Brooke looking for a new job?

**Emily:** She went to interview at a Chilli’s a few blocks over. Longer commute, but there’s a bus she can catch, and it’s on our way to campus.

**Miss Amber:** How are classes going?

**Emily:** Not much change. Brooke still sucks at math.

**Miss Amber:** Is Emily still skipping classes?

**Emily:** You know, there’s a greater incentive to go when you have to pay back your tuition if you don’t.
Unknown: Is this Chloe Price?

Chloe: That depends. Who is this?

Unknown: Please don’t block me. I’ve been trying to track down you down for months. I just want to talk.

Chloe: Okay, who the hell is this?

Unknown: Fiona.

Chloe: ... how the fuck did you get this number?

Unknown: Skip gave it to me.

Chloe: Cool. I’m going to kick his ass. Don’t text me anymore.

Unknown: WAIT

<CONTACT BLOCKED>

Lynn: Are you really not coming back for Xmas?!

Jessica: No. I’m going to Memphis with Hannah.

Lynn: Why can’t you bring her here?!

Jessica: Because I want to meet my girlfriend’s family.

Lynn: She could meet yours!

Jessica: Yes. She could. But we’re going to Memphis, so it’s not likely.

Lynn: Oh, come on.

Jessica: Look, her parents invited me two months ago. They’re even paying for my ticket. It would’ve been rude to say no.

Jessica: Also, Hannah’s still pretty jittery about being out with her family. She stresses out before every Skype session we have. And her parents know that.

Jessica: Her father actually called me directly a couple of weeks ago. He said they are eager to meet me, but they also want me to come down so Hannah knows that she doesn’t have to worry about them not loving and accepting her.
Lynn: So... you’re essentially Hannah’s security blanket?

Jessica: I guess, yea.

Lynn: ... fine. But you still suck.

Jessica: I want her to meet you guys too, okay? Maybe I’ll ask her to come visit over the summer.

Lynn: Oh, cool. Right in the middle of my JPL internship.

Jessica: You’re going back again?

Lynn: They invited me. One of the teams I worked with called me their favorite mascot.

Jessica: That... sounds a little deprecating.

Lynn: Meh.

Jessica: What do they have you working on, anyway?

Lynn: Stuff that goes really, REALLY fast.

Jessica: Like?

Lynn: Unfortunately, I’m bound by a security clearance from discussing this further with you.

Jessica: Wait, you actually have a security clearance?

Lynn: Investigated by the FBI and everything. Sat in a room for about four hours answering questions about all kinds of stuff.

Jessica: ... including Mom?

Lynn: Dude, that was SUCH a long conversation.

Chloe: You’re a fucking dead man.

Skip: Okay, I can explain.

Chloe: You gave my phone number to my EX!! The fucking druggie who stole two hundred bucks from me, and almost died trying to rob my apartment!!

Chloe: What part of “Don’t pass my number around” was too fucking complicated?!

Skip: She’s different, Chloe. She just wants to talk.

Chloe: I’m not interested in talking to her.

Skip: You know she’s sober now, right?

Chloe: Don’t care.

Skip: She’s been off the crystal since she got out of prison. It’s been over five years since she did a
line. She’s in Narcotics Anonymous, and sponsors other girls who are trying to get clean.

**Chloe:** Woo hoo. I still don’t want to speak to her.

**Skip:** She’s also trying to make up for the bad shit she did while she was high. And you’re definitely one of the people she wronged.

**Chloe:** I don’t want an apology. I want her out of my life.

**Skip:** The apology’s not for you. Making amends is one of the Twelve Steps.

**Chloe:** Then she can apologize to everyone else.

**Skip:** Breaking into your apartment was what sent her to jail, Chloe. This is important for her.

**Chloe:** Still don’t care. And next time I see you, I’m whooping your ass.

**Skip:** Fine. I’ll take it. But please talk to her.

**Chloe:** Absolutely not. I’m married, doing classes, and I have a kid to take care of. The door to that part of my life is firmly closed, and she can stay on the other side of it.

**Skip:** Okay, I didn’t want to bring this up, but you owe me.

**Chloe:** Oh, really? How the fuck do you figure?

**Skip:** Firewalk.

**Chloe:** ...

**Chloe:** You’re a cocksucker, you know that?

**Skip:** I never asked for anything. But you can’t tell me those tickets aren’t worth a single text conversation with Fiona.

**Chloe:** ... fine.

**Skip:** Thank you.

**Chloe:** This doesn’t change the fact that I’m going to whoop your ass.

**Skip:** Understood.

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**Derek:** Congratulations!!

**Kate:** What for?

**Derek:** My accountant told me that you finally used the card we gave you!

**Kate:** ... I’m sorry.

**Derek:** Why? You’ve had it for over three years!
Kate: I know. I still feel really guilty for spending your money.

Derek: What did you buy?

Kate: A new laptop. I was using my old one at the table, and I accidentally spilled water on it.

Kate: I would have saved for it, but I need it for work.

Derek: What kind did you get?

Kate: I think it was a Dell? The guy at Best Buy helped me pick it out.

Derek: Okay, I want you to do something for me.

Kate: What’s that?

Derek: Put that thing back in the box and return it.

Derek: Then go to the closest Apple store, and buy yourself the nicest MacBook Pro they sell.

Kate: I don’t need anything that fancy, Derek. The laptop I got will work just fine.

Derek: I’m sure it will. But I think you’ll appreciate having a computer that cost more than two hundred and fifty dollars.

Derek: I know these things seem frivolous. But higher-quality goods last longer than the cheap ones, so it works out to a better deal in the long-term. Besides, you’re doing good work, and you should have a good computer to do that work on.

Kate: ... are you sure? Those high-end MacBooks cost a lot of money.

Derek: Kate, your mother-in-law just spent four hundred dollars on another new pair of shoes. Then turned around and brought a five-hundred-dollar purse.

Derek: I spent five hundred thousand dollars on a new McLaren last month, because it’s faster than my old one.

Derek: And your wife dropped five grand on a new Armani pantsuit for a meeting in Seattle two weeks ago.

Derek: You have my utmost promise that I will NEVER judge you for what you choose to buy.

Kate: Vicky’s told me that several times.

Kate: But you’re still the one who worked to make that money. I don’t want to be frivolous with it.

Derek: Sweetie, one of the reasons my wife and I adore you is your respect for other people’s hard work. But that hard work has earned me more money than I doubt I’ll ever spend in my life. Which is why I’m perfectly happy to help make the lives of people I love better.

Derek: You have my blessing to buy yourself the laptop you want, not just the one that’s easiest to afford.

Kate: ... I do like the look of those MacBooks with the touchbars.
Derek: I look forward to hearing how much you like it.

Chloe: You’ve got five minutes. Then I’m re-blocking you.

Fiona: ... thank you.

Chloe: Whatever. Say what you have to.

Fiona: I’m sorry.

Chloe: Cool. Was that it?

Fiona: No. Just... you were right. I was a shitty person, and I cheated on you. With a couple of girls.

Chloe: I know. I spent a while, going through your Facebook messages.

Fiona: You did?

Chloe: Like I said, easy password. Four minutes.

Fiona: ... okay, I had more. But please take this first, before I run out of time.

Fiona: <Venmo from (fiona_93@gmail.com)>

Chloe: What’s that?

Fiona: The money I stole from your nightstand. Plus some extra. I don’t know how much it cost to fix your window.

Chloe: Is this part of your twelve steps, or whatever? Paying people back?

Fiona: Sort of. It’s making amends to the people we hurt. I would’ve paid you back sooner, but you’re pretty hard to find.

Chloe: So you actually have a job now?

Fiona: At Wal-Mart.

Chloe: Cool. I don’t want your money. I want to go back to you being literally anywhere else.

Fiona: I will. I’m not trying to weasel back into your life. Skip told me you were married.

Chloe: Yes, I am. We have a kid, and I’m in college. I don’t want to be dealing with my past mistakes right now.

Fiona: I swear, if you take the money, you’ll never hear from me again.

Chloe: Why is this so important to you?

Fiona: Because I fucked up, okay?

Fiona: You were a really awesome girlfriend, for actually putting up with my shit. And I ruined everything because I wanted the next line of meth more than a relationship.
Chloe: Meth is why you fucked Heather?

Fiona: ... she was one of my dealers. When I was short on cash, she’d negotiate. Sometimes with her, or sometimes with her boyfriend.

Chloe: Ah ha.

Fiona: I know, okay? Every time I think about what I did when I was high, I feel humiliated and disgusted. I just want to try to make things right.

Fiona: I get that you don’t care about me. You’re clearly still pissed, and you have every reason to be. But please, let me repay you so that I feel like a little less of a piece of garbage.

Chloe: ... fine. I’ll accept the venmo.

Fiona: Thanks.

Chloe: Did you ever make up with your mom? I remember you saying that she kicked you out.

Fiona: Mostly. Her and my stepdad started letting me back in their house last year.

Fiona: My older brother still refuses to see me, though.

Chloe: Why?

Fiona: I pawned a necklace of his that belonged to our dead father.

Chloe: Ouch.

Fiona: I know. Still trying to figure out how to amend that one.

Chloe: Yea. Good luck with that.

Chloe: I am glad to hear that you’re clean. And doing better.

Chloe: But I still don’t want to talk.

Fiona: I understand. Thanks for letting me pay you back.

Fiona: You can block me now, if you want.

Chloe: I’m not. Just... good luck with life, and all.

Fiona: Thank you.

Victoria: Hey, did you get an invite to Taylor’s wedding?

Max: Yea. But we’re probably not going.

Victoria: Really?

Max: Chloe’s college classes started a few months ago. We don’t have the cash to fly the three of us to D.C. for a weekend.
Victoria: Wait, Chloe’s actually going to college?!

Max: ... why is that so surprising?

Victoria: It’s like I’m talking to a woman who’s never actually MET her wife.

Max: What does that mean? Chloe’s smart!

Victoria: And you’re biased.

Max: Maybe. But she knows more about computers than anyone else I’ve ever met. Her boss says that she’s the best server tech he’s got, and she’s got a bunch of certifications that are pretty hard to get.

Max: Her not having a degree is really the only thing holding her back.

Victoria: Wasn’t she expelled from her last school?

Max: Okay, yes, but she’s doing online classes now. And she really wants to do well this time.

Victoria: What degree is she going for?

Max: An associate’s in Computer Information Systems.

Victoria: What is that, servers?

Max: IT in general, really. But that, with her certifications, should make it easy to get a job as a Systems Admin. Or something similar, with a better salary and set hours.

Victoria: Fair enough. Is it for sure that you’re not going to D.C.?

Max: Not yet. But it’s not looking likely.

Victoria: Bummer.

Victoria: What about coming back down to Los Angeles for a visit? We miss you guys.

Max: That, I’m always up for :)

Brooke: Sienna said that Peter Xavier committed suicide. Is that true?

Miss Amber: Yes, it is.

Brooke: What happened?

Miss Amber: He hung himself in his cell with bedsheets. The guards found him during rounds.

Miss Amber: His attorney had just told him that he’d lost his last appeal, and that getting paroled early wasn’t going to happen. He was looking at serving the full fifteen years. It’s not uncommon for people looking at that kind of sentence to do what he did, unfortunately.

Brooke: Nobody knew what he was going to do? He wasn’t on a suicide watch or something?
Miss Amber: I’m afraid not. The ones who are really determined don’t always show warning signs.

Miss Amber: Are you okay?

Brooke: ... he’d still be alive if it wasn’t for me.

Miss Amber: Sweetie, this isn’t your fault.

Brooke: It feels like it.

Miss Amber: He’d also still be stealing money from the parishioners who were on food stamps. People were starving because of him, and he used the money meant for their food to make the lease payments on his Lexus.

Miss Amber: He was also the one giving orders to Jesse Bowers, on behalf of his father. Peter was the one who told him to kidnap those children they found chained up in the shed.

Brooke: I know he was scum of the earth. But I didn’t want to kill him.

Miss Amber: You didn’t kill him. He killed himself, because he was too much of a coward to face the consequences of his actions.

Miss Amber: Quite frankly, there are a few people around here who’d say he got exactly what he deserved.

Brooke: It still doesn’t feel good. And I know other people have killed themselves since that raid.

Miss Amber: Lilly and Oscar Winslow knew that the FBI was coming to arrest them for forcing their seven-year-old daughter to marry a man in his twenties. You didn’t force them to take those pills, they did it because they couldn’t face what they’d done.

Miss Amber: Same with Anthony North. He knew that they’d find his son in that graveyard. And that the investigators would figure out what happened; he let Elder Jefferson kill his son because Drew was secretly seeing one of Jefferson’s daughters. Anthony made the decisions that lead to him eating his pistol.

Miss Amber: What they chose to do is NOT on you.

Brooke: I still feel like shit. I can’t imagine what their families are going through.

Miss Amber: That’s because you’re a good person. They were not. They didn’t kill themselves out of guilt for what they did, they killed themselves because they were about to suffer the consequences.

Brooke: ... you put that a lot more politely that Emily did.

Miss Amber: Well, I don’t think I would have necessarily disagreed with whatever Emily said.

Miss Amber: Listen, I’m going to swing by Corvallis this weekend. Can you guys meet for lunch? I want to make sure you’re all doing okay.

Brooke: You don’t have to. I’m sure you’ve got a crapload of other kids to look after.

Miss Amber: Just because you guys aren’t my wards doesn’t mean I don’t still care.
Brooke: ... yea. Sure.

Juliet: How many dispensaries does Trevor own?

Dana: I think a couple dozen or so.

Juliet: All in Seattle?

Dana: No, they’re all over. He’s got a bunch in Oregon too, mostly around Portland. Why?

Juliet: Any chance he’d be willing to talk on TV?

Dana: What for?

Juliet: Well, I’m assuming he knows about the bill they’re trying to pass to recriminalize recreational usage. We’re doing a segment on it, and we want to cover both sides.

Juliet: I don’t really know anyone else in the marijuana industry, so...

Dana: Well, I’ll ask. But I don’t think Trevor’s ever been interviewed before.

Juliet: It’ll be easy. We’re not ambushing him or anything. We just want a few statements, and some good quotes.

Dana: Will you be the one interviewing him?

Juliet: No. I’ll be producing it.

Dana: I thought they were going to put you on camera at some point?

Juliet: I’m working on it. But I need to learn the mechanics of it first.

Dana: Okay, Trevor says he’ll do it if you’re there.

Juliet: Absolutely. Can we film it on one of his dispensaries? Preferably a nice one.

Dana: He said all of his dispensaries are nice. But they just finished some renovations at Simply Edibles.

Dana: What does he have to talk about?

Juliet: The benefits of medical marijuana usage. What legal pot can bring to the state in terms of tax revenue and crime reduction. The laws and restrictions surrounding the industry.

Dana: Well, he knows all about that.

Juliet: He should wear a suit, too. Something that makes him look professional. And he’s got to be sober.

Dana: He stopped smoking recreationally when he found out I was pregnant with Sophie. You don’t have to worry about that.

Juliet: Really? A pot mogul who doesn’t sample his own merchandise?
Dana: I said recreationally. He still needs to know what he’s selling.

Dana: Also, he wholeheartedly supports your use of the word “mogul”.

Juliet: What about his wife? Does she help him?

Dana: I’m breastfeeding, in case you forgot.

Juliet: So you can’t recommend a good strain?

Dana: I didn’t say that :)

Jessica: I need help.

Victoria: What’s wrong? Are you still in Memphis? Are you and Hannah in danger? Do you need me to send someone over?

Jessica: Um... wow. I’m fine, you don’t have to send anyone for us.

Victoria: Are you sure? If you give me your address, I can have someone get you guys in ten minutes.

Jessica: I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to sound desperate. I want advice, not a rescue.

Victoria: Oh. Okay.

Jessica: Could you really get someone here that quickly?

Victoria: Kid, you’re family and I’m rich. I can have people pull you out of anywhere in ten minutes.

Jessica: ... honestly, that’s more disconcerting than reassuring.

Victoria: Maybe, until you actually need it. So what’s wrong? Is Hannah’s family a bunch of assholes?

Jessica: No, they’re really sweet.

Jessica: Most of them, anyway.

Victoria: Why don’t you start from the beginning.

Jessica: Hannah’s parents and brother really have been awesome. We’ve been having a lot of fun for the past few days, hanging out and running around. Her brother even gave us a few rides in his squad car.

Jessica: They’ve really been putting a lot of effort into making me feel included. Hannah was really worried about the trip, and she’s relaxed a lot since we’ve been here.

Victoria: Well, you did say they were trying to support her. So what happened tonight?

Jessica: We went to her uncle’s house, and her entire extended family was there. She was introducing me to everyone, and we were all having a really good time.
Victoria: I see where this is going. Who killed the mood?

Jessica: Her grandmother on her dad’s side.

Jessica: I thought there might have been a thing, because she smiled and hugged Hannah while giving me the cold shoulder. But I chalked it up to my being a new girlfriend, and that she needed time to warm up to me.

Victoria: Not so much?

Jessica: She saw us kissing after dinner, and kind of exploded.

Victoria: Christ, kid, you can’t keep your hands off your girlfriend for one night?

Jessica: It was just a kiss when we were passing in the hallway! I thought we had a few seconds of privacy! We didn’t see anyone else around!

Victoria: I was being facetious, Jessica. It’s okay to kiss your girlfriend.

Jessica: Well, not according to her grandmother. Like I said, she just blew up on Hannah, calling her all sorts of nasty names. I guess she was trying to turn a blind eye, and pretending her granddaughter wasn’t actually a sinful dyke.

Victoria: Jesus, she called her that?

Jessica: Among other, worse names.

Jessica: I feel really bad. I just froze while she came at us screaming, and... I don’t know. It felt like I was back in the room with Mom, when Kate was coming out over Skype.

Victoria: You feel bad? Why?

Jessica: I could’ve said something. Or done something.

Victoria: I get that, but it’s a family issue, Jessica. The best thing really was for you to stay out of it, and let Hannah handle her grandmother.

Jessica: Hannah froze, too. Neither of us said anything.

Jessica: But the screaming kind of attracted the whole family. Hannah’s dad tried to defend her, and her grandmother started screaming at him too, for letting us desecrate the house. Then Hannah’s mother got involved, and aunts and uncles, there were little kid cousins who were crying... It got ugly really quickly.

Jessica: It took a few minutes for Hannah’s brother to pull us away from the fighting, and get us outside. But once he went back in, Hannah just broke down sobbing.

Victoria: Shit. I’m sorry.

Victoria: What about you?

Jessica: I was still kind of in shock. I’ve been in the room when Mom lost her mind, but I’ve never been screamed at like that before. Pretty sure Hannah hadn’t, either, the way she was crying.
Jessica: I just tried to hug her, but I don’t think she noticed.

Victoria: You guys aren’t still there, are you?

Jessica: No. Her parents and brother came and got us after about twenty minutes, and drove us all home. Her parents tried to comfort us, and make sure we were okay, but Hannah didn’t really talk.

Jessica: That was a couple of hours ago. We went to bed when we got back, but Hannah won’t go to sleep.

Victoria: Where are you? In bed?

Jessica: Bathroom. Look, I don’t really know what to say. And I figured you were with Kate, every time Mom pulled her crap, so...

Victoria: Honestly, Jessica, I was kind of winging it.

Jessica: Great.

Victoria: Did you tell Hannah you love her?

Jessica: … I don’t remember. It’s been kind of a blur.

Victoria: Well, I’m sure she’d really like to hear it. Especially after a night like that.

Victoria: Other than that, she probably just wants you to be there. So I’d quit hiding in the bathroom, because we’ve been texting for twenty minutes now, and get back to your girlfriend.

Jessica: Okay.

Victoria: Text me back in the morning, all right?

Jessica: I will. Thank you.

Victoria: No problem.

Victoria: And seriously, someone can be there in ten minutes. Though if you want a guy who can break kneecaps, it might take twenty.

Jessica: … REALLY disconcerting.

Max: What’s in this huge box that just got delivered for you?

Chloe: It’s here already? I didn’t think it’d arrive until next week.

Max: What wouldn’t?

Chloe: A TRS-80 I found on eBay.

Max: What’s that?

Chloe: And old-school computer. Radio Shack used to sell them in the 70’s and 80’s.
Max: Are you serious?! Why the hell would you buy this ancient piece of junk?!

Chloe: Because it’s awesome. They were an important part of computer history. The TRS-80 line was one of the first mass-produced computers that didn’t weigh five hundred pounds.

Max: It doesn’t feel very lightweight to me!

Chloe: Better start working on those gains.

Max: Is this seriously what you spent the money that girl gave you on?

Chloe: Yes. I was saving that cash to get one before she stole it.

Max: Why didn’t you just save for it again?

Chloe: One, because after she took the cash from my nightstand, I was so mad that I didn’t want to think about it anymore.

Chloe: Two, because I started dating this absolute bombshell of a brunette, and I needed the money to wine and dine her.

Max: ... bombshell, huh?

Chloe: Yea, she was pretty hot, and I really wanted to see her naked. Figured the money was better spent trying to get in her pants.

Max: Easy, babe, my heart can only take so much romance.
June 2023

“Are you sure what I’m wearing is okay?”

“Yes, Max, what you’re wearing is fine.” Victoria nodded, as she watched her friend straighten her blazer for the fifth time in three minutes. “My father doesn’t put a ton of stock in people’s appearances, so long as they don’t look like vagrants.”

Max sighed. “So you’ve said. But your dad’s a very busy and important man, and I don’t want him to feel like he’s wasting his time on someone who doesn’t appreciate how much his time costs.” She shot Victoria a look. “And you being cagey about why he wants to have dinner isn’t helping my stress level.”

Victoria shrugged. “He asked me not to discuss it until he got here.”

“So, you do know?”

“Of course I do.”

“Will you at least tell me why the two of you are in San Francisco?”

“Nope.” Victoria sipped her cocktail. The two of them were sitting at the bar in one of San Francisco’s most upscale restaurants, a very exclusive establishment near the top floor of a hotel that overlooked the bay. “Why don’t you just enjoy your drink and appreciate the view? You can’t tell me you make it up here very often.”

Max scoffed. “Of course I don’t. Even at Riccardo’s, we don’t charge half these prices for drinks, and I can barely afford to take Chloe there.”

Victoria frowned. “I thought Jake and Penny paid you better than that.”

“They pay me well enough. But Chloe’s classes aren’t cheap. And Faith won’t stop outgrowing her clothes.” Max sighed as she took a quick sip of her drink. “I thought she wouldn’t hit her growth spur until she was a teenager.”

“How many classes does Chloe have left?”

“Two.” Max smirked. “I will be SO happy when we’re not paying her tuition anymore. Once she gets a better job, we can stop worrying about spending money.”

“Mm.” Victoria grinned. “I don’t think you’ll have to worry about it for long.”

Max glanced at her. “Why? What does that mean?”

“Nothing.”

“God damn it, Victoria, what the hell are-”

“Hey, Dad!”
Max whipped her head around as Victoria waved behind her, and saw Derek walk into the room. “Hey, sweetie,” he greeted her with a smile. “And Max. It’s so good to see you again.”

“You too, Mister Chase.” Max adopted a polite tone as stood and shook his hand. “How have you been?”

“Very well, thank you. Though I could use a drink.” He looked at the bartender. “May I have a glass of Macallan twenty-five, please? And make sure everything is on my bill.”

Max’s cheeks turned a slight shade of pink. “Thank you,” she said as the bartender fixed Derek’s drink. “And for dinner. I’ve always wanted to try this place.”

“So have we. I have some friends that do business here, and they highly recommend it.” He accepted a glass from the bartender, taking a small sip. “Oh, that’s good. Why don’t we find our table? I’m famished.”

“Wow.” Victoria dabbed at her lip, before folding her napkin and placing it on the table. “That might have been the best swordfish I’ve ever had.”

“Really?” Derek looked over from his plate. “Better than that restaurant in Tokyo?”

“Yep. I don’t know how they cooked it, but I want seconds.”

“I’ll have to order that next time, then.” Derek took another bite of his food. “They certainly know how to cook their Wagyu. Max, how was your chicken?”

“Incredible.” Max smiled as she took a sip of water. “We might need to steal this recipe for our restaurants.”

Victoria smirked. “The saffron might make the cost a little prohibitive.”

“Hey, if it tastes this good, it’ll sell itself regardless.”

Derek chuckled. “So you believe in quality over quantity, then?”

“I think there’s an acceptable balance between the two,” Max answered. “It’s certainly doable, to put out quality food at quantity prices. That’s the reason Maria’s Kitchen has been so successful; we’re opening our fourth location early next year.”

“I heard.” Derek nodded. “You’re right, of course, but the higher-quality food often demands higher-quality prices. Your company’s high-end restaurants are a testament to the success of that business model.”

“Riccardo’s and Dionaldo’s do make money, but their exclusivity can be problematic, too,” Max stated. “Their limited clientele means that we need to keep them consistently coming back. Part of the reason those restaurants are successful is because we work hard to maintain a good relationship with our repeat customers. A single bad experience could be disastrous.”

Derek hummed. “You think appealing to lower-income diners is a better way of making money?”

“Restaurants like Maria’s kitchen cater to families that want a good dining experience with a bill that doesn’t break the bank. If you can assure the quality of the food, then you’ll get repeat customers with a quarter of the effort. And our profit margin is stupidly high, because the food they serve is incredibly cheap to make.” Max shrugged. “I don’t know about ‘better’, but it’s certainly safer and
Derek pursed his lips. “Some people in the corporate world would think that argument is a bit of a cop-out.”

Max smirked. “Well, I don’t know who said making money had to be done the hard way, but they were wrong.”

“They certainly were.” Derek and Victoria exchanged quick glances, as he took the last bite of his steak and pushed the plate aside. “Do you know why I asked you to meet with me tonight, Max?”

“... no,” Max admitted. “Victoria wouldn’t tell me.”

“Well, there were actually two reasons. Do you know why Jake and Penny haven’t been in to your office for the last couple of days?”

She frowned. “They said they were meeting with some people.”

“They were. My people.” Derek nodded. “We’ve spent the past two days negotiating the purchase of Franklin-Seymour.”

Max blinked, as she stared at Derek. “... huh?”

“We bought you guys out, Max,” Victoria explained. “Jake and Penny signed the papers this afternoon.”

“You...” Max slowly leaned back in her chair. “Wait, you guys own the company now?”

“We do. Once we file the paperwork, Franklin-Seymour will become a subsidiary of Chase Enterprises.” Derek took another sip of his drink. “Day-to-day operations will fall under the purview of one of our executives starting Monday.”

“Oh. Wow.” Max licked her lips, as she slowly exhaled. “They didn’t tell me that they were thinking about selling.”

“They were approached very discreetly,” Victoria assured her. “And we asked them not to say anything to anyone, including their employees. A lot of people watch our company, and try to make money off of our decisions. Especially in the California market.”

Max nodded mutely. “I guess that makes sense. Does, um...” she glanced between the two of them, apprehension in her face. “Am I... out of a job?”

“We’ll get to that,” Derek assured her. “But there’s a pressing issue we want to resolve before Monday.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, we weren’t aware until yesterday that Miss Seymour and Mister Franklin only owned ninety-five percent of their own company.” Derek withdrew an envelope from his jacket pocket. “I understand five percent belongs to you? Signed over last year, as part of your promotion to executive?”

“They wanted me to have an incentive to keep making the company money,” Max confirmed.

“Well, we’re not interested in only owning part of a business.” Derek placed the envelope down on the table, nudging it towards Max.
She took the envelope with a frown. “What’s this?”

“Our formal offer for your share.”

Max opened the envelope, taking out the paperwork and unfolding it. Her eyes scanned over the page quickly.

Victoria enjoyed watching the color drain from her friend’s face immensely.

“I... um... is this... right?”

“Our analysts determined that was a fair market value,” Derek allowed. “Normally we would negotiate back and forth, like we did with your former bosses. But I’m not interested in short-changing a good friend of my daughter’s.”

“... wow.” Max put the paper down, then picked up her glass of water and took a long drink, exhaling as she stopped. “Okay, so... where do I sign?”

“Here.” Victoria produced a pen and handed it to Max. “Bottom of the page.”

She quickly scribbled a signature.

“Good.” Derek sounded pleased, as he took the paper back. “I like it when things are easy, too.”

“Yea. Um...” Max paused. “You, uh, didn’t answer my question.”

“I’m sorry, what was it?”

“Whether or not I was out of a job.” Max bit her lip. “Am I working for that executive you mentioned now? And what about the others in our office?”

“We’ve elected to keep on the other employees in their current roles,” Derek answered. “Operational continuity, and all. But the second reason I wanted to meet you is to see if you might be a good fit for our organization.”

Max blinked. “Chase Enterprises?”

Derek inhaled deeply through his nose. “My daughter has pointed out that we’re missing a lot of opportunities for growth in southern California,” he started. “On her advice, and that of some others, I’ve decided to expand our operations in Los Angeles. We already have funds in escrow for a new corporate office in the financial district.” He nodded towards his daughter. “Of which Victoria will be the Director of Legal Operations.”

“We’ve still got a bunch of staff jobs we need to fill, though,” Victoria added. “Including Acquisitions. Jake and Penny really talked you up to the guys they met with; they said you’d be a good fit.”

“So...” Max looked at her. “I would work for you?”

“Different department.” Victoria shook her head. “You’d be in Executive Operations. But we’d be in the same building.”

“Of course, we would want you to relocate to Los Angeles,” Derek continued, as he reached into his other jacket pocket and produced a folded piece of paper. “This is the official job offer.”

Max accepted the paper, opening it and reading. “... whoa,” she breathed, as she got to the salary.
“What do you think?” Victoria asked.

“I...” Max stopped herself, as she looked back up. “God, I’d love to. But I need to talk to my wife,” she added quickly. “Especially if we’re going to move to L.A. She’s almost done with her classes, and we were banking on her boss giving her a promotion.”

“Of course.” Derek nodded. “I under-”

“What if we sweeten the deal?” Victoria interrupted.

Derek and Max both looked at her. “How?” her father asked.

“Chloe’s going to be looking for work as a Systems Admin, right?”

Max nodded.

“We need to hire a few of those, too.” Victoria glanced back at her father. “For all of Chloe’s many, MANY faults, she’s a genius with computers. I know she’s got close to a decade of experience with working on servers. And we haven’t started hiring people for IT yet.” She turned her gaze back to Max. “I will personally guarantee that she gets the job.”

“Really?” Max exclaimed. “That’s-”

“If she agrees to stop calling me Vic,” she added.

Max sighed. “Crap. She might say no just for that.”

Derek laughed, as Victoria pressed her lips together. “Fine. ONLY because I really want to work with you, I will compromise.” She leaned forward. “I’ll settle for her understanding that if she calls me Vic in front of important people, I will punt her through the window of my office. Which is going to be no lower than the thirty-fifth floor.”

A smirk came over Max’s face. “That, I think, I can persuade her to agree on.”

Chloe: How important are we talking here?

Victoria: Literally everyone between your job and my father’s.

Chloe: ... you suck.

Victoria: There would be entire floors between us. Odds are we’d never even see each other.

Chloe: I still don’t like having my First Amendment rights restricted.

Victoria: Oh, shut the hell up.

Victoria: Are you guys going to accept?

Chloe: Dude, it took us a whole three minutes to decide. Pretty sure Max is sending the email to your dad’s assistant right now.

Chloe: And I really appreciate the job. It means a lot.

Victoria: Well, I know you’re good at what you do.
Chloe: You still didn’t have to. I would’ve told Max to say yes regardless.

Victoria: Chloe, despite the fact that you might be the single biggest pain in my ass, you’re still one of my best friends. I was your Maid of Honor, for fuck’s sake.

Victoria: And we really are looking forward to you guys being closer. When I told Kate that my dad was offering Max a position in LA, she almost shattered my eardrums.

Victoria: So hurry up and pack, so you guys can get down here and we can hang out.

Chloe: Sure thing.

Chloe: And... thank you, Victoria.

Victoria: I’m sorry, what?

Chloe: YOU ONLY GET ONE

Victoria: ARE THE EXTRA FIVE LETTERS SO FUCKING HARD??
“How long do you think you’ll be?”

Chloe shrugged as she parked the truck. “I guess it depends,” she admitted. “She might not be in today.”

Max nodded from the passenger seat. “And if she is…”

“I don’t know. I haven’t spoken to her in almost a decade.” Chloe sighed. “She might not even want to see me.”

“From what you’ve told me, I’m sure she’ll at least want to lay eyes on you,” Max assured her. “Say hi, probably.”

Chloe smirked. “Last time we spoke, I called her a fu...” she paused, glancing towards the backseat. “An effing b-word. And that was probably one of the nicest things I ever said to her.”

Max snorted. “Well, you were the one who wanted to come. It’s okay if you would rather just get back on the road; it’s a long drive to Los Angeles.”

“No.” Chloe shook her head. “I told myself I was gonna do this at some point. And we don’t know if we’re ever coming back. Not since Steph, Jake, and Penny have moved away. So it’s now or never.”

“Okay.” Max nodded. “Well, you take as much time as you need. We’ll be fine. Won’t we, kiddo?” she added, looking over her shoulder.

Faith nodded, as she held her doll while sitting in the booster seat; at three years old, she was still too small to sit without one. She looked through the windshield and took in the building in front of them. “Are we gonna see a police ocifer?”

“Officer,” Max corrected. “Not ocifer. And Chloe is. We’re just gonna wait here, okay?”

“’kay.”

“I’ll be back soon,” Chloe added, as she got out of the truck. “Probably just a few minutes.”

She tried not to squirm, as her anxiety unconsciously rose when she walked through the door of the precinct. *Just calm down,* she told herself. *You’re not getting arrested. Or cited. Just here for a quick visit, before the road trip.*

The desk sergeant looked up as she approached. “Can I help you?”

“Um, yea.” She nodded. “Is there an officer here named Harriet Gonzales?”

The cop blinked. “The Lieutenant?”

“I... didn’t know she was a Lieutenant now,” Chloe admitted. “Is there any chance I could speak to her? Like, really quick?”
He eyed her suspiciously. “Can I ask what it’s about?”

“I used to know her, a few years ago. I just want to talk for a second.”

The cop pursed his lips, then turned and picked up a phone, dialing an extension. “Lieutenant?” he asked, after a few seconds. “It’s Sergeant Ford at the desk. There’s a woman here who wants to speak to you...” he looked back at her. “I’m sorry, what was your name?”

“Chloe Price.”

“A woman named Chloe Price, ma’am.” He listened for a few seconds, before he glanced back at her. “Um... about five-nine, blue hair, big tattoo on her right arm?”

He listened some more.

“Okay.” He hung up, looking back to her. “She’ll be down in a second.”

Chloe exhaled. “Cool,” she murmured, as she turned and took a seat.

_So far, so good. Hope she doesn’t arrest me for old time’s sake._

The door beside the desk opened a couple of minutes later. Harriet strolled into the room, looking decidedly different that when Chloe had last seen her. Gone was the uniform, replaced with a pantsuit, and her hair was cropped short. There were a couple of wrinkles in her face, too.

Chloe stood back up. “... hey, Gonzales,” she greeted.


“Yea.” Chloe wiped her sweaty palms on her jeans. “It’s, uh...”

Harriet took a couple of steps forward and surprised Chloe by wrapping her in a hug. She stood frozen in surprise as the officer squeezed. “It’s so good to see you,” Harriet said quietly.

Chloe eventually returned the hug silently.

“You still look like a Muppet,” Harriet added.

The bluenette snorted. “Knew it was too good to be true.”

“Yea, well.” Harriet stepped back, looking Chloe up and down. “You look good, kid. Lot better than you did last time I saw you.”

Chloe smirked. “Sitting in the back of that cop car, covered in spray paint? I could really only go up.”

Harriet shook her head. “I still have no idea how David sweet-talked those people out of pressing charges.”

“By offering to pay for the damages. And letting the principal finally expel me.” Chloe bit her lip. “I’m, uh, sorry. For what I said that day. And all the other times you put me in handcuffs.”

“Apology accepted.” Harriet guided her back to the chairs. “Come on, let’s sit.”

She took the offered seat. Harriet sat across from her, wincing as she did so. “Are you okay?” Chloe asked.
“It’s my knee.” Harriet squeezed the problem joint. “I tweaked it a few years ago. Hasn’t been right since.”

“Chasing down more teenagers?”

“Hazard of the job.” Harriet smiled. “You really do look better. Aside from the hair, I mean.”

“You know, I wasn’t planning on keeping it for this long when I did it,” Chloe admitted. “But my wife likes it, so...”

“Right, I heard you got married.” Harriet nodded. “Your step-dad mentioned it. And that you asked him to walk you down the aisle. You have no idea how honored he was, Chloe.”

“No, I got that,” Chloe assured her. “And... that was kind of one of the reasons I wanted to see you.”

Harriet tilted her head. “Why?”

“To tell you that you were right. About what you told me, when I finally had to spend the night in lockup.”

The officer hummed, as she looked down at her lap. “I’ve always felt bad about that,” she admitted. “That wasn’t really appropriate, what I said and did. I was way out of line.”

“It wasn’t entirely undeserved,” Chloe pointed out. “You were right, I was a spoiled little shit. And I never really considered that my mom was going through a tough time, too. What you said... it kind of stuck with me, in the back of my mind, for a while.”

Harriet looked amused. “If I remember right, you were back in handcuffs two months later.”

“Hey, man, it was a freshly-painted wall just BEGGING to be tagged.” Chloe shrugged, sighing. “I’ll never argue that I was a shitty kid. But... I mean, after I got expelled, and I figured I was about to get kicked to the curb, David still offered to pay for my certification classes. So I figured that, you know... maybe you were onto something. And if I hadn’t taken those classes, I never would have met my wife.”

Chloe took a breath. “They also wouldn’t have let me get those certifications, if I had a serious criminal record. So I guess I have you to thank for that, too.” She met Harriet’s gaze. “David told me a few years ago that you were the one who spoke to the judge, not him.”

Harriet leaned back in her chair. “He was supposed to take credit,” she mused after a few seconds. “Never figured he would’ve told you.”

“He did. You were related to the judge?”

“My great-uncle.”

“Why did you?” Chloe asked. “You were the one who told me that I didn’t do anything to deserve it, and that I was a spoiled little brat. Was it just a favor to David?”

“No.” Harriet crossed her legs. “Would it surprise you, Chloe, that my juvenile record is probably worse than yours?”

Chloe raised her eyebrows. “Yes.”

“Well, you’re not the only one who turned into a little shit after losing a parent.” Harriet nodded. “Mine was my mom, though, not my dad. You reminded me a lot more of myself than I cared to
admit. You were going down the same path I did, and the only thing that stopped me from getting worse is a cop that kicked my ass into shape.”

“Literally, or figuratively?”

“Yes.” Harriet smirked. “I didn’t want you to ruin your future for being a stupid teenager. So I did what I could.”

Chloe nodded. “I owe you big time, then.”

“You really don’t.” Harriet cocked her head. “Why today? What bought you in to finally see me?”

“I’m leaving San Francisco,” Chloe answered. “My wife and I got job offers in Los Angeles. We’re probably not coming back, and I always told myself I would see you before I left, so... this was it, really. Couldn’t put it off any longer.”


The lobby doors swung open, and they both turned to look as Faith ran through the door. The toddler smiled as soon as she saw them. “C’oe!” she squealed, as she bumbled towards her.

“Hey you!” Chloe grabbed her by her armpits. “Why aren’t you in the truck?”

Max ran through the door behind her, exasperation on her face. “Sorry. She said she had to use the bathroom.” She gave Faith a look, as Chloe pulled her onto her lap. “And I told you to hold my hand.”

Faith shrugged. “Sorry.”

“Who is this?” Harriet asked, leaning forward. “Is she your daughter?”

“No.” Chloe shook her head. “She’s my sister-in-law.”

Harriet’s eyebrows shot up.

“Yea, I know. It’s really, really complicated.” Chloe wiggled her fingers in Faith’s armpits, making the child giggle. “Hey, kiddo. Say hi to Lieutenant Gonzales.”

Faith waved her hand. “Hi.”

“She is so cute.” Harriet grinned, as she waved back. “What’s your name?”

“Faith.”

“And this is my wife, Max,” Chloe added, nodding towards the brunette.

Max smiled as she shook Harriet’s hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“You, too.” Harriet tilted her head towards Chloe. “Are you the one who keeps her under control?”

“I try really, really hard.” Max’s smile got wider. “It’s easier some days than others.”

Chloe scowled. “Can we save the teaming up on me for Christmas?”

Max ignored her. “Do you have all the stories about her arrest record?” she asked. “My wife won’t tell me anything.”
“Oh, I was there for most of it.” Harriet smiled back. “Which one do you want to know about? The vandalism, the petty theft, or getting arrested for driving without a license?”

“None,” Chloe said. “Please.”

Harriet looked at her smugly. “You don’t still have that death-trap of a truck, do you?”

“Come on.” Chloe bounced Faith on her lap. “We’ve got a kid to take care of. I wouldn’t put her in that thing.”

“Good.” Harriet looked back at Faith. “Are you a good girl, Faith?”

The child nodded. “Uh-huh.”

“You should change that, when you’re a teenager.” Harriet nodded. “Start sneaking out of your house, stealing from pawn shops, running from-”


“I look forward to hearing from David, when that’s not the case.”

“Are you a police officer?” Faith blurted out.

“Officer,” Chloe and Max corrected simultaneously.

Harriet nodded. “I sure am.”

“Cooool,” Faith said in awe.

“Hey.” Harriet leaned forward again. “Would you like to see a cop car up close, Faith?”

The child’s eyes got big. “Can I play the siren?”

“If your sisters say it’s okay, you sure can.”

Faith looked at Max and Chloe. “Please?”

Max looked at Chloe with a smirk. “We’ve got plenty of time, before we have to be in Los Angeles for dinner. We can look at a cop car.”

“Okay.” Chloe nodded, shifting Faith out of her lap. “Come on, kiddo. Let’s see if we can imprint a desire to stay out of the back of one.”

Max: Are you sure it’s okay to put our hotel room on the company card?

Victoria: Positive. You’re not the only employee we’re hiring from out of the area.

Max: I got that, but... the Hilton is expensive. And I know it’s going to take a little bit to close on a house.

Victoria: You REALLY don’t get that you’re in the big leagues now, do you?

Max: ... apparently not.
Victoria: Relax. We’ve got a corporate deal with that hotel. You’re basically getting the room for half-price.

Max: I am?

Victoria: Did you tell them that you’re an executive with Chase Enterprises?

Max: I didn’t know I was supposed to.

Victoria: Okay, if you don’t get that corporate rate, you WILL have a problem with accounting. Just call them back and have them adjust it.

Max: I really, really hope you guys don’t think that you made a mistake by hiring me.

Victoria: I know you get that my dad likes you, but he didn’t hire you because of that.

Victoria: The accountants went through the Franklin-Seymour paperwork before he made the decision. You made Jake and Penny a fair amount of money.

Max: I think “a fair amount” is relative.

Victoria: It’s the same game. You’re just on a different scale now.

Victoria: Did you talk to Peter yet?

Max: A couple of times. He wants me to look at restaurants, since I know that business pretty well. And figure out where we can open a Maria’s Kitchen location down there.

Victoria: My dad is actually pretty excited about that place. Did you know he ate there for lunch when we were in SF?

Max: He did?

Victoria: Not at the actual restaurant, we had it delivered. But he loved it.

Victoria: He’s going to fly Maria up to Seattle, so he can talk to her about a broader expansion plan.

Max: Why? He owns the name now.

Victoria: Professional courtesy. And he wants her to be the face of the business.

Max: But Maria’s a terrible businesswoman.

Victoria: ... is she really?

Max: Why do you think Jake owned half the restaurant? She’s an amazing cook, but if she made the decisions, she would’ve gone bankrupt in year two.

Victoria: I should probably mention that to my dad, before they meet.

Kate: So???

Max: They accepted the offer!
Kate: YAY!! You guys are so lucky, that is a GORGEOUS house!

Max: I know, Faith is so excited to move into a bigger bedroom.

Max: I’ll almost miss apartment living, but oh my GOD that backyard.

Kate: I’m a little jealous. Sometimes I wish we lived in a house.

Max: Why don’t you? I’m sure you guys could afford a nice one. Hell, with Victoria’s money, you guys could get the fanciest one in Beverly Hills.

Kate: We thought about it, especially since Kevin was born. But we’re in an amazing school district, there’s a park right next door, and we both really love this apartment.

Kate: Also, Vicky said she wouldn’t be caught dead living in Beverly Hills.

Max: Why not?

Kate: She had some very impolite things to say about the people who live there. She thinks they’re all rich snobs.

Max: ... did you tell her that SHE’S a rich snob?

Kate: I did. She took great offense.

Kate: When are you guys moving into the house?

Max: In three weeks. We still have to have the property inspected, and go through escrow.

Kate: You’re having a housewarming party, right?

Max: With who? You two are literally the only people down here that we know.

Kate: Exactly :)

Max: ... sure, why not.

Steph: How was your first day?

Chloe: I had a BLAST

Steph: Really?

Chloe: They haven’t set anything up yet, so I was asked to plan out a proper network.

Chloe: When I asked for a budget, they just told me to put together a list of what we were going to need.

Steph: Seriously? They gave you a blank check?

Chloe: Their office manager admitted that she knows very little about network infrastructure. She told me to put together a good, quality setup that will last us a long time.
Steph: So you spent the day shopping, then.

Chloe: I never knew how much fun it would be spending money that wasn’t mine.

Chloe: Brand-new computers, laptops, servers, and I get to set up all of it... this is like a wet dream.

Steph: Man, you and Max must have some weird dirty talk.

Jake: How was your first day of work?

Max: I am in so far over my head.

Jake: Come on, it can’t be that bad.

Max: My boss, Peter, wants me to start looking at markets we can expand into down here. Not businesses, MARKETS. Our budget is literally in the MILLIONS.

Jake: You make a decision yet?

Max: No!! My head felt like it was going to explode just from all the reading!

Jake: You realize that this is exactly what you did for me, right? Remember those restaurants you helped us open? And it was YOUR idea, to buy out those other two dealerships.

Max: That was easy! I could go through everything in a few days!

Jake: I am SURE Peter doesn’t want an answer in a few days.

Max: ... more like a few weeks.

Jake: Then you have plenty of time to get the lay of the land.

Jake: What about Maria’s Kitchen? I know Mr. Chase wanted to open one in L.A.

Max: I sent a bunch of emails out, looking for locations we could use. I’m still waiting to hear back.

Jake: Then sit back and take a few deep breaths. You’ll be FINE, Max.

Max: I hope so. We already spent all the money we got on our new house. If this falls through, I have nothing.

Jake: Wow. You sound like I did, when I opened my first bar.

Max: Yea?

Jake: Take it day by day. I’m sure you’ll do great.

Max: ... thanks.

Victoria: First quarter sales are in.

Max: Wait, how did you get them before me?
Victoria: I’m having lunch with a couple of the other directors. Peter just got them on his phone.

Max: Oh. And?

Victoria: It wasn’t two hundred thousand.

Max: ... fuck.

Max: I was so sure.

Victoria: Hey, you’re not always going to be right. We don’t think less of you. And we still made plenty of money.

Max: I don’t get it. It’s located in the perfect neighborhood for a Mexican restaurant. Over forty percent Latino, right next to an office park, and nothing like it for three blocks in any direction.

Victoria: It’s really fine, Max.

Max: It was literally the first decision I made, and it came in under the mark.

Victoria: Seriously, don’t beat yourself up over it.

Max: I will anyway. But fine.

Max: Was I at least close?

Victoria: Not really.

Max: How far off was I?

Victoria: About $50K.

Max: What? No way. We would have known if we were doing sales that low.

Victoria: I never said it was a negative number.

Max: ... I’m going to kill you.

Victoria: ROFLMFAO

Victoria: We are DYING over here!

Max: You are NOT FUNNY!! I was having a heart attack!!

Max: What was our profit margin? No bullshit!

Victoria: $250K. Actually, if we round up, closer to $260K.

Max: SHIT

Victoria: Told you it was fine.

Max: Shut up! I’m mad at you!
Victoria: Yea, yea. Peter says to tell you ‘good work’.

Victoria: And that you still owe him a proposal by Friday?

Max: I HATE YOUR GUTS

Max: And tell him that he’ll have it tomorrow.
December, 2020. Sunday after the MSN interview.

Sam couldn’t even describe her feelings after three days.

After Max’s attempted kidnapping, she hadn’t slept a wink. She was fairly certain nobody did; Rachel had looked exhausted, when they’d started driving, and Brooke had fallen asleep in the back seat.

She was also incredibly on edge. As she walked back up to her apartment, a gnawing feeling developed in the back of her mind, that someone from First Light would be waiting for her with a gun. And as she walked towards her door, the noise of her television coming from the other side made her freeze in fear.

It’s Charles.

You know it’s Charles. He said he’d be here.

Crap. What if it’s not?

She pulled out her cell phone and dialed his number. After a few seconds, she heard a familiar ringtone through the door.

“That girl is a problem, girl is a problem, girl is a problem, problem, goddamn problem...”

“Hello?”

She sighed, then stuck her key in the door and turned it. The door swung open, to reveal her boyfriend sitting on the couch as he watched a sitcom. He turned to face her, phone still to his ear.

“I really hate that that’s my ringtone.”

Charles grinned as he dropped his phone on the coffee table. “Too bad. It fits you to a T.”

Sam stuck her phone back in her pocket as she dropped her duffle bag. She made her way to the couch and collapsed onto it, immediately tilting over, her head landing in Charles’ lap. “I’m tired.”

He rubbed her shoulder soothingly. “I bet. You have a long weekend drinking lots of wine?”

She opened her mouth, about to spin her tale, but stopped short.

He’s going to find out eventually.

“I... didn’t drink any wine.”

“Oh?” He raised an eyebrow. “Beer then? Or hard liquor? Doing shots in the club, getting-”

“I grew up in a cult.”

He stopped, blinking in surprise as he looked at her. “... come again?”

Sam sat back up, keeping her eyes in her lap. “It wasn’t a girl’s weekend,” she muttered. “I’m sorry that I said it was. I was just avoiding the topic.”
“It...” he frowned. “I don’t understand. What was it? And what do you mean, you grew up in a cult?”

“You know First Light of Christ, right?”

He raised his eyebrows. “Those weirdos in Arcadia Bay?”

“Yea.” Sam nodded, still not looking at him. “I spent the first sixteen years of my life in that church.”

“What?!” Charles looked flabbergasted. “You were... seriously?”

She nodded.

“I thought you said you grew up in the foster system?”

“I did, after I ran away from home.” She finally looked up and met his gaze. “I turned in another girl to the church for being gay, because I thought she was sick and needed help. Her parents beat the shit out of her instead.”

Charles didn’t move. He stared at her mutely, only blinking and breathing.

“... please say something.”

“I’m not sure what I’m supposed to say.”

Sam blinked, quickly wiping a tear away. “I’d... really, really like to hear that you’re not mad at me. For not telling you that I grew up in a cult.”

“Of course I’m not. Don’t think like that.” Charles grabbed her hand. “But... what did you do this weekend?”

“I met back up with the girl I turned in. And another couple of people, a teenager and another runaway.” She bit her lip and dropped her gaze back to her lap. “We gave really detailed statements to the FBI, about the crimes we saw get committed while we were growing up. And then we taped an interview for MSN. They’re going to air it in a couple of weeks, so the whole country knows about them.”

“Wow.” Charles leaned back. “That’s... wow.”

“I’m sorry.” Sam sniffled. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

Charles used one finger to tilt Sam’s head back up. He leaned in and planted a soft kiss on her forehead. “It’s okay, Sam.”

“I...”

“Babe, if half of what I’ve heard about those whack jobs is true, I wouldn’t talk about it either.” He paused. “But I want to know what you went through, Sam. Especially if we’re going to see it on TV. And everything you’ve told me is kind of jumbled. So... will you start from the beginning? Please?”

July, 2024

“You sure about this?”
“No.” Sam looked out the car window as Charles drove. “But I at least want to see what they’re like now.”

Charles glanced at her. “I’m worried. Especially after what you’ve told me about them. I mean, they buried your sister in an unmarked grave.”

“I promise, babe, they’re not on my Christmas card list.” Sam sighed. “It’s just breakfast. That’s all. We’ll see where we go after this conversation.”

“... okay.” He nodded. “No coffee for you.”

“Jesus.” She glanced at him. “Do you have to rub salt in the wound?”

He smirked. “You heard what the doctor said. No caffeine until after the baby’s born.”

Sam glanced down at her belly. At seven months, her baby bump was very noticeable. “This kid better be a doctor or something,” she muttered. “After everything I’ve been through.”

They pulled up to the diner a couple of minutes later. Sam took Charles in as he got out of the car; even after a few years together, he’d kept up his figure. The button-up shirt he wore was stretched tight across his chest, and his head was freshly shaved. He quickly adjusted the silver Rolex he’d brought to celebrate the first anniversary of his bar being open, before following Sam into the diner.

She recognized her parents immediately. Other than some grey hair, they’d changed very little in twelve years. They noticed her as well, her mother tapping her father on the shoulder as she appeared.

Then Charles came in behind her, laying a hand possessively on her lower back. She watched their demeanor change as they saw him, both of her parents narrowing their eyes slightly at the two of them.

Charles seemed to notice it, too. “You didn’t happen to tell them that I’m black, did you?” he whispered as they walked towards their table.

“No.” Sam shook her head. “It didn’t seem important.”

“Well, this should be fun.”

Her parents stood as they got to their table. Samantha and Charles stopped just behind their chairs. “Hi Mom, Dad,” Sam greeted cautiously.

“Samantha.” Her mother paused. “I thought we would be seeing you alone.”

“We weren’t aware that you were married,” her father stated. Sam could practically feel the derision in his voice.

“That’s because we’re not.” Sam plastered on a smile. “It’s nice to see you, too.”

“Yes. Sorry.” Her mother bit her lip, casting a lingering gaze over Charles. “It is nice to see you, Samantha. Please, let’s sit.”

They all sat down, Charles scooting back from the table a little bit to sit closer to Sam. He folded his hands on the table, staying silent.
“So.” Sam paused. “Been a while. How’re things back at Arcadia Bay?”

“Not what it used to be,” her father replied. “That interview did a lot of damage to the church. They still haven’t fully recovered.”

“Good.” Sam shook her head. “They shouldn’t.”

“Samantha, they did a lot of good for the community,” her mother scolded. “They were-”

“I’m sorry, they what, exactly?” Sam raised an eyebrow. “What good did they do when they stole thousands of dollars from you in food stamps? When they had thugs force parents to choose between their businesses and their children’s lives? Or when they forced girls to get married when they were too young to say no?”

“Those people are gone,” he father countered. “We’re getting that money back.”

“Well. Good for you.” She paused. “Why didn’t you ever try to reach out and tell me that Abigail died?”

The two of them traded looks. “We thought you’d abandoned the family,” her mother said. “That you wanted nothing more to do with us.”

“She was still my sister.”

“We know it was wrong.” Her father clasped his hands together. “We made mistakes, Samantha. We want to rectify them.” He paused. “We want you back.”

“Yea. Well.” Sam crossed her arms. “An apology for trying to force me to marry a boy I didn’t even know would be a good start.”

“We were doing what we thought was best,” her father said. “He was a good boy.”

“He wasn’t a boy. He was twenty-four. I was sixteen.”

“Fine. He was a good man. He still is.” Her father spared a half-second glance at Charles, before looking back at her. “He would have been good to you, Samantha. And your life certainly would have been easier.”

She raised an eyebrow. “What does that mean?”

“We know where you used to work.” Her mother shivered. “A strip club, Samantha? After all the values we instilled in-”

“I made enough money to pay my rent and put myself through college without any student loans,” Sam shot back. “I’ll never apologize for that.”

“You earned them by dressing like a whore,” her father said.

Sam turned back to him, staying silent. She watched from the corner of her eyes as the sleeves on Charles’ shirt tightened, but he didn’t move or speak.

“We can still help you, Samantha, with the money we’re going to get once the church settles its debts,” her father continued. “We want you back. We want you to come home.”

“I have a home,” she said shortly.
“You don’t need to be an unwed mother.” Her father finally shot Charles a dirty look. “And you
don’t need to be trapped in a bad situation.”

Sam stared at him, blinking. After a few seconds, she sighed.

“I don’t know why. But I thought you guys would have changed.” She scooted her chair back and
stood. “Let’s go, babe. I’m tired.”

Charles stood next to her. So did her father, as they turned to leave. “Samantha-”

“Enjoy dying alone,” she shot over her shoulder. “I’m done.”

Neither of them said a word as they walked out of the restaurant. Charles opened the door, letting
Sam into the passenger seat before he went around and got in. As soon as he closed his door, he
checked his watch.

“Four minutes.” He shook his head, as he hit the button to start the car. “Figured we would’ve made
it to ten, at least.”

“Me too.” Sam rubbed her forehead. She looked up as her parents walked out of the restaurant and
stopped, staring at her from the entrance. “Let’s get out of here.”

Charles reversed the car, pulling out of the lot. Sam didn’t look over her shoulder as the diner
vanished behind him.

“You know that if there wasn’t anyone around, your old man would have been a greasy smear on
the wall for calling you a whore, right?”

She smirked. “Your unborn child appreciates your restraint.”

Tiana: So? How’d it go?

Samantha: It went.

Tiana: ... that bad?

Samantha: I figured we would’ve at least ordered food, before they broke out the word ‘whore’.

Tiana: God. I’m sorry.

Samantha: It is what it is. And not entirely unexpected, at that.

Tiana: You think you’ll see them again?

Samantha: Doubt it. They weren’t exactly accepting of my choice in boyfriends, either.

Tiana: Why not? Charles is amazing! Did you tell them that he’s got a great job, and can provide for
you and the baby with no problem?

Samantha: We didn’t get to that. I think his skin was a little too dark for their liking.

Tiana: Ah ha.

Tiana: Well, I’m still sorry. I was hoping that they would’ve gotten better, since they left the church.
Samantha: That makes two of us.

Tiana: Do you guys want to come over for dinner, and reminisce about pasts best left behind?

Samantha: Are you gonna make your bread pudding?

Tiana: I will if you want me to.

Samantha: Then we’ll be there at five :) 

Claire: UUUUUUGGGGGGGHHHHHHHHHH

Sam: So, how’s schoolwork?

Claire: This SUCKS

Claire: How the fuck did I let you talk me into this??

Sam: Because you were tired of being introduced to the stage as ‘Portland’s favorite cougar’ when you turned twenty-six?

Claire: Oh, right.

Claire: You know, if I actually WAS a cougar, I think it would’ve softened the blow.

Sam: No, it wouldn’t have.

Claire: Fair point. Hey, wanna write my Cultural Awareness paper for me?

Sam: I’m good. I have no desire to go back to school.

Claire: This sucks so hard. And I still have, like, fifty classes to go. This honestly doesn’t feel worth it.

Sam: How else are you going to make a living, Claire? You’re completely unqualified to do literally anything else. And you can’t strip forever.

Claire: There’s always porn.

Sam: Most porn stars start when they’re in their early twenties, Claire. I think you’re a little past your prime to break into the industry.

Claire: Ouch!!

Claire: Wait, how did you know that? Did you look it up?

Sam: No!

Claire: Oh my God, you researched it!! You considered doing porn!!

Sam: NO I DID NOT

Claire: You DID!! Spread that info! What kind of genre makes the most money? Is the schoolgirl
fetish still a thing? Can I ask for more cash if I let them tie me up and spank me? Is it hotter to call someone 'Master' or 'Daddy'?

**Sam:** I NEVER, EVER, CONSIDERED DOING PORN!!!!

**Claire:** Educate me in the ways of the fuck-on-camera, you brunette Jenna Jameson!

**Sam:** I AM NOT A BRUNETTE JENNA JAMESON!!

**Claire:** True. You’d have to finish growing your tits first.

**Sam:** SHUT UP!!!
The alarm shattered the silence of the morning, jerking Brooke from her sleep. Not bothering to open her eyes, she reached out and slapped her phone, silencing the alarm.

Groaning, she nestled back into the bed, sighing as she tried to forget that she had a class in an hour. It was one of her last classes of the year, but she really didn’t want to do it; given how late she’d been awake, all she wanted to do was go back to sleep. And in her drowsy mind, she was perfectly okay with that.

The alarm sounded again, a few minutes later, and she slapped the phone for a second time. As she started to curl back up, she felt a foot in the small of her back. Before she knew it, she was flying off the bed, out from under the covers, landing on the floor in a heap.

“Get the hell up,” Emily mumbled from her side of the bed. “And take your goddamn phone with you.”

“Fuck you.” Brooke reached up, grabbing the side of the bed and pulling herself to a sitting position. “I want my own room.”

“Take it up with Regina.” Emily rolled back over. “Go to class already.”


“Whatever.”

She was getting off the bus a few hours later, blowing into her gloves as she tried to keep warm in the December weather. “Fuck this goddamn cold snap,” she muttered as she pushed through the slush on the ground. “And fuck Behavioral Science.”

Brooke sighed, as she hugged herself tightly. The bus stop was five blocks from the apartment; she tried to take their car as little as possible, saving it for when Regina and Aaron needed it. For nine months out of the year it was fine, but during the winter... well, she found herself wanting to be a little selfish.

After the first two blocks of the cold blowing right through her coat, she decided to take a detour into a coffee shop. Brooke pushed her way inside, rubbing her arms as she savored the warmth. She sighed and closed her eyes as she soaked up the heat.

*Screw it. I deserve a coffee.*

Brooke pulled out her wallet, opening it to count her cash. She flipped through the few singles and the change, deciding that she could treat herself if she didn’t buy anything else until her next paycheck.

While the three girls made a fair amount of money, working their respective waitressing shifts, things had been tight since Brooke and Emily had entered their graduate programs. The scholarship only paid for half their tuition now, instead of three-quarters, and the Master’s courses were much more
expensive. Regina had even talked about taking a break from her classes, to help increase their cash, but Brooke and Emily had quickly nixed the idea; she was close to finishing her Public Administration degree, and neither of them wanted her to give that up.

So they stretched their money, took whatever extra hours at the restaurant they could, and made it work. Brooke was determined not to feel bad for spending a couple of bucks on a hot drink when the temperatures were almost in the negatives. She stepped closer to the counter, looking at the menu as she tried to decide what she wanted.

“Brooke?” Someone called from behind her.

“Hm?” She turned to the unfamiliar voice... and her heart stopped.

The woman behind her had changed a lot in a few years. She’d definitely lost some weight, and her hair was greyer than Brooke remembered. Gone were the diamond earrings, replaced by simple studs, and the expensive watch was also missing. The coat and hat she wore looked several years old.

But there was no mistaking her mother.

Brooke immediately jammed her hand into her pocket, wrapping it around the canister of pepper spray as she took a step back. “Don’t come near me.”

Her mom took a step closer.

Brooke pulled out the pepper spray, holding it close to her chest. She pointed at her mother with her free hand. “You stay right there,” she said in a high-pitched voice. “I mean it, you stay away from me!”

“Brooke,” her mother gasped, and Brooke paused as she noticed her mother’s eyes watering. “Oh, sweetie, I missed you so much.”

What? Her mom’s statement threw her for a loop, and she didn’t respond as she tried not to hyperventilate.

“Brooke, please.” Her mom clasped her hands together. “Brooke, please, don’t run. I just-”

“You’re supposed to be in jail,” Brooke interrupted. “You got sent to prison with Dad, and Henry, and Grandpa. What are you doing here? How did you get out?”

“... I got released a couple of months ago.” Her mother paused to wipe her eyes, as she took another step. “Brooke, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Please don’t leave, I’ve been trying to find you since I-”

“STOP!!” Brooke ordered loudly. Out of the corner of her eyes, she could see the barista and the other customers looking at her. “I don’t know how you found me, or what you want, or how you got them to release you, but I don’t care! Don’t come anywhere near me!”

Her mom finally stopped, lowering her hands.

“I’m sorry,” she repeated. “Brooke, I’m so sorry. Please, I just want to talk.” She sniffed. “I miss you so much.”

“You MISS me?!” Brooke asked incredulously. “You and Dad tried to force me to marry a psychopath! You guys paid a shrink to lie about me in court! You tried to trick me into moving in with a man I didn’t know when I was fifteen years old! And you fucking MISS me?!”
Her mother looked like someone had punched her, as she sniffled deeply. “Your grandfather did all of that,” she said quickly. “Brooke, please-”

“That’s convenient, blaming someone who isn’t here,” Brooke snapped.

“I love you!”

“Well, you got a funny way of fucking showing it!”

“Why do you think you went back to school after your grandfather told you that you were married?”

Brooke paused. “... what?”

“Sweetie, please,” her mother begged. “I swear, I didn’t want you to get married. Your dad and grandfather arranged all of it. I wanted you to tell someone and get help.” She snorted, as tears fell down her cheeks. “I didn’t think they would take you away, Brooke. Please, I miss you so much. I just want to talk, I swear.”

Brooke lowered her hand, but kept the pepper spray ready. “What does that mean? What did you do?”

Her mother wiped her eyes again. “I... convinced your grandfather to let you finish the semester,” she admitted. “I just thought someone would step in, and stop the marriage. I never thought they would take you away from us.”

Brooke’s mind raced, as she thought about what her mom said. It wouldn’t have made sense for Grandpa to let me go back to school after telling me that I was already married, she realized. I can’t believe I never thought about that. He could have waited until the weekend.

“You told me that I should be happy,” she argued back. “You tried to get me excited, and told me all about how it was when you and Dad moved in together!”

“I didn’t have a choice. Not with your father and grandfather in the house.” Her mom’s lip trembled. “Please, Brooke.”

The barista finally came around the counter. “Is there a problem?” she asked, glancing between the two of them. “Miss, are you okay?”

Brooke considered her answer for a few seconds. “I’m fine,” she said quietly, as she lowered the pepper spray, holding it out of sight.

“Are you sure?”

“Yea.” Brooke nodded, her gaze not leaving her mother. “Thanks.”

“How did you find me?”

The two of them were sitting at a table against the wall. Brooke took the chair closest to the door, and she didn’t put away the pepper spray; she kept it held in her hand, under the table, as she watched her mother carefully.

“When I tried to Google you, the OSU web page came up,” her mom explained quietly. “There were photos of you in classes. And in a couple of them, you had a to-go cup from this shop on your desk.”

Great. Well, I can never come here again. Brooke sighed. “So... what? You’ve just been surveilling
“Why those days?”

“Because that’s when I have off. I work the rest of the week.”

Brooke blinked, surprised. “You work?”

“I have to.” Her mother shrugged. “The police seized everything we had, sweetie. I need to make a living.”

She folded her arms. “They seized everything because it was stolen. From people on food stamps, barely scraping by, who were forced to give twenty-five percent of their salary to that fucking church.”

Her mom sighed. “I know. They told me all about it, after they arrested me.”

“Oh, please,” Brooke scoffed. “Do you really expect me to believe that you didn’t wonder how Dad and Grandpa made so much money, before the raid? I was a teenager, and I knew something was fishy.”

“... I did, too.” Her mother looked back at her. “I just didn’t want to know what.”

“Ah. The old ‘ignorance is bliss’ defense.”

Her mother shook her head. “I don’t want to argue, Brooke. I know it was wrong.”

“Well, you’re full of apologies.” Brooke leaned back in her chair. “What do you expect right now? Me to just forgive you, for everything you guys put me through?”

“I tried to—” Her mother was interrupted by the beeping in her pocket. She checked her phone, then withdrew a bottle of pills from her coat, shaking two of them out and swallowing them. “Sorry.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing. Just medication I have to take on a schedule.”

Brooke glanced at the bottle, but her mother put it away too quickly. “What, are you sick?”

“Sweetie, I wanted to help you,” her mother said quietly, ignoring her question. “I did the best I could. I swear, I didn’t want you to marry that boy any more than you did.”

“Yea. Well.” Brooke paused. “You didn’t answer my question. Why are you taking medication?”

“It’s nothing, Brooke, I-”

“You want me to trust you, and it’s kind of hard when you’re lying to my face.” Brooke uncrossed her arms and leaned forward. “What medication are you taking?”

Her mother sighed. “... Temodar.”

“What is that?”
Oral chemotherapy.

Brooke did a double-take. “You have cancer?”

Her mom nodded, as she kept her eyes on the table. “Glioblastoma,” she admitted. “Brain cancer.”

“... how?”

“The oncologist said it was just bad luck.” Her mother looked back up at her. “You asked how I got out of jail. After my diagnosis, the warden helped me apply to the Bureau of Prisons, for a compassionate release. Since I didn’t have any disciplinary issues, they granted it.”

Brooke stared at her mother. “You’re... dying?”

“In a few months.” Her mother paused. “I wasn’t trying to lie to you, Brooke. I just didn’t want to make you feel like I was manipulating you.”

耶稣基督。Brooke felt very conflicted. I didn’t hate her enough to want her dead.

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.” Her mother nodded. “If you don’t want to see me anymore, Brooke, I understand,” she said quietly. “I just... if this is the last time we meet, then I just wanted you to know how sorry I am that I didn’t do more.”

Brooke bit her lip. “Does Dad know?”

Her mother shook her head. “We’re somewhat estranged, as you can guess.”

“Still too devout to divorce him?”

“I honestly don’t see a point. Everything will come to pass long before lawyers could push a divorce through. And there’s no will to worry about.” Her mother smiled. “I’m sorry, Brooke, but I’m afraid you won’t get much of an inheritance.”

She shrugged. “I don’t want our family’s dirty money anyway.”

“Are you doing okay?” Her mother asked, leaning forward. “I know you’re in college, and I know it’s expensive.”

“I’m fine. I have a scholarship that covers a lot of the money.”

“Good.” Her mother nodded. “When do you graduate?”

“Technically, I already did. I got my bachelor’s earlier year. I’m in a graduate program now.”

“Oh, wow.” Her mom smiled. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. You always were the smartest one in the family.”

Brooke smirked. “There wasn’t a lot of competition.”

“No, I suppose not.” Her mother dropped her gaze to the table. “I have so many regrets, Brooke. And I wish so badly you hadn’t been taken away. But... you’re doing so much better than I ever hoped for. I can’t tell you how happy that makes me.”

Chewing on the inside of her cheek, Brooke took a few seconds to formulate a response. “Thank
you. For... you know, doing what you could. I guess I owe you.”

“No, you don’t. I was just trying to be a good parent.” Her mom shook her head. “Brooke... I’d really, really like to see you again.” She paused. “If you’ll let me.”

“What did you say?”

Brooke looked across the table at Emily, her friend watching her intently as Brooke recounted the story. “I said that I would,” Brooke admitted quietly. “I mean, maybe I’ll remember at some point how much I hated her. But I don’t want to lose the chance to talk to her just because I was stubborn.”

Next to Emily, Regina leaned onto her elbows. “I think you made the right choice, Brooke.”

“I hope so.” Brooke shrugged. “I guess we’ll find out eventually.”

“What else did you guys talk about?”

“We caught up, mostly. I told her about school, and she talked about her job.” Brooke smirked. “She works at Wal-Mart, as a greeter.”

Emily tilted her head. “Seriously? A greeter?”

“The chemo makes it hard to do much of anything else. And sitting down helps.”

“Ah.” Emily nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“It is what it is. I’m still trying to process it.” Brooke rubbed her face. “I’m... I don’t know. I don’t want to talk about it anymore.” She blinked. “Wait, Emily, isn’t Javier going to be here soon?”

Emily glanced at her watch. “In twenty minutes or so.”

Regina raised her eyebrows. “Isn’t this, like, date number five?”

“Six, if you count that coffee shop as the first date.” Emily bit her lip. “I... kind of want to have sex with him.”

Brooke and Regina both shifted, giving Emily their full attention. “Do you really?” Regina asked.


“I’m not sure about this, Emily.” Brooke cautioned. “I mean, you know we like Javier. He’s a great guy. But you still have nightmares about... you know. Him.”

“You don’t have to remind me about Martin. Trust me, I remember him.” Emily crossed her arms. “Javier is really nice, though. He’s nothing like Martin was. He actually listens to me, and pays attention, and remembers what I say.”

Emily, I don’t think-”

“I have to get past Martin,” Emily interrupted. “I’m not going to live like a nun for the rest of my life. I want a family. I get that it might not be with Javier, but I have to start somewhere. And I refuse to let what Martin did to me control my life.”

Brooke and Regina traded glances. “... okay then,” Brooke finally said. “You’re, you know, going to make him wear a condom, right?”
Emily rolled her eyes. “I’ve seen all the PSAs.”

Emily wound up coming home at the usual time later that night; Javier had apparently been scheduled for a late shift.

A couple of days later, Brooke agreed to meet her mother for dinner. She left as the sun was setting, tightening her beanie over her ears as she closed the apartment door behind her.

As she was walking down the stairs, she noticed Javier’s pickup truck pull into the lot. He seemed jovial, as he got out of the driver’s seat.

“Hey!” Brooke greeted him with a wave, as she stopped halfway down the stairs. “I didn’t know you were coming by.”

“Oh, what’s up, Brooke?” Javier smiled back. “Yea, I was texting Emily earlier. We’re gonna go see an early movie, and get some dinner.”

“Where at?”

“That new Italian place that opened near the campus, Cromartie’s.” He nodded. “I hear they got some killer casserole.”

Brooke nodded back, as Javier started coming up the stairs. As he got level with her, she reached out and grabbed his arm, holding him in place. His eyebrows went up, as she pulled him closer.

“You know, Emily really likes you.”

“Um...” he paused. “Really?”

“Yea. A lot.” Brooke looked him up and down. “And you seem like a good person. So far, anyway.”

Javier smiled. “I try to be.”

“Glad to hear it.” Brooke leaned in closer. “If she comes home crying one day, and it’s your fault? They’ll never find your body.”

“Oh.” Javier blinked. “Um. Okay, got it.”

“No, you don’t,” Brooke informed him. “Do you know that there are people who want me dead, Javier?”

“... really?”

“A lot of people. I would say at least a few dozen, conservatively. But I’m still here, and because of me, they’re all either in prison or dead.” Her eyes narrowed, as she tried to look as serious as possible. “Are you picking up what I’m putting down?”

Brooke felt a little bit of satisfaction, as she watched the traces of mirth disappear from his face as he studied hers. He slowly nodded. “Yea. Okay.”

“Good.” She let go of his arm and patted the wrinkles out of his jacket. “Don’t take her to Cromartie’s. Take her to Balderdash. She saw a commercial for it, and she really wants to go and try their stuffed peppers.”
Javier nodded eagerly. “They do look pretty good.”

“Perfect.” She smiled widely. “You guys have a nice evening.”
May 2026.

It was a much smaller ceremony than Brooke was used to.

When she’d been in First Light, funerals were very large affairs. Over a hundred people would gather at the coffin to pay their last respects, even for people they didn’t know. All the Elders would come out, and the Pastors would speak for twenty to thirty minutes about that parishioner’s life and how they touched all of them.

When her mother finally passed, there were less than a dozen people at the service. She stared at the casket morosely from the front row of the funeral home, flanked on both sides by Emily and Regina. On either side of them sat seven-year-old Aaron, sitting quietly in his smartest outfit, and Javier, dressed in a black suit.

Behind them, Miss Amber sat beside her girlfriend, Steph. Across the aisle was the woman who introduced herself as Kelly, her mother’s probation officer, and Nicole, the woman she’d lived with for the last few months of her life. Behind them was a woman who had come in late, sitting quietly next to one of her mother’s nurses.

The director read some very generic-sounding comments, lauding about the tragedy of a life cut short. Brooke tuned most of it out, as she sat and tried to figure out how she felt.

When he finally stopped, Brooke stood and walked over to the casket, laying her eyes on her mother. She certainly looked better than she had in hospice. Her hair hadn’t started falling out until late in her chemo cycle, but when it went, it went quickly. And her weight had gone with it. The mortician had done a good job with the makeup, and a wig; it almost looked like her mother was asleep.

*I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.*

She felt, rather than saw, Emily stand next to her. Regina followed suit on her other side, both of them standing close.

*I think they’re expecting me to faint.*

*I’m not going to. I know I should feel sadder, though. I’m sorry that I don’t. Maybe I spent too long being angry at you. By your own admittance, I certainly had good reason.*

... *fuck.*

*Sorry. I know you didn’t like it when I swore.* Brooke smirked. *Between you, Miss Amber, and Regina, I’ll have a clean mouth before long.*

*Thank you. For what you did. I got to go to college because of you. Miss Amber said she’s going to score me an interview at her office after I graduate. I’m gonna help kids that need it, just like I did, because you made sure I could run away.*

*I really wish that you’d told me sooner.*
Brooke swallowed. *I don’t really believe in God anymore, and I never got the chance to ask you about it. But... I hope that you’re in a good place.*

She sighed and turned away. Miss Amber was behind her, watching with a worried look on her face. “Are you okay?” she asked quietly.

“Yea,” Brooke muttered. “I need some air.”

She moved to step past her old social worker, and felt Emily and Regina start to follow her. Brooke stopped and looked back at them.

“Alone, if you guys don’t mind.”

She sat on the bench near the edge of the cemetery, staring off into the distance. It had started drizzling shortly after the funeral had begun, but Brooke didn’t bother to put up the hood on her jacket; she was content to let the raindrops hit her head.

Her feelings were extremely conflicted. She knew that most people felt sad when a parent died. And she did, a little bit. But she felt like she should have been sadder. She felt like she was supposed to be sadder.

But she didn’t know how.

*I’m not, like, a sociopath or something, am I?* Brooke exhaled through her nose, as she stared out over the field of tombstones. I don’t think I am. Pretty sure I’m not.

*Would I know if I was?*

*Fuck.*

“You look thoughtful.”

Brooke blinked at the interruption to her thoughts, glancing over her shoulder. Steph was a few feet behind the bench, smiling warmly. She stood with one hand in her jacket pocket, and the other holding an umbrella.

“You’re elected to make sure I haven’t gone and hung myself?” Brooke asked wryly.

“No. They’re still trying to figure out if they should come find you or not.” Steph walked around to the front of the bench. “Cool if I sit?”

Brooke shrugged. “It’s a free country.”

“Yea, it is, isn’t it?” Steph turned and sat beside her, positioning the umbrella so that it covered both of them. “Penny for your thoughts?”

“Is that all you think they’re worth?”

“Not like they have any reviews on Amazon.” Steph smirked, reaching her free hand up and tucking a strand of hair back under her beanie. “For real, how are you feeling?”

Brooke sighed. “I was just trying to figure that out.”

“Let me guess. You’re not, like, super upset. And you feel like you should be, and that people will think you’re weird for not being really sad about your mom dying. But you’re not sure how to,
because you spent a really long time not liking her.” She paused. “How close am I?”

Eyebrows arching, Brooke glanced at her. “... what number am I thinking of?”

“Eleven?”

“It was four.”

“Shoot. That would’ve been cool.”

“Yea.” Brooke nodded. “How’d you know?”

“I felt the same way when my mom died last year.” Steph exhaled. “Rachel spent three days hovering and being really annoying after I found out.”

A snort escaped from Brooke’s nose before she could stop it. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” Steph shrugged. “We weren’t close, at the end. I didn’t find out she died until almost two weeks later.”

Brooke frowned. “Really? Why not?”

“Well, nobody knew for the first four days. My mom got drunk and took a bunch of medication that she wasn’t supposed to. Her heart stopped during the night; cops forced entry a few days later, when a bunch of neighbors complained about the smell.” Steph shook her head. “Then it took a while for the police to get ahold of me. They had to talk to four of her six ex-husbands before they found one who had my phone number.”

“Oh, God.” Brooke looked at Steph with wide eyes. “I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you.” She sighed. “I wasn’t really surprised. Given my mother’s fondness for whiskey, I’m shocked her liver lasted as long as it did.”

Brooke hesitated. “Did you... kind of hate your mom too?”

“Oh, there was nothing ‘kind of’ about it.” Steph nodded. “I’ll spare you the details. But I hadn’t spoken to her in years.”

“Mm.” Brooke pursed her lips. “So... how did you deal with everything?”

“Drank a little. Smoked a little. Figured there wasn’t really anything I could do, and if I was really upset, it would come.” Steph shrugged. “It still hasn’t, for me. Mostly because I never forgave her for what she did, and she never apologized. But your mom tried to reconcile with you in the end.”

“Yea.” Brooke bit her lip. “Drinking didn’t really do anything for me. Did the cigarettes help? Last time I tried one, I just felt sick.”

Steph smirked. “I wasn’t smoking cigarettes, Brooke.”

“Then what... oh.” Brooke blinked. “Pot?”

“Yep.” Steph nodded. “It didn’t really do anything. Although I was a lot more relaxed, I will admit that. Grass is always good to take the edge off.”

Brooke glanced over her shoulder, checking behind them; nobody was there. “... you got any with you?”
Steph tilted her head. “Why?”

“All chance I could give it a shot?”

She exhaled slowly, leaning back against the bench as she watched the smoke waft away from her face. Halfway through the breath, she started coughing.

“Ah, virgin lungs.” Steph took the blunt back, putting it to her own lips and taking a quick puff.

“So?”

“It’s... kind of nice,” Brooke admitted. “I do feel a little more comfy.” She looked over at Steph.

“This won’t get me in, like, huge trouble, will it?”

The brunette scoffed. “They legalized recreational usage years ago. You’re fine.”

“It’s not addictive?”

“It is not.”

“Is it going to be obvious to everyone else that I’m baked?”

Steph chuckled, as she took another puff before handing it back to Brooke. “You’re going to have to take more than a couple of drags to start using the term ‘baked’, dude.”

“Sorry,” Brooke put the blunt back to her lips. “Don’t mean to be a Debbie Downer. This just feels sketchy.”

“That’s okay. It’s just a little paranoia.” Steph leaned back into the bench. “There aren’t any cops around, and this stuff will be out of your system in a week or so anyway. There are literally no negative consequences to what we’re doing right now.”

“Yea, you say that.”

Steph and Brooke both turned to see Miss Amber behind them, her arms crossed over her chest. She was without an umbrella, too, but she ignored the rain as she glared at them. “You two want to explain to me what the HELL you think you’re doing?”

“Nothing,” Steph said immediately. “We’re just talking.”

“You are so full of crap. As long as we’ve been together, you think I don’t know what pot smells like? And you.” She turned to Brooke. “Do you have any idea what could happen if you get busted smoking that stuff?”

Brooke shook her head silently.

“Oh, Jesus, don’t do that.” Steph rolled her eyes. “You know the laws as well as I do. Oregon legalized recreational use years ago. Shit, YOU could probably smoke some and still keep your job.”

“No. I can’t. Government workers are expected to abide by federal laws, which means we can’t imbibe in controlled substances. And that is NOT the point of this conversation.” Miss Amber looked back at Brooke. “Sweetie, I know you’re having conflicted thoughts about your mother. But this is not going to...” she paused. “Why aren’t you talking?”

Brooke didn’t answer.
“Oh, for God’s sake, exhale already.”

She immediately gasped, a thick cloud of smoke expelling itself from her mouth as she coughed uncontrollably. “Dude, have you been holding that in this whole time?” Steph asked.

“Yes,” Brooke wheezed. “My chest feels funny.”

“Good. Let that negative reinforcement sink in.” Miss Amber sighed. “Brooke, I know you’re conflicted about how you feel. But you need to figure it out without the help of chemicals, natural or otherwise.”

Brooke dropped her gaze. “I know.”

“Good.” Miss Amber gestured back towards the funeral home. “Come on, let’s go back inside. People are worried about you.”

Brooke was fairly quiet for the rest of the service. Mostly.

The other people who came to the funeral said very kind words, and apologized for Brooke’s loss. She mostly shrugged and muttered her thanks. Until the mystery woman who’d been sitting next to her mom’s nurse walked up to her.

“Kristy Webber.” The woman introduced herself with a handshake. “I’m very sorry, Miss Scott.”

“Thank you.” Brooke tilted her head. “How did you know my mother?”

“She came to our office for legal aid a couple of months ago,” Kristy informed her. “I prepared your mother’s will.”

“Oh.” Brooke sighed. “I’m not, like, inheriting a ton of debt, am I?”

Kristy shook her head. “Debt doesn’t get passed down to people’s children, Brooke. Unfortunately, your mother didn’t leave much of an estate, and what is left will most likely be claimed by her medical providers. She did owe them several thousand dollars.”

“Yea, I figured.” Brooke shrugged. “So, no windfall for me.”

“I’m afraid not. But your mother did give me this.” Kristy reached into her purse and produced a manila envelope. “Physical possessions can’t be claimed by debtors, so nobody will come looking for it. I told her that I would make sure you got it when she passed.”

Brooke accepted the envelope. Her curiosity got the better of her, and she opened it, tilting the contents into her hand.

A gold necklace with a small medallion fell into her palm, along with a note.

She turned the necklace over first, frowning as she rubbed her thumb over the image of the woman holding a sword. “That’s... what is this?”

Emily poked her head over Brooke’s shoulder. “Saint Joan of Arc,” she answered. “The woman who told authoritarian men to go fuck themselves.”

“Probably not in those exact words,” Regina added.

“Given the time period, it was probably in far less polite language.” Emily smirked. “Fitting.”
Brooke nodded, as she unfolded the note.

Brooke,

I’m sorry it’s not much of an inheritance. Kristy said most of what I have would be taken by the insurance company, but leaving you something wouldn’t be a problem. I know you’re not one for religion, and we never accepted Catholic saints anyway. But I thought that Joan of Arc, the woman who defied authority to lead an army, would be appropriate for you.

From the day you were born, I knew you would be special. And as I watched you grow up, I knew you would be the one to do something impressive. You weren’t made for accepting an arranged marriage like the rest of us; you were going to do something to try to break the cycle and make things better for everyone. But even I never would have thought that you would have crippled First Light. An entire generation of children will have better lives because of what you and your friends did.

I don’t know how well any motherly advice I could offer would be received. But if I was to give you one thing, it would be the hope that you never lose your drive. Don’t ever let anyone tell you that you can’t do something, and don’t ever bend to anyone else’s will; be the force to stand against the world, and tell them “No, you move.” You are destined to be amazing. And I hope you know that I’ll be watching and smiling.

All I’ve ever wanted was for you to do better than us. And you succeeded. I love you so much, Brooke. And I am so proud of you.

-Mom

Brooke didn’t even realize she was crying until she finished, and sat down heavily on the pew behind her. She wiped her eyes quickly, with the hand that held the necklace as she read the letter again.

Emily sat next to her. “That good, huh?”

She sniffled, nodding as she folded the letter and stuck it in her pocket. She undid the clasp of the necklace with shaky fingers as she looped it around her neck. Re-hooking it, she let it drop over her shirt.

Thanks, Mom.
February, 2027.

“When was the last time you checked your mirrors?”

Brooke winced, as she drove the car, and glanced at her rearview mirror. “I don’t remember.”

“At LEAST once every couple of minutes,” Miss Amber... or Rachel, now, since they were coworkers, scolded her. “You want to make notes of cars you see over and over. If you see the same kind of car multiple times, it’s a red flag.”

“Right.” Brooke glanced at her. “Have you ever been followed before?”

“Not successfully.” Rachel smirked. “Between your custody trial and the raid, I had cars follow me three times, trying to find our secure foster homes. Including yours.”

“You did?”

“Yes.” Rachel checked their mirrors for herself. “So far, so good. That’s why I want you to pay attention. This isn’t a game.”

“How did you lose them?”

“Blew through a couple of red lights, did some U-turns. Had some cops pull them over in one case, when I absolutely had to go see kids that day.” Rachel nodded. “Nobody’s tried since the raid. But I don’t want you to get complacent. First Light may be dying, but it isn’t dead yet. And their parishioners are still causing trouble.”

“Yea, I know.” Brooke nodded. “Regina got served with visitation papers from her former husband last month.”

Rachel’s eyebrows arched. “Wait, seriously? I didn’t know that.”

“Well, you’re not our social worker anymore, so I can’t think of a reason you would.” Brooke shrugged. “She already saw a lawyer, who said that the guy’s delusional if he thinks a judge will grant his request.”

“No, of course not.” Rachel shook her head, as she leaned into her seat. “Family Court judges don’t generally like children being in the same room as statutory rapists. Even if they are out of jail.”

“Well, that, and Aaron isn’t his kid.”

Rachel blinked. “That’s... also true, isn’t it?”

“Real baby-daddy is still in jail, too,” Brooke pointed out. “And since cunt-face signed away her rights, Aaron will never see any of them.”

“Good.” Rachel paused. “You know you need to stop swearing, right?”

Brooke sighed. “Yea, I know.”
“Right. Anyway, First Light isn’t dead yet. Three different people reported that Elder Maxson said everyone in our office is on borrowed time, and that ‘our day of reckoning was coming’.”

“Really? When was this?”

“Last month.” Rachel shrugged. “I don’t think the good Elder appreciated me removing his grandchildren from his daughter’s home.”

“Why did you?”

“Mom used to get really angry when I couldn’t get my brother to stop crying.”

Brooke tried not to stare at the scar on Denise Maxson’s face, as the teenager sat on the chair across from her. The laceration was brutal and deep, starting an inch above her left eyebrow and continuing down past her eye, finally ending on her cheek. It was an angry red color that stood out starkly against her brown hair and pale skin.

The fifteen-year-old spoke in a quiet voice. She seemed to unconsciously turn her face away, in an attempt to make the scar as difficult to see as possible. And despite the warm weather, she wore a long-sleeved shirt, concealing the cigarette burns Brooke knew dotted her arms.

“I was always pretty good at getting him to go down,” Denise continued. “But then he got an ear infection. I mean, he’s only three years old. Mom wouldn’t take him to see a doctor, or get him any medicine, so he just screamed his head off for hours. I tried everything, but there was no getting him to sleep.”

“What did your mother do?” Brooke asked softly.

“She screamed at me to make him shut up.” Denise shrugged. “I had to yell back, over Tommy, that I was trying. Mom didn’t like that I yelled at her, so...” The teenager bit her lip, falling silent.

Brooke leaned closer. “It’s okay, Denise, if you want to take a break.”

“I don’t.” She finally looked back up at Brooke. “I think she was just trying to grab the first thing she could get her hands on. And the glass pitcher on the counter was closest.”

“What happened?”

Denise dropped her gaze again, turning her head a little further away as she stared at her lap. “I put it on the counter because it fell over and cracked. I don’t think she noticed, before she picked it up. When she threw it at me, it hit my head and shattered.”

Brooke waited for a few seconds, as the teenager slowly exhaled. “What did your mom do after that?”

“She got madder, because there was glass on the floor. She screamed at me to clean it up, then left the house.” Denise squirmed. “I don’t think she saw that I was bleeding.”

“And what did you do?”

“I... tried to clean up.” Denise was clenching and unclenching her hands, as she spoke. “But I kept bleeding all over the floor. I tried to make it stop, with paper towels, so I could get the glass off the floor, but it wouldn’t. And the blood was making everything worse, and I cut my hands a couple of times, but they stopped bleeding, and my face didn’t, and... I got scared.”
Brooke let a slow breath out through her nose. “Is that when you called 911?”

“I couldn’t. The house didn’t have a phone, only my mom’s cell. And she took it with her when she left. I tried to keep pressure on it, and bandage it, but it just...” Denise sniffed. “It’s stupid. But... I thought, you know, if I couldn’t stop bleeding, I was gonna die. So I went to the neighbors, and told them that I needed a ride to the hospital.”

Brooke glanced over her shoulder. Directly behind her was a video camera, mounted on a tripod and attached to a laptop. A paralegal and a prosecutor stood next to it, recording Denise’s account. Rachel stood behind them, watching carefully; she seemed worried, but made no move to stop anyone.

The prosecutor, Elizabeth, turned the notepad in her hands so that Brooke could see it. She read the writing quickly, before turning back to Denise. “Do you remember how many stitches the doctors put in your face?”

Denise nodded. “Forty-seven.”

“Did they say anything else?”

“That the delay in treatment limited their options.” Denise sighed again. “They said there wasn’t much they could do about the scar. And that I would need to see a plastic surgeon to make it go away.”

Brooke nodded slowly, then looked back at Elizabeth. “Is there anything else?”

“That should be good,” The prosecutor replied. “We’ll-”

“Is my mom going to watch this?” Denise interrupted.

Elizabeth paused. “Yes, she will.”

“Can I say something to her?”

“You can, but it probably won’t be seen at trial.”

“Good.” Denise took a deep breath, looking straight into the camera. “I just want you to know, Mom, that I hope the judge puts you in jail for the rest of your life. I hope you die in prison. And I’m going to do everything I can to make sure that Tommy knows that you were NOT a loving parent. I’m going to tell him all about how you put out your cigarettes on my arms, and how you used to hit me for being too loud, and that you never gave an ounce of parenting effort. He’s going to know that I was the one who fed him, cleaned him, changed his diapers, and taught him how to walk. And that the only thing he can thank you for was caring enough not to abort him, like you kept screaming that you should have.”

With that, she leaned back in her chair. “... okay then,” Elizabeth said after a few seconds, turning off the camera. “I’ll definitely make sure she gets a copy.”

“Thank you.” Denise stood. “I need to use the bathroom.”

Brooke stood up too, watching her leave before she turned to Rachel. “Well?”

“You did good,” she assured her. “You didn’t ask leading questions, you didn’t prod her in any way, and you offered to take a break. That was perfect.”
“Thanks.” Brooke looked over her shoulder, towards the door. “Now what?”

“Go check on her.” Rachel nodded. “Let me know if you need any help. And do it quickly. Take it from me, you don’t want to leave a new foster kid alone in a bathroom for too long.”

Brooke frowned. “Really? Why not?”

“I’ll tell you the story on the way back. And don’t worry, it’s actually a little funny.” Rachel gestured. “Go.”

Nodding, Brooke turned and followed after Denise. She walked through the house, pausing at the open bathroom door.

The teenager was standing in front of the mirror, staring at her reflection. She turned as she noticed Brooke, though she didn’t say anything.

“Did the doctors you spoke to talk about plastic surgery?” Brooke asked.

Denise shrugged, turning back to the mirror. “It’s elective,” she said quietly. “Miss Amber said she tried to get the insurance to cover it, but they won’t, since it’s not medically necessary.”

Brooke sighed. “I’m sorry.”

“Yea.” Denise brushed at her hair, trying to get it to fall over the scar. She gave up after a couple of tries. “Tommy’s afraid of me now.”

Fuck, that sucks. Brooke stepped up next to her, laying a hand on her shoulder. “He’s only three. He’ll get used to it.”

“I know, Miss Scott. I’m not angry at him.” Denise glanced at her. “You think they’ll put my mom in jail?”


“Good.” Denise turned back to the mirror, falling silent again.

“Have you had any sessions with Doctor Greene yet?” Brooke asked, changing direction. “I know you’ve started classes at Blackwell.”

Denise sighed. “No.”

“Have they made appointments for you?”

“Yes.”

“Why haven’t-”

“I don’t want to talk to a shrink.” Denise shot her a look. “And definitely not some head doc who’s going to try and tell me that she knows what I’m going through. I get enough of that from Miss Amber.”

Brooke couldn’t help but smirk. Boy, does this sound familiar.

“Doctor Greene is very experienced with kids that have left First Light,” she told the teenager. “You really should go see her, Denise. She can really help you sort out everything you might be feeling.”
Denise scoffed, as she folded her arms and looked away. “I doubt it.”

“She did for me.”

The teenager blinked in surprise, turning back to Brooke. “You’ve... seen her?”

Brooke nodded. “I was her patient, too, when I was in your shoes.”

Denise did a double-take. “You’re from First Light?”

“Born and raised.” Brooke nodded. “I left about nine years ago, after my family tried to force me to move in with the man I supposedly married when I was eight years old.”

“That... wait.” Denise frowned. “Scott? Like Elder Scott?”

“He’s my grandfather.”

“... holy shit.”

Brooke smirked. “Language.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Brooke leaned against the wall. “Look, Denise, I’m not going to stand her and tell you that I know what you’re going through, either. Nobody who leaves First Light fits a standard mindset. But Doctor Greene is incredibly helpful, and blowing off her appointments isn’t doing you any favors.”

Denise bit her lip. “I don’t want to be the girl that left the cult and had to be committed, because she couldn’t handle the real world.”

“Neither did I.” Brooke nodded. “You’re not seeing her because you can’t handle things, Denise. You’re seeing her because you care about your mental health. Recognizing that you have issues and addressing them is a responsible thing to do.”

The teenager seemed to mull over that statement for a while, as she chewed on her lip.

“... fine,” she muttered. “I’ll go see her.”

“Good.” Brooke smiled. “The doc is legit, Denise. I promise.”

“Trust me, I was on the phone with the insurance people for over an hour.” Rachel rubbed her forehead. “I argued with three different supervisors. Unfortunately, when the state cut our budget, the amount of coverage the kids have through the insurance carrier was reduced.”

Brooke glanced at her while she drove back to their office. “What does that mean?”

“It means that they won’t pay for a procedure that’s purely cosmetic.” Rachel met her gaze briefly, before returning her eyes to the road. “I exhausted every option I had. I even routed a request to the governor’s office, for an exception.”

She could feel her face flush. “And for what reason did our esteemed governor deny a procedure to fix a teenaged girl’s disfigured face?”

“Well, I don’t know if he actually saw it or not. But I wasn’t given a reason.” Rachel shook her
head. “My guess is the budget cuts again.”

“...fuck.” Brooke leaned her head against the seat. “That sucks.”

“I know. Quick, what cars are behind us, and how long have they been there?”

“A red pickup truck had been with us since the last exit, and a blue Volkswagen Beetle has been behind us since we passed the Burger King,” Brooke replied. “I’m paying attention.”

Rachel smiled. “You’re picking it up faster than I did.”

“Meh.” Brooke straightened back up. “There really isn’t anything we can do?”

“Unless you’ve got thirty or forty grand laying around, no.” Rachel sighed. “Sorry.”

Brooke pursed her lips, the wheels turning in her head. “Right.”

As the week went on, they never had any more discussions about it.

Rachel took Brooke to meet several other First Light teenagers, and introduced her to several of the police officers they worked with frequently. They also went to court, and Brooke watched Rachel testify to the abuse a child suffered at the hands of her father.

The weekend was uneventful. Monday was not.

Rachel first noticed something amiss as Brooke got on the elevator with her. She fidgeted nervously as the car made it’s way to their floor. “Are you okay?” she asked.

Brooke nodded. “Just... anxious.”

“About...”

“Maybe nothing.” Brooke shrugged as the doors opened, and they got out. “So, what are we doing today?”

Rachel badged their way through the doors. “Well, I’ve got some paperwork from the trial I have to fill out,” she started. “Then I figured we’d go see some of the other-”

The door to Stacy’s office flew open. “BROOKE!!”

“Shit,” Brooke muttered, as Rachel blinked at the interruption.

Their boss stalked towards them, stopping in front to glare at the younger social worker. “I just got off the phone with a very pissed-off aide in the governor’s office,” she growled. “Did you speak to the Tribune on Saturday?”

Brooke nodded. “I did.”

Rachel swung her head around. “Wait, you what??”

“You gave an interview to Missy Tanner?” Stacy ignored Rachel, focusing on Brooke. “You told her about Denise, and the GoFundMe to pay for her reconstructive surgery?”

“Yes.” Brooke inhaled slowly. “I was trying to make people aware, so they would donate.”

“Did you tell her that the Department of Social Work has to crowd-fund medical procedures for
children because the governor is too cheap to do it himself?!”

“No.” Brooke folded her arms. “And I know that’s not what she wrote. I read it this morning.”

Stacy dug her phone from her pocket, glancing at the screen. “‘When asked why the Department of Social Work’s medical insurance was unable to pay for Denise Maxon’s facial surgery, Brooke Scott answered that the state government’s budget cuts had negatively affected their ability to pay for non-medically-necessary procedures for children.’”

“Nowhere in there do I call the governor ‘cheap’,” Brooke pointed out.

“It’s IMPLIED. Brooke! His aide is furious!” Stacy dropped her phone back in her pocket. “He wanted me to fire you as soon as you walked through the door!”

“And the governor?”

“Well, Brooke, if his aide is furious, I imagine he’s not thrilled either!”

Brooke exhaled. “So... am I fired?”

“No. The governor’s aide doesn’t dictate who works here and who doesn’t. I do.” Stacy’s glare didn’t soften as she stepped closer, and stuck a finger in Brooke’s face. “You do not speak for this department. You do not give interviews to anyone without my express permission and say-so. And you do NOT imply that it’s the governor’s fault when we’re not able to help our kids as much as we can. Is that crystal FUCKING clear?”

Brooke nodded.

“Good.” Stacy took a step backwards. “Go home. You’re suspended without pay for two weeks.”

“... okay.” Brooke paused. “Can I ask a question?”

“What?”

“Did you donate?”

“Yes.” Stacy pointed behind her. “Now get your ass back on the elevator.”

“You know what you’re going to say?”

Rachel nodded tightly, as her and Steph climbed the stairs of Brooke’s apartment complex. “I know EXACTLY what I’m going to say. I promise.”

“Oookay...” Steph paused. “You gonna tell me?”

“No. It’s that one, over there.” Rachel led the way towards Brooke’s apartment, knocking on the door as soon as they got in front of it.

Inside, the noise from a TV fell silent, and they heard footsteps coming towards the door. They paused in front of it as the peephole darkened, and they heard a sigh as the bolt was thrown.

Brooke was wearing sweatpants and an orange OSU football jersey when she opened the door. “What are you guys doing here?” she asked quietly.

Rachel stepped closer, and Steph watched her hand swing faster than the eye could follow as she
slapped Brooke upside her head. Her girlfriend’s hand made a loud CRACK, as it contacted the back of Brooke’s skull.

“OW!!” Brooke yelped, as she grabbed the back of her head. “What the fuck?!”

“That’s for being an idiot. Now let us in.”

Brooke rubbed the back of her head as she glared at Rachel. “Why? So you can beat me up some more?”

Steph cleared her throat, holding up a pair of pizza boxes and shaking them gently. “We brought food.”

“... fine.” Brooke stepped back and let them inside. “Only because I’m probably gonna need leftovers for the next couple of weeks.”

“We figured. That’s why I got two.”

They followed her, Rachel closing the door behind them. “What are you doing, anyway?”

Brooke thumbed at the TV. “Watching Netflix. Figured if I was gonna be home for a couple of weeks, I might as well catch up on all the shows I’m behind on.”

“You’re lucky you still have a job.” Rachel folded her arms. “You know if we had any other supervisor, you’d be out on your ass, right?”

“Yea.” Brooke sat down at her table, pushing aside a pile of mail as she averted her eyes. “I know, trust me.”

“What the hell were you thinking, anyway?!”

“That Denise needed her face fixed. And if the state wouldn’t do it, then I would.” Brooke sighed. “I know it wasn’t the best way to go about it. But nobody else was doing anything.” She looked up at Rachel. “Did the GoFundMe meet its goal?”

“This afternoon.” Rachel took a seat across the corner of the table from her. “We’ve scheduled the preliminary appointment. She’s going to see the best plastic surgeon in the state on Thursday.”

“Then it was worth it.” Brooke shrugged. “I’m not sorry, if that’s what you’re here for. She needed the procedure, and I’m not going to grovel for my job if it’s on the line for this.”

Rachel rubbed her forehead, before she answered. “I’m not here for an apology, Brooke. Or to make you feel bad.”

“Then why did you hit me?”

“Because I’m pissed that you put in so much work to get where you are, and almost threw it away by being a moron.” Rachel leaned back. “I mean, you could have made the quote anonymously, for fuck’s sake. Or not made it at all, and given her that info as background. There were better ways to do what you did.”

Brooke blinked. “Wait. You’re not mad I did it?”

“I’m mad at the way you handled it.” Rachel tilted her head. “Brooke, I spent three thousand dollars of my own money on those phones I handed out. Do you think I don’t understand wanting to help these kids at any cost?”
“Yea, but... I mean, you never did anything like that.”

Rachel inhaled and exhaled slowly. “There was a bag of clothes and cash for you in the trunk of my car, on the day of your custody trial,” she admitted. “If we’d lost, I was going to take you into the bathroom and help you leave through the window, so you could make a run for it.”

Brooke raised her eyebrows. “... no you wouldn’t have. You’re too straight-laced for that.”

“Yes, she would’ve.” Steph set the pizza down and took her seat. “She called me that morning. Told me that there were instructions to make your way to San Francisco, so I could hide you in my apartment.”

“Really?”

Rachel nodded. “I get it, Brooke. But you can’t help these kids if you lose your job.

“... okay.” Brooke sighed. “I’m sorry. And...” she hesitated. “I have kind of a confession to make about that day, too.”


Brooke squirmed. “I was only, like fifty percent confident that you and Megan would be able to keep me from going back,” she admitted. “I didn’t want to risk it. So... I made a shiv, with scraps I found in Pete’s garage, out of plastic so I could get it through the metal detectors. It was taped to the inside of my arm, and if the judge said I was going to have to go back...” she shrugged. “I was going to stick it in my neck.”

Rachel blinked, staring at her silently with an expressionless face as Steph’s eyes got wide. “I figured you and Megan would have your hands tied,” Brooke continued, as she fidgeted with her fingers. “I wasn’t going to-"

WHACK!!

Brooke jerked forward as Rachel delivered a much harder slap to the back of her head. “OW!!” she yelled. “STOP THAT!!"

“Are you FUCKING KIDDING ME?!” Rachel yelled, as she stood and swung her hand again. Brooke barely managed to dodge it, as she scrambled out of her chair and maneuvered around the table while Rachel tried to follow her. “Were you out of your FUCKING MIND?!"

“I was a teenager!” Brooke yelled back, as she kept circling the table, keeping it between her and Rachel. “I was scared! I didn’t know what else to do!”

“How about fucking TRUST ME?!” Rachel’s eyes were on fire, as she grabbed the table and pushed around it. “I worked eighty FUCKING hours a week for you guys! Spent THOUSANDS of my own money giving you all cell phones! Committed borderline CRIMES to get you all away from that church!” She kicked a chair out of her way as she continued to chase Brooke. “I did not bust my ass for you to fucking MARTYR yourself in front of the FUCKING judge because you didn’t want to just FUCKING TRUST ME!!”

Steph finally caught up to her, wrapping Rachel in a hug as she pulled her away from the table. Brooke stopped, her breath heavy as she watched her old social worker struggle against her girlfriend. “Eight years ago!” Steph yelled. “Rachel, it was eight years ago!”
“I know!! I’m still going to FUCKING kill her!!”

Brooke raised her eyebrows. “A little counter-productive, don’t you think?”

Rachel’s nostrils flared, as she forced her way out of Steph’s arms. She raced forward and grabbed the table, and Brooke quickly retreated; it looked like Rachel was about to flip the whole thing over.

But she didn’t. Rachel slowly un-tensed her arms, as she let go of the table between them and slowly exhaled. “What did I do wrong?”

Brooke blinked. “Huh?”

“What did I do wrong?” Rachel repeated quietly. “What did I do that made you not trust me, when I told you that you were never going back? I need to know, so I can make sure that none of the other First Light kids think that suicide is their only way out.”

A wave of guilt came over Brooke, as she averted her eyes. “… nothing,” she muttered.

“That can’t be true.”

“I did trust you.” Brooke bit her lip as she crossed her arms, keeping her eyes on the floor. “You saved my life. If it wasn’t for you, I probably would’ve been forced to have that psycho’s kids. Or I’d be dead right now.”

“Then WHY?” Rachel’s voice was pained, as she asked.

“Because I didn’t trust the judge,” Brooke answered. “Or that my family wouldn’t try to just… I don’t know, take me back anyway.”

Rachel didn’t reply, as she studied the younger girl.

“I’m sorry.” Brooke finally looked back up at her. “For what I did. And for almost pissing away the future you made sure I would have by being an idiot.”

After a few seconds, Rachel sighed. “You know, the other social workers in our office were actually kind of impressed with your stones.”

Brooke raised her eyebrows. “Seriously?”

“Nobody appreciates the cuts that the governor has made to our budget.” The corner of her mouth twitched in a smirk. “Stacy will never say anything, because she’s in charge and showing her dissent would set a bad example. But I know she’s pretty mad at the situation, too. I’m sure that you flipping their office a middle finger put a smile on her face.”

“Never would have figured,” Brooke said dryly.

“Well, she still needs to make sure everyone knows that you’re not allowed to mutiny without consequences.”

Steph laid a hand on Rachel’s shoulder. “So are we good?” she asked, glancing between the two of them. “No more trying to kill each other?”

Rachel nodded.

“Good. Then let’s eat some pizza. I’m hungry.”
They all sat back down, and Rachel reached over to open the pizza boxes. “Let’s change the subject. How are Regina and Emily doing?”

“Well, Regina’s lawyer got that asshole’s custody case shot down.” Brooke smirked as she took a slice. “As soon as the judge heard that Aaron wasn’t his, and had never even met him, he threw the case out. Regina said watching the judge chew out the dude’s lawyer for wasting everyone’s time was glorious.”

Rachel smirked back. “Aaron’s... what? Seven now?”

“Yea. His birthday was last month.” Brooke nodded. “Anyway, Emily and Javier are still doing wedding planning. She said they finally picked a venue.”

“Oh, nice.” Rachel took a quick bite of her pizza. “Excited to be a Maid of Honor?”

Brooke sighed. “I was. Until I saw the dresses she wants me and Regina to wear.”

Steph snickered. “That bad?”

“Dude, I was SO close to telling her that ugly dresses were one of the reasons we left First Light to begin with.”
March, 2028

I used to be able to sleep in so late.

Chloe could see her bedside alarm clock through a cracked eyelid, looking disdainfully at the digital display. It was only a little after seven-thirty in the morning, on her first real day off in weeks, and she was not in the mood to be awake.

Christ, I miss the days where I could sleep in until noon. She closed her eye and relaxed, her head sinking into the pillow. Just waking up slowly, pouring myself out of bed, and grabbing a breakfast beer while I binged video games.

... maybe I still could.

Fat chance. Max would kill you for even looking at a beer before lunch. Though after two weeks of upgrading an entire office worth of IT equipment, I deserve all the alcohol I can drink.

She’d just come back from a trip to San Diego, where she’d been visiting one of Chase Enterprises’ smaller satellite offices. Though ‘small’ was relative for such a massive company; there had been over a hundred workstations to go through, dozens of cell phones, and three different servers that had reached the end of their lifecycles.

The entire trip had tested every limit of her patience. The office workers were mostly decent, though there was the occasional incident. The old lady working in Accounting, who refused to back up her work until the last minute; the idiots in Sales who’d downloaded illegal file-sharing software, mere hours after she’d wiped the hard drive of viruses; and the incompetent middle-manager who tried several times to refuse the upgrade, because the laptop he’d been using for years worked just fine. Chloe had been horrified to watch the Windows XP logo flash across the screen when the man had booted it up, and then had to deal with his temper tantrum when she immediately banned the no-longer-secure laptop from their network.

The phones, though. Chloe shuddered at the petty squabbling over the phones. Chase Enterprises ran exclusively on Apple phones, since they purchased them in bulk with a massive vendor discount. But the majority of them were base models; only certain executives were allowed to get the high-end devices. Chloe had arrived with eight brand-new, top-of-the-line iPhones for those executives. The whining she’d had to deal with from the lower executives still gnawed at her eardrums.

The worst had been the director’s assistant, who had possibly the worst sense of entitlement Chloe had ever seen. She was sure the assistant had only been hired because the buttons on her shirt worked harder that she did (when she bothered to button them, anyway). And the girl had insisted that she get the same phone the director did, as she needed an identical phone to support him.

Chloe had informed her that that was not the case, when she handed her a base model. It was returned to her two days later, water leaking from the case; the girl had “accidentally” dropped it in a mop bucket. The next phone had been “accidentally” dropped down the stairs.

When she’d been handed a bill alongside her third phone, Chloe had worried that the girl’s head was about to explode.
Over. Done. Never going back. Swear to God I’ll quit if they try to make me. Chloe nestled into the bedsheets. Back to sleep now. Must dream.

It was peaceful for another five minutes. Then the was the rustling from the other side of the bed, and the sound of bare feet hitting the ground, running for the bathroom. Vomiting followed soon after.

Her wife’s morning sickness. When it had hit Max earlier that month, it had hit like a freight train. Chloe felt a little guilty, as she listened to her wife retch.

She still didn’t move, though. No. Too early. She said I could sleep in. Not gonna feel bad. Her idea to do IVF anyway.

“Chloe?”

The small voice came from behind her, and Chloe squeezed her eyes closed. God damn it, Faith, why do you have to sneak into our bed at night...

“Chloe.” The girl repeated herself, laying a small hand on her shoulder and shaking. “Chloe, wake up.”

No. Sleeping. Fuck off.

The covers behind her shifted, as the seven-year-old moved behind her. Chloe barely felt the back of her tank top ride up before she felt the icy stab of pain, like a shaft of pure nitrogen, grinding itself into her lower back.

“GAAAAHHHH!!” she shrieked, arching her back away from her sister-in-law before rolling over. The child tucked her foot back as Chloe bolted upright, rubbing her back. “Faith!! Why the hell are your feet so cold?!”

She shrugged. “Chloe, Max is sick.”

Chloe exhaled, as she rubbed her eye. “Babe?” she called out. “Are you okay?”

“Y-” Max paused mid-word and retched again. Chloe winced as she heard another stream of puke hit the toilet, before her wife coughed. “... yea. I’m okay.”

“There. See? Your sister’s fine.” Chloe dropped back onto the bed. “Now go back to sleep.”

“She doesn’t sound fine.”

Chole sighed, closing her eyes. “She’ll be okay. Faith. It’s just morning sickness.”

“What’s that?”

“Sometimes you get sick in the mornings, when you’re pregnant.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, kid.” Chloe pulled the blanket over her head. “Go ask your sister.”

“... Chloe?”

“What?”
“I’m hungry.”

“Good for you.”

Faith shook her shoulder under the blanket. “Chloe, I want waffles.”

“So go make some.”

“Max says I’m too little to use the toaster.”

“Not anymore.” Chloe stuck her hand out from under the blanket and waved her away. “You’re now big enough to use the toaster.”

There was blessed silence, for a few seconds. “MAX!!” Faith called towards the bathroom, as Chloe cringed under the blanket. “CHLOE SAID I’M BIG ENOUGH FOR THE TOASTER!!”

A groaning noise emanated from the bathroom. “Babe,” Max said weakly, “I do not feel good enough to deal with this right now.”

Chloe heaved a sigh, as she slowly sat up and pushed the blanket off of her. *I do not get paid enough for this.*

“Come here, Faith.” Chloe took her sister-in-law’s arm and pulled her closer, before reaching up and cupping her chin with one hand. “Listen very carefully. Okay?”

Faith nodded.

“Someday, you’re going to be all grown up. With a house of your own, and a job, and responsibilities. Just like Max and I.” Chloe paused. “And then, when you don’t expect it, I’m going to break into your house super-early, sneak into your bed, and wake you up to ask for waffles. Do you understand?”

Faith nodded again.

“Good.” Chloe let go. “Come on, let’s make breakfast.”

Chloe yawned as Faith led the way downstairs, clambering onto one of the stools at their kitchen island. “Can I have whipped cream?” the girl asked sweetly.

“Sure.”

“What about peanut butter?”

“No.” Chloe smirked, as she retrieved the frozen waffles from the freezer. “You can pick one or the other, not both.”

“Can I have one of each?”

“Kid, it’s really not the morning to be difficult.”

Faith leaned over, splaying her arms across the counter surface as she looked at Chloe with big eyes. “Pleeeeeease?”

“... fine.” Chloe pulled out two waffles from the package, sticking them in the toaster. “Why don’t you go get the peanut butter and syrup.”
The child jumped back off the chair, quickly retrieving the condiments from the pantry. She came back just as Chloe placed a glass of milk at her spot. Faith’s nose wrinkled. “Can I have OJ?”

“No. You get milk.”

“But I want OJ.”

“And I wanted to sleep in.” Chloe pushed the glass closer. “Come on, sit down and drink.”

Faith pouted, but climbed back into her seat and started sipping from her glass. The waffles popped up after a few minutes, and Chloe stuck a couple more in before she started preparing Faith’s. By the time she was sliding the plate across the counter, heavy footsteps could be heard coming down the stairs.

Max meandered across the kitchen in her bathrobe, sitting down just as Chloe put a pair of toasted waffles in front of her. “You want Powerade?”

“Yes,” Max mumbled as she reached over, taking the peanut butter from Faith to spread on her breakfast. “And Pop Tarts.”

“What’s wrong with the waffles?”

“Nothing. I want Pop Tarts, too.”

Chloe smirked as she retrieved the box of pastries. “You gonna keep these down?”

“Guess we’ll find out. You remember that I have an OB appointment this afternoon, right?”

“Yea, I know.” Chloe took a couple of Pop Tarts for herself. “Do we have anything else?”

“Not that I-”

The ringing cell phone distracted all of them. Max frowned as Chloe pulled it from her pocket. “That’s not work, right?”

“It shouldn’t be.” Chloe glanced at the screen, her face falling; it was the name of the executive in charge of her department. “And yet...”

“It’s your day off.”

“Tell it to my boss.” Chloe sighed as she answered. “Hey, Chris.”

“Chloe, we need you down here.” Her boss’s voice sounded slightly frantic. “We’ve got a problem.”

“No we don’t.” Chloe leaned against the counter. “YOU’VE got a problem. It’s Saturday. My day off under normal circumstances, never mind the tail end of an upgrade to the most god-awful satellite office I’ve ever had the misfortune to-”

“Chloe, we’re not fucking around right now. Main Two just got hit by ransomware.”

She stood upright. “What? What thefuck do you mean, ransomware?”

“Swear jar,” Faith called from her seat. Max quickly shushed her as Chloe listened.

“I mean the server is being held hostage.” Chris told her. “We’ve got emails coming from the Czech Republic saying that if we don’t give them a few million in Bitcoins, we’re gonna lose everything.”
“Jesus,” Chloe breathed. “Chris, you shouldn’t be calling me, you need to call the cops. I’m pretty sure the FBI office downtown has a Cyber Crimes unit; they’re the ones you need to loop in on this.”

“We already did, they’re on their way. But it’s your server, Chloe. You know it better than anyone here, and we need to figure out where this came from and how it happened. So unless you want the feds running roughshod all over your setup...”


“Fine.”

“And Tuesday.”

“Come on, Chloe...”

“Hey, man, I’m supposed to be going with my wife to an OB/GYN appointment,” she countered. “We’re supposed to find out if we’re having a boy or a girl. If you’re gonna have me come in and miss it, you’re gonna make it worth my while.”

“Christ. Fine, okay, Monday and Tuesday. Just get down here, pronto.”

“Right.” She sighed heavily as she hung up, looking at her wife. “So...”

“I heard.” Max nodded. “You want me to make a new appointment?”

“No, those guys take forever to reschedule.” Chloe shook her head as she pushed herself upright. “Just go with Faith. I gotta get dressed to kick some ass.”

“Swear jar!”

“Not now, kid.”

“Not now, kid.”

“It wasn’t me!”

Chris stared at the young executive impassively, as he sat at the conference table with his arms folded. “Yes it was, Keith. We know it was. The virus was traced back to the laptop that you were issued when we hired you last year. It jumped to our mainframe when you logged in on Friday.”

“I swear it wasn’t!” The man was sweating profusely. “It must have been someone else who used my laptop!”

“So you left company property unattended? While you were logged into it? At a location where someone else would have had the ability to access it?”

“I... yea, I guess I must have!”

Chris shook his head. “The entire IT department, plus six FBI agents, have spent all day scouring the company server of the ransomware,” he stated. “We had to roll back the server to Thursday evening because you didn’t tell us what you did before you left on Friday night.”

Keith shook his head furiously. “No I didn’t! It wasn’t me!”

The lawyer at the table beside Chris cleared her throat. “Even if it wasn’t, Mister Johnson, leaving company property unattended while logged in is a very serious offense,” she informed him. “You have financial information on your laptop, as well as documents that outline this corporation’s
business strategy. You’ve already admitted to a fireable offense.”

“No, I- wait, there’s been a mistake, I didn’t-”

“Didn’t what?” Chris countered. “You did something, Keith. A server with irreplaceable information was almost compromised because of malware that was traced back to your laptop. We’re examining the device right now, so we will figure out what happened one way or another.”

“I swear, I didn’t-”

“Okay, I’m tired of this.”

The third person stood, leaning forward and planting her hands on the table as she looked Keith in the eyes. “Listen to me very fucking carefully, Johnson. Are you listening?”

Keith’s face drained of color. “Miss Chase, I swear-”

“Shut up. I’m tired of you swearing.” Victoria glared intently into his eyes. “This company is out tens of thousands of dollars in manpower. Along with more than twenty-four hours of data that was uploaded to that server, including privileged information about our employees. Which means that we’re now going to have to shell out thousands more for identity-monitoring services for everyone working here, because it was our own fault.”

“But-”

“I DID NOT SAY YOU COULD TALK!!”

Keith recoiled at Victoria’s outburst. She waited a heartbeat before continuing.

“I want to know what happened,” she growled. “I want to know why dozens of people are here on a Saturday. I want to know why the fuck I’M here, instead of spending the day with my wife and son at a playdate.”

He didn’t respond, though his breathing quickened.

Victoria took a deep breath and was about to continue before the door opened. Chloe strode inside, the laptop in question under her arm. “Is this a bad time?” she asked casually.

“No.” Chris looked at her. “What did you find?”

“Well, the hard drive was formatted when I got the laptop. Twice, actually.” She looked at Keith as she sat down. “Unfortunately for you, Mister Johnson, formatted data can still be recovered with the right tools. I was able to restore your operating system after about an hour or so.”

Keith was now looking ill.

“What did you find?” Chris asked.

“File-sharing software. BitTorrent, to be exact.” Chloe opened the computer. “It seems Mister Johnson here is a big fan of peer-to-peer programs. There’s about thirty gigs worth of media on the computer.”

“What kind of media?”

Chloe finally looked at Keith. “Well, the file we were able to trace the ransomware to was titled ‘Once Upon a Japanese Gangbang’. I think we can all infer from there.”
“It wasn’t me,” Keith protested, as everyone turned to look at him. “Swear to god, it wasn’t-”

“Mister Johnson’s logon credentials to a camgirl site were also in his browser history.” Chloe ignored Keith’s protest. “Included saved, private sessions between him and a very lovely Asian girl named Jade. Sessions that recorded both his and her cameras.” She shook her head. “I don’t Mister Johnson paid very close attention when he signed IT’s terms-of-use agreement.”

Victoria inhaled deeply. “Porn,” she stated simply, looking at Keith. “You compromised the integrity of millions of dollars in data and financial records in the pursuit of porn.”

He didn’t reply.

“I’m done here.” Victoria stood up straight. “As the boss, I’m using my executive privilege to leave what happens next to your supervisors and the legal department.” She glanced at the others. “I expect this to be dealt with. Expediently.”

With that, she left, closing the door behind her. Chloe cleared her throat after a few seconds. “I had someplace important to be today, too,” she mentioned. “I’ve already documented everything, Chris. Unless you need anything else…”

“You can go.” He nodded. “If you could, when you get to the ground floor, have security send a few people up.”

She nodded as she walked out, rubbing the back of her neck as she strode to the elevator. Victoria was still standing there silently, watching the numbers at the top of the doors. Neither of them spoke as the car arrived and they walked inside, Chloe hitting the number for the lobby floor.

The continued to stand silently for several seconds after the door closed.

“Once Upon a Japanese Gangbang,” Victoria finally stated.

Chloe snorted in amusement, hanging her head. “I know,” she chuckled. “God, I don’t know who comes up with the names for those movies, but they should get an Oscar.”

“You know, it sounds like a coming-of-age story.” A grin finally cracked over Victoria’s face. “Or a Quentin Tarantino movie.”

“Dude, that wasn’t even the most messed-up video he had,” Chloe informed her. “He had copies of Asian Invasion, My Japanese Stepmother, Giant Throbbing Dicks in Little Asian Chicks, and Oriental Bombshells number three.”

Victoria arched an eyebrow. “Number three, huh?”

“Yep.”

She pursed her lips. “Do you think it’s a movie you could watch on it’s own, or do you miss key plot points by not having seen one and two?”

Chloe burst out laughing, Victoria right behind her. They both spent several seconds cackling as they held onto the elevator walls.

“Oh, Jesus.” Chloe wiped her eyes. “This almost makes up for missing the OB/GYN appointment.”

Victoria raised both eyebrows. “That was today? Are you serious?”

“Yea.”
“Fuck. I can’t believe they made you come in.”

Chloe shrugged. “It’s my server,” she reminded Victoria. “Besides, watching you guys tear Johnson apart was almost worth it.”

“Aren’t you guys gonna find out if it’s a boy or girl?”

“Ideally.” Chloe shook her head. “The doc said we might. But he wasn’t sure. I guess I’ll find out when I get home.”

“Bummer.” Victoria paused. “You remember our bet, right?”

“If it’s a girl, you owe me a hundred bucks.” Chloe rolled her eyes. “And if it’s a boy, I have to stop calling you Vic for three months.”

“Exactly.”

“You know, I’d really rather just give you a hundred bucks.”

“Tough shit.” Victoria smirked. “Besides, you’re gonna need the cash for diapers, remember?”

“... fuck.”

Relax. Take a deep breath. It’s gonna be fine.

By the time Chloe had gotten back home, it was almost eight at night. Max had long since come back from the appointment; she could see her wife’s car in the driveway, as she pulled in her truck and parked. She was, hopefully, about to find out the gender of the kid they were about to have.

And really, it doesn’t matter. I could truly give less of a shit.

So why the hell am I so nervous?

She exhaled slowly as she got out, dragging her laptop bag behind her. She could see through the windows as she walked up that Max and Faith were sitting on the couch, and she had to stop and look for a few seconds as they watched TV.

I really am here.

Christ, even after so many years, this feels surreal. She shook her head. I’ve got a wife. And a kid, even if she’s not really our kid. And we’re about to have another kid, one who actually is mine and Max’s. In this incredible house, with an incredible job.

I bet if I could go back in time and show this to myself, teenaged Chloe would’ve been a hell of a lot nicer to her mother.

She finally squared her shoulder and inserted her key, turning the knob and walking inside. Faith immediately whipped her head around from the couch, beaming as she stood up on the cushions. “Hi Chloe!”

“Faith!” Max pulled the girl down by her arm. “How many times to we have to tell you to stop standing on the couch?”

Chloe snorted, as she set down her bag and made her way over to the love seat. “At least once more, apparently.”
“I guess.” Max smiled over her shoulder. “How was work?”

“Ugh.” She shook her head as she plopped down. “Long. Aggravating. But I got to watch a guy’s career go down like a flaming sack of potatoes because of his Asian fetish, so that was fun.”

“What’s an Asian fetish?” Faith asked innocently.

“Something we’ll discuss when you’re older.” Chloe turned her gaze to Max. “... so?”

Max had a blank expression on her face. “So... what?”

“What do you mean, so what? How was the appointment?”

“What appointment?”

“The-” Chloe stopped. “Max, please don’t do this.”

“Do what?” Max folded her arms. “You just walk in here, don’t say hi, don’t tell me that you love me, and start trying to teach Faith inappropriate sayings. Now you want something?”

She sighed. “Hi, Max. I love you, Max. I’m sorry I tried to teach Faith bad words, Max. Now, how was the appointment?”

“Uh uh.” Max smirked. “You’re forgetting something.”

“I- oh. Right.” Chloe stood up quickly. She leaned forward, grabbed her wife’s shoulders, and planted a kiss on her lips.

Max leaned back as Chloe sat back down. “Better.”

“Thank you. Now.” Chloe leaned forward. “Boy or girl?”

Max and Faith exchanged glances, both of them smiling connivingly. Her wife reached into her pockets, producing two folded pieces of paper. She put each one in a closed fist and held it out. “Pick one.”

Chloe furrowed her brow. “Wait, seriously?”

“Yes. Pick one.”

“I’m- wait, how the hell does this even work?” she asked incredulously. “They both have to say the same thing, or else it doesn’t matter!”

Max held her fists out further. “Pick one.”

Chloe looked at her warily, still not quite sure what was happening. But she slowly reached out her hand and tapped Max’s right fist. Her wife opened her hand and gave Chloe the paper, which she quickly unfolded and read.

She looked up after a couple of seconds. “... a girl? We’re having a girl?!”

Max nodded. “YES!!” Chloe pumped her fist as she cheered while shooting to her feet. “Vic’s giving me a hundred bucks!! Yes yes YES!!”
Max and Faith both laughed. “Does that mean I can have a new Barbie?” the child asked.

“You can get TWO Barbies!” Chloe flashed her two fingers. “Whichever ones you want!”

“YAY!” Faith squealed.

“Whoo!!” Chloe sat back down, exhaling. “Man! I don’t think I could’ve handled Vic if we were having a boy, she would’ve lorded that bet over me.” She paused, looking back at Max’s other fist. “Wait, what does the other paper say?”

Max wordlessly handed it to her. Chloe opened it, scoffing as she read it. “Yea, see babe, you didn’t think this through.”

“Oh?” Max raised an eyebrow. “How do you figure?”

“What if I had picked this one?” Chloe waved the paper. “You would’ve had to tell me I was wrong, and we weren’t having a boy, we were having a girl. I only had a fifty percent chance of getting it right.”

Max smirked. “You had a one hundred percent chance of getting it right, babe.”

“How, exactly? Unless you’re gonna sit here and tell me that we’re having one of-”

Chloe froze, her mouth slowly falling open. Faith started giggling as the bluenette blinked while staring at Max wordlessly.

“... oh my God.”

Max reached into her back pocket and produced a small ultrasound photo, handing it to her wife. Though Chloe wasn’t entirely sure how to read one, she could see that there were two babies. “We’re having twins!” Max exclaimed excitedly.

“We’re...” Chloe worked her mouth, trying to speak, but words didn’t come out. “But I...”

Max watched Chloe sag into the love seat, a look of shock on her face. “Babe?” she asked after a few seconds. “Are you... okay?”

Chloe glanced between the ultrasound and her wife. “... we are going to need so MANY fuckin’ diapers.”

“Swear jar!”

---

Chloe: Okay, I got good news and bad news.

Victoria: Did you guys find out the gender??

Chloe: Yea. Which one you want first?

Victoria: ... let’s do the bad news.

Chloe: You’re gonna have to fork over a hundred bucks.

Victoria :DAMMIT

Chloe: Bummer, right?
Victoria: Don’t get me wrong, I’m thrilled you guys are having a girl. Super happy for you. But I was really looking forward to not hearing that fucking nickname for three months.

Chloe: I know you were.

Victoria: So what’s the good news?

Chloe: You’re not gonna hear that fucking nickname for three months.

Victoria: ... huh?

Victoria: Wait, I thought you guys were having a girl?

Chloe: We are.

Victoria: Then how do I both lose and win the bet?

Chloe: We’re having a boy, too.

Victoria: YOU’RE WHAT

Chloe: Twins, dude. Max is having a litter.

Victoria: First of all, I doubt Max approves of the term ‘litter’.

Victoria: Second, HOLY SHIT YOU GUYS ARE HAVING TWINS?! ARE YOU SERIOUS?!

Chloe: Yea, so if we could get that hundred bucks in Pampers, that would be great.

Max: Are you and Steph together?

Rachel: Yea, we’re having dinner at my parent’s house. Why?

Max: I had my ultrasound today.

Rachel: ... you hadn’t had one before?

Max: To get the gender!

Rachel: OH

Rachel: Steph hit me in the back of the head for forgetting. Sorry.

Max: Classy.

Rachel: I said sorry. So? What are you having?? Is it a boy??

Max: Why do you want it to be a boy?

Rachel: Because I always wanted a little brother when I was a kid, and it would be so sweet if Faith hadscsb

Rachel: She wanted a boy because she bet me fifty bucks.
Max: Hey, Steph. Why is everyone making bets on my future children?

Rachel: Because it’s fun ;)

Rachel: Wait, CHILDREN?! PLURAL?! 

Max: ... shoot. I had a thing, to lead into that.

Rachel: HOW MANY KIDS ARE YOU HAVING?!

Max: Twins! A boy and a girl!!

Rachel: OMG OMG OMG

Rachel: WE CLAIM GODPARENTS FOR ONE OF THEM!!

Max: You’re already godparents for Faith!

Rachel: You cannot have too many godkids!!

Max: We’re not religious! It’s a meaningless title!

Rachel: To YOU, maybe.

Max: Sorry, guys, but you’re not in the running. Victoria and Kate get it for the first one out.

Rachel: What about the second?

Max: Faith and Kevin.

Rachel: Seriously?! Faith already gets to be an aunt!

Max: So are you two! All of our kids are going to call you Aunt Steph and Aunt Rachel!

Rachel: ... aww.

Rachel: Okay, we can live with that. When is the baby shower?

Max: Ask Chloe. She said she was gonna plan it.

Rachel: CHLOE is going to plan your baby shower? Seriously?

Max: And what’s wrong with that?

Rachel: Nothing. I’m sure she’ll find the nicest Buffalo Wild Wings in Los Angeles.

Chloe: Max had her ultrasound!

Joyce: How was it? Did you guys find out the gender?

Chloe: Yep. And we got photos. Take a look!

Chloe: <US.jpg>
Joyce: Wow, it almost looks like there are two babies.

Chloe: It does, doesn’t it.

Joyce: ARE YOU GUYS HAVING TWINS?!?!

Chloe: Boy and a girl.

Joyce: OH MY GOD

Joyce: Are you READY for this?

Chloe: FUCK no. Faith was hard enough at that age, I don’t even want to think about there being two of them.

Joyce: I’m sure that you guys will get by just fine ;)

Joyce: When are they due?

Chloe: August. So, no pressure or anything, but if you maybe came out a couple of weeks after they’re born to help out...

Joyce: I’ll have David book tickets as soon as he gets home.

Joyce: What about names?

Chloe: We’re not sure about the girl yet. But... I was gonna ask Max if we could name the boy William. After Dad.

Joyce: Oh, honey. He would be so honored.

Chloe: I hope so.

Chloe: How was he? As a baby, I mean.

Joyce: Well, I wasn’t there. But according to your grandmother, he was a little terror. Always getting into everything, running straight into danger... she said he used to climb trees that were taller than the house.

Chloe: You know, lying would have cost you NOTHING, and I would have believed you.

Joyce: Gotta know what you’re getting into ;)

Kate: You figure it out yet?

Max: No :( choosing baby names is hard.

Kate: I know. Why not name her after someone important to you?

Max: Don’t get me wrong, I like the idea. But I can’t figure out who.

Kate: Who’s William again?
Max: Chloe’s father. He died in a car accident when she was fifteen.

Kate: I’m assuming your mother is out of the question.

Max: Yea, that’ll be a hard pass.

Kate: What about someone else? You know it doesn’t necessarily have to be someone important to you. Could be someone who made an impact on you, or someone you miss.

Max: I still don’t know.

Kate: Is there ANYONE from your childhood that left a mark on your life?

Max: ... hm.

Kate: What?

Max: What do you think of Jennifer?

Kate: That’s a good name. Who was she?

Max: Do you remember those two teenage girls the church killed? When Chloe and I were still dating?

Kate: Of course. That was terrible.

Max: Did I tell you that I used to babysit one of them?

Kate: You did?

Max: Jennifer Hansen. She was seriously the sweetest kid you ever saw. Easiest babysitting money I ever made.

Max: She was so polite, and nice. We used to have so much fun, playing hide-and-seek around her house and pretending that she was a princess.

Max: When I heard what her parents did to her, I almost threw up all over Chloe. I was so sick.

Kate: Oh, Max. I’m so sorry.

Kate: I think Jennifer’s a perfect name.

Max: Do you think Jennifer Caulfield-Price is too much of a mouthful?

Kate: ... you might have to be prepared for people to call her Jen.
Ms. Brooke Scott:

It is with heavy hearts that we must inform you that your grandfather, James Scott, passed away late last evening.

As you may have known, your grandfather was suffering from a heart condition. Doctors were on hand to assist him and ease his suffering, but he succumbed to the disease at 8:39PM. Enclosed is a notarized copy of his death certificate.

Your grandfather’s next-of-kin wasn’t updated following the death of your grandmother, so there isn’t anyone designated to direct the disposition of his remains. Your father is incapable of making decisions as a result of his Alzheimer’s, and your brother refuses to speak to the prison pastor. The duty now falls to you, should you so desire; if you elect not to do so, the duty will fall to the state. You will also be receiving a certified letter shortly from the lawyer who handled his last affairs.

Please call our office to let us know what steps to take.

We are extremely sorry for your loss.

Sincerely,

Eric Donahue

Warden, FCI Sheridan

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Dad: Congratulations, sweetie!

Rachel: On... what?

Dad: ... have you been to work yet?

Rachel: No. I was there until almost midnight last night, so I’m not going in until noon. Why?

Dad: Nothing.

Rachel: What do you mean, nothing?

Rachel: Congratulations on WHAT??

Rachel: DAD!!

...

Rachel: Okay, how did you know?

Dad: I know many things.

Rachel: Stacy told you, didn't she?

Dad: I have mentioned that your boss and I are friends.
Dad: I thought you weren’t going in until noon?

Rachel: Well, after your cryptic messages and radio silence, I figured I would go in to see what was going on!!

Dad: And how is your new office?

Rachel: A lot bigger than the cubicle.

Dad: I imagine. So, how’s it feel to be a supervisor?

Rachel: Little overwhelming. Though I guess I did get some experience, supervising and training Brooke.

Dad: You know that was on purpose, right?

Rachel: ... it was?

Dad: Why do you think Stacy didn’t do it, when it’s usually her job? You were being groomed.

Rachel: Shit. I had no idea.

Dad: Welcome to management, sweetie.

Brooke: Can I ask you a question?

Dr. Greene: Of course. Is this for a class?

Brooke: No, I graduated already.

Dr. Greene: Oh! I’m sorry, I thought for some reason that you were still in the graduate program. Congratulations!

Brooke: Thank you. But this is about doctor stuff anyway.

Dr. Greene: Go for it.

Brooke: You remember that I got “evaluated” by that asshole Ericson?

Dr. Greene: I remember his testimony.

Brooke: About how much does a psych eval cost?

Dr. Greene: It can vary, depending on the doctor. But it generally goes off their hourly rates.

Brooke: Can you ballpark it for me really quick?

Dr. Greene: Well, we figure an hour spent with you, another few hours doing the report for the judge, then there’s the travel costs and the time spent at court. I know Ericson bills fairly ludicrously for his time, so at $400 an hour, I think we can easily say he earned between five and seven thousand for his efforts. Possibly up to ten grand.

Brooke: Hm.
Dr. Greene: Can I ask why you’re interested?

Brooke: My grandfather died a couple of weeks ago. He didn’t really have a will, my grandmother is dead, and my dad doesn’t remember if he was the one who shit his pants or not. So the “estate”, such as it is, is pretty much split between me and Henry.

Dr. Greene: Oh. I’m sorry, Brooke.

Brooke: For what?

Dr. Greene: Your grandfather passing. And your father’s condition.

Brooke: Fuck them. Anyway, part of the estate is all of his crap that they stuck in storage. Mostly personal effects, and paperwork that the FBI decided wasn’t relevant to the fraud.

Brooke: I figured I’d take a couple of days and look through it, to see if there was anything interesting. I found his personal ledger. And a couple of journals.

Dr. Greene: How does this involve Ericson?

Brooke: Two weeks before I met him, my grandfather cut him a check for twenty-five thousand dollars.

Dr. Greene: Wow. Okay, that’s very concerning.

Brooke: I figured. So I checked my grandfather’s journals around that time. He’s got a list of names, with a few crossed out. Ericson’s on there, too.

Dr. Greene: What are the other names?


Dr. Greene: J. Klamath is most likely Jason Klamath, and S. Hern is probably Susan Hern. I don’t know the others.

Brooke: Who are they?

Dr. Greene: Klamath is a psychologist whose license was revoked by the American Psychological Association last year for gross malpractice.

Dr. Greene: Hern’s license is currently suspended for having an inappropriate relationship with a patient’s father.

Brooke: ... so my grandfather was shopping for shrinks with loose ethics. Who’d lie about me on the stand for money.

Dr. Greene: Would you do me a favor? Put all of that in an email and send it to me. Including pictures or scans of your grandfather’s papers.

Brooke: What are you going to do with it?

Dr. Greene: I have some friends in the APA who would be very interested in what you’ve found.

Brooke: You’ll have it in a few minutes.
Steph: I need your help. Like, right now.

Chloe: With what?

Steph: My laptop won’t boot. I can get to the login screen, but then it just loads over and over.

Steph: I’ve been fucking with it for an hour. I HAVE to get into it today, there’s concept art that needs to get sent to important people before midnight. What do I do?

Chloe: I dunno.

Steph: This is your job!!

Chloe: I no smart at magic boxes with words.

Chloe: What is lap top? Like top of lap?

Steph: THIS ISN’T FUNNY

Chloe: I know. This Steph. Me Chloe. Durrurr.

Steph: I’m serious, Chloe! If I don’t get into my computer, I’m so hosed!!

Chloe: In minute. Still looking for nice Buffalo Wild Wings.

Steph: ... are you fucking kidding me?

Chloe: Nope. I not even know buffalo could fly!

Steph: I NEVER SAID YOU WERE STUPID

Chloe: No. Just simple.

Steph: UKBFKNSDUBLIHDNK

Steph: I’M SORRY! YOU’RE NOT STUPID, OR SIMPLE. PLEASE HELP ME GET BACK INTO MY COMPUTER BEFORE I GET FIRED!!

Chloe: What’s in it for me?

Steph: You can literally name your price.

Chloe: You and Rachel are coming down for the baby shower, right? I want a box of those Voodoo Donuts.

Steph: Seriously? We’re flying, Chloe. I don’t think we can take them onto the plane.

Chloe: Bring it as your carry-on. You want your computer fixed or not?


Chloe: Go get Rachel’s computer and Skype me. I’ll walk you through it.
Henry,

The storage locker with Grandpa’s stuff is ours now. And it costs me $150 a month to keep it. I’m not paying for one second longer than I have to.

So, here’s the deal. This letter is certified, and contains a full inventory of the locker’s contents. Once you verify receipt, you have 30 days to tell me if you want to keep any of it. I’ll put it aside, at no cost to you, and everything else is gonna get sold at an estate sale. Any money left over after I claim what I had to pay for the locker is split between us. You dick around or take too long, everything gets sold or thrown away.

-Brooke

Jessica: I think I need a lawyer.

Victoria: What for?

Jessica: I got a phone call from the woman’s correctional facility in Fresno, telling me that an inmate wanted to speak with me.

Victoria: ... what did you say?

Jessica: I said no. And I hung up.

Jessica: Pretty sure it was Mom. I don’t know anybody else in jail.

Victoria: Well, that’s her prison, so probably.

Jessica: She kept calling back. I had to disconnect the apartment phone line. Then she called my cell phone, so I blocked the number.

Jessica: Then she called Hannah’s phone.

Victoria: ... did she answer?

Jessica: No. She turned it off.

Jessica: We’re freaking out a little bit. I thought she wasn’t allowed to call us?

Victoria: She’s not allowed to call me and Kate. We have a restraining order. You and Hannah don’t.

Jessica: Could we get one?

Victoria: You’d have to show cause. And unfortunately, a few unwanted phone calls isn’t enough. Neither is “I don’t want to talk to her”.

Jessica: So what do we do?

Victoria: You don’t need a lawyer. Send me an email with all the numbers you can be reached at, including work. I’ll have my people get the prison to blacklist them.

Jessica: ... you have people?
Victoria: Jessica, my people have people.

Ms. Scott:

After reviewing your letter, we don’t think we can assist you in your plans for your grandfather’s remains.

The prison does not have access to a wood chipper, nor do we keep any acid on the grounds. And while cremation is an option, pouring his ashes into the sewer grate is a violation of multiple environmental laws, as is flushing him down the toilet.

Unless you decide on a more dignified plan of action for your grandfather’s remains in the next two weeks, the decision will be made by the facility pastor.

Sincerely,

Eric Donahue

Warden, FCI Sheridan

Joyce: <barbie.jpg>

Joyce: Is that the one she wants?

Max: Yep. With the green dress. She was very specific in her letter to Santa.

Joyce: And the accompanying Ken doll?

Max: You can get it, but I don’t know if she’ll play with it. She doesn’t play with the ones we’ve gotten her.

Joyce: Really? Why not?

Max: We THINK it’s because of me and Chloe. She only pays house with Barbies; Ken is never around.

Max: We’re not sure if that’s weird or not.

Joyce: She’s just learning by example, sounds like. Kids take a lot of social cues from their environment.

Max: Really?

Joyce: Oh, yes. Back when William was re-doing our kitchen, Chloe used to sneak out of bed and pretend to be him in the morning.

Joyce: We came down one day to her wearing his too-big boots and gloves, carrying a wrench, and desperately trying to stop the water pipe she’d broken from destroying the room.

Max: Oh my GOD tell me you have pictures.

Joyce: Of course. We needed them for the insurance claim.
Max: Tell me you have pictures of HER.

Joyce: Of course. We needed them for the scrapbook :)

Max: We’re gonna have to look through that again when we get there.

Joyce: You really think you can keep your wife from destroying it?

Max: ... how much convincing would it take for David to turn the lock around on the bathroom door?

---

Henry,

I see your writing skills haven’t improved since high school. Allow me a brief critique.

- “Apastate” is spelled wrong. It’s Apostate. It’s also not really a title, so you shouldn’t start a letter with it.
- “Your” is also incorrect; it should be “you’re”, short for “you are”, when you say “your going too regret ever crossing this family”.
- Also, that “too” should be “to”.
- Even if I was willing, it’s not anatomically possible for me to shove my head up my ass.
- If, by some miracle, you DO manage to cut my throat? You’re not going to watch the blood leave my “fermoal” veins. First, they’re arteries; second, it’s “femoral”; and third, they’re in your legs, moron. The ones in your neck are carotids. I’m assuming you got this from a cell mate or something, so know that he’s not as badass (or smart) as you think he is.
- I don’t know why you called me a count, since we’re not European nobility. Pretty sure you meant cunt. Congratulations on messing up the spelling of a four-letter word.
- A brother telling his sister to get fucked is a little Game-of-Thrones-y. I know you’ve never seen that show, so ask your dumbass cell mate to explain that one to you.

But thank you anyway, for your letter. I took it to a lawyer who said it’s more than enough to establish a threat of violence, and we’re bringing it to a judge. You’ll probably get served with the no-contact order in a couple of weeks, and if you violate that, they’re going to extend your sentence.

By the way, the estate sale went well. You earned $163.48. I decided to be the better person, so rather than claim it for my time and effort, I sent it to the prison for your commissary account.

-Brooke.

Max: How hard were the classes for your Master’s?

Kate: Difficult, but not prohibitively so. Are you thinking of getting one?

Max: JUST thinking. Kids take up enough time as it is, even with day care.

Max: But I’ve seen who they promote in the offices here. They seem to prefer people with graduate degrees.

Kate: Most places do these days. It’s kind of sad, but a Bachelor’s doesn’t go as far as it used to.

Max: Well, I know you have your Master’s. Rachel does, too. It’s really only a few classes, isn’t it?
Kate: That depends on the school and the degree. There’s no standardized number of credits for graduate programs. It shouldn’t take more than a couple of years, though.

Kate: Are you looking at an MBA?

Max: Yea. That seems to be the favorite around Chase Enterprises.

Kate: I imagine so. If nothing else, it would make it easier to negotiate for a higher salary.

Kate: Do you want my help? I’m sure we could find something online that would work for your schedule.

Max: ... only if you have nothing better to do.

Brooke:

We would first like to apologize for the delay in our response to your inquiry. Our investigations take time, and ones of the nature you described in your email to Doctor Greene can take even longer.

You may rest assured that we have looked into the actions of Doctor Michael Ericson, as well as his history of paid testimony. During our investigation, we examined the files of the patients he testified about, and found numerous discrepancies, misdiagnoses, and exaggerations. While we cannot give you the details of his infractions, we would like to inform you that we’ve suspended his license to practice medicine pending further review.

On behalf of our entire association, we apologize for your experience. And we sincerely hope that you won’t let what happened stop you from seeking any help you might need.

Dr. Manuel Sinclair

American Psychological Association
December, 2029

“What did Jane say, when you spoke to her?”

Brooke juggled her bag and a travel mug of coffee as she closed her apartment door, locking it behind her. “That it was the third warning they’d gotten from Blackwell about Raina fighting. And that she was officially suspended for two days.”

“Wonderful.” Rachel sighed through the phone. Brooke kept it pinned it to her ear with a shoulder as she made her way towards her new car. “Well, I’m stuck here. You’re going to have to handle it without me.”

“I figured.” Brooke set her mug down on top of the Prius, using her free hand to unlock the car before tossing her bag inside. “You know, I remember Stacy leaving her office a LOT more than you do.”

“Yes, yes, we’ve established that she was much faster at doing paperwork than I am.”

Brooke smirked as she grabbed the coffee and slid into the car. “What are you working on now?”

“She’s got all the supervisors looking at re-vamping some of the criteria for placing kids. Or something like that.” Rachel sounded bitter as Brooke turned her car on. She shivered as the cold air blew out the vents, and set her phone down as it connected to the Bluetooth. “I’m not sure. All I know is that I have a sixty-page thing to read, and an email to send up by the end of the day.”

“Well, that’s what you get for being really good at your job.”

“Shut up. Do you have this?”

“Yea.” Brooke checked her mirrors, as she pulled onto the road, mentally tallying the cars behind her; after three years in CPS, and Rachel’s constant badgering, she’d gotten pretty good at looking for tails. “I’ll talk to her, figure out what’s going on. Maybe I can get Wells to let her see Doctor Greene while she’s out of classes.”

“That would be beneficial. All right, I gotta go. Call me if you need anything.”

“Well do.”

Brooke tapped the touch screen on the center console, disconnecting the call as she leaned back into her driver’s seat. I love this car, she thought idly. I should’ve upgraded years ago.


Fighting. Shit. Brooke sighed, as she rubbed her forehead. Raina is going to be the death of me. I think even Jane is running out of patience.

Her new teenager was an oddity for Jane and Pete, in that she wasn’t from First Light; the sixteen-year-old had initially been sent to a regular foster home. But her father, a diagnosed narcissist who
couldn’t seem to stop doing meth, had tracked her down and tried to kidnap her back when she got off a school bus. Rachel had elected to put her in one of the secure homes until her father was dealt with by the legal system.

And now fighting. Brooke knew that Doctor Greene had already spoken to her about losing her temper, but the teenager didn’t seem to take what she said to heart. She sighed, as she tried to think about what she would say to Raina.


Maybe I can get her to channel some of that anger into something constructive? Brooke mulled that thought over. There is a martial arts studio ten minutes from the foster house. Or I could talk to Pete, see if he still works that punching bag in the mornings. I’ll bet he wouldn’t mind having a workout partner.

Then again, maybe teaching her how to get better at a behavior we’re trying to curb isn’t the best idea.

Her stomach interrupted her thoughts, as it growled.

Well, that’s what you get for skipping breakfast. Brooke glanced around and spotted a convenience store that she knew sold breakfast burritos. She pulled into the lot, turning off the car.

Green Mustang. Red Sedan. Blue Smart Car. She shook her head as it passed. God, those are so ugly.

Brooke made her way inside and through the short line to order her breakfast. Her thoughts wandered idly, as she waited by the window. Shoot, I still need to pick up a present for Aaron’s birthday, she remembered. Well... I guess I have a little time. His party’s on Saturday.

Hell. What did she say he wanted again? Brooke brought up her text messages on her phone.

Regina: Games for his new Game Boy. He’s already got the Pokémon game, and one called Fire Emblem, I think. If you can’t pick one, just get a gift certificate to Game Stop or something.

Nice, kid. Brooke put her phone away. Okay. I’ll swing by a Target or something on my way back from Jane and Pete’s. Ooh, maybe I can get one that’s really loud and obnoxious. She smirked to herself. Make him happy and drive Regina crazy at the same time? Talk about a win-win.

Crap. Maybe not. Car payment is coming due. Brooke glanced back out the window. Ah, fifty bucks won’t kill me. I just have to remember to actually bring lunch to the office, instead of eating out all the time.

She was still admiring her new car when it happened. Something began gnawing at the back of her mind. The hair on the back of her neck slowly stood on end, and she became extremely unsettled as an ominous feeling overcame her.

Something’s not right.

One of the first thing Rachel had taught her was to trust her gut. Brooke kept her eyes out the window, as she tried to figure out what was wrong.

That man hasn’t gotten out of his car.

... is that the red sedan from before?
The car at the far end of the lot was still occupied. Brooke knew that she’d been standing at the window for a couple of minutes, and the driver hadn’t made a move to get out of his vehicle.

*Okay, calm down. Maybe he’s sending a text or something.* Brooke stepped away from the window, out of sight. *Don’t start the day with a little paranoia. It’s probably not even the same car.*

“Order up for Brooke!”

She blinked, hearing her name, and turned to see the cashier holding up a paper bag. “That’s me,” she said quickly, taking it. “Thanks.”

As she left the store, she made it a point not to look at the sedan while she got back in her car. It felt chillier than usual as she started it again, pulling back into the street. She kept her eyes on the rearview mirror as she drove away.

She didn’t make it to the next intersection before the red sedan pulled into the road, driving to catch up to her.

*Okay, calm down. It could just be a coincidence.* Brooke hit her turn signal, making a left. The red sedan followed. *Let’s see if you also need gas.*

A mile down the road, she turned into a gas station and pulled up to the pump. She got out quickly, watching from the corner of her eyes as the red sedan drove past her and disappeared.

Brooke breathed a sigh of relief. *Not enough coffee this morning.*

She quickly filled her car, closing the tank and paying after a few minutes. When she turned back, her gaze went across the road just in time to see the red sedan pull into the parking lot across the street. It slow-rolled through the lot, and Brooke could see the driver watching her.

*Oh, shit.*

She got back into her car, still pretending not to see the sedan as she drove away. After several seconds, she watched in her mirror as the red sedan got back onto the road, staying several car lengths behind her. *Don’t panic. And don’t do anything to give away that you know he’s there.*

As she drove, she worked the car’s touch screen. She quickly navigated through the menu and made a call to a number she had on speed dial.

“CPS, Rachel Amber speaking.”

“It’s Brooke.” She glanced in her mirror again. “I think I’m being followed.”

There was silence for a couple of seconds. “Are you sure?”

“Mostly. The same car watched me stop for breakfast and fill my gas tank.” Brooke took a turn, away from Jane’s house. “He’s a few cars behind me.”

“Where are you right now?”

“Heading south on Franklin. I just turned from Nineth.”

“Okay. Make like you’re going to the office. Gimme a second.” Brooke heard the thump of her boss’s cell phone being put down, followed by buttons being hit. “Chief? It’s Rachel. One of my social workers is being followed.”
Brooke turned her concentration back to her driving. She noticed that she’d unconsciously sped up, and she took her foot off the gas as she took some deep breaths. *Don’t let him suspect that anything is different.*

“Yes, I do. She was heading to one of our secure foster homes.”

A pause.

“I would really appreciate that. I’ve got her on my cell right now... mm-hmm. Hang on. Brooke? Are you still going south on Franklin?”

“Yes.” She checked the intersection as she passed through it. “I just passed Seventh.”

“Okay, Chief, she just passed Seventh Avenue, heading south on Franklin. She’s driving a late-model black Prius.”

“Dark blue,” Brooke corrected absently.

“Sorry, a late-model dark blue Prius. Brooke, what kind of car is following you?”

“It’s a red sedan. An older one. Too far away to see what kind.” She studied her mirror intently. “He’s about three hundred feet behind me.”

“It’s a red sedan, three hundred feet behind her. Right. Yea, sure.”

The line went silent for few minutes. Brooke took deep breaths, focusing on maintaining her speed as she drove through the morning traffic.

“Perfect,” Rachel finally said. “Brooke, there’s a police car in the parking lot of the McDonalds, just before Meyer. Take a left on Second.”

“Got it.” Brooke changed lanes, the red sedan following suit after a few seconds. It stayed behind her as she took the turn. “Okay, I’m heading east, and he’s still behind me.”

“Chief, he’s still right behind her... yep. Okay, Brooke, just drive normally.”

She did as she was told, finally seeing the McDonalds down the road. And the police car getting ready to pull out of the lot. She watched the officer in the passenger seat wave at her, and she waved back discreetly.

As soon as the red sedan passed the restaurant, the cops pulled out and hit their sirens. Brooke breathed a sigh of relief, as the red sedan pulled over behind her. “They got him, Rachel.”

“Good. Make your way back to the office. You can go see Jane and Pete later.”

Brooke shared her cubicle wall with another social worker named Leslie, who frowned when she walked through the door. “Weren’t you supposed to go see Raina this morning?”

“I was.” Brooke shrugged out of her jacket, hanging it on a hook before she collapsed into her chair. “Before some asshole decided to tail me.”

Leslie rolled her chair backwards, raising her eyebrows. “You were followed?”

“I noticed them this morning, when I was getting breakfast.” Brooke glanced at the door to Rachel’s office, noting that her boss was still on the phone. “Has she come out yet?”
“Not since she went in.” Leslie leaned forward. “Are you okay? What happened?”

“I’m fine. The guy never got close.” Brooke waved her hand. “I called Rachel, and she got on the line with Chief Watson. He had a couple of cops pull the guy over so I could get away, and I came here.”

“Mm.” Leslie nodded. “Well. Not that I’m not glad you’re okay, but I do kind of wish you’d gone to see Raina.”

Brooke smirked. “Given the circumstances...”

“I know. I’m just worried about that girl,” Leslie sighed; she had been Raina’s original social worker, before they’d placed her in the secure foster home. “Kid’s been through a lot already, between moving houses and her psychotic father.”

“He’s not out, is he?”

“No.” Leslie shook her head. “He’s still in detention; judge denied him bail, on account of his little kidnapping attempt.”

“What a shame,” Brooke remarked dryly. “At least he’s sober now.”

Leslie snorted. “You wouldn’t know it, based on his court behavior.”

“That bad?”

“The bailiff and I were debating if he had any synapses the meth hadn’t fried.”

The door to Rachel’s office opened, and they both turned to see her walk out. “Brooke, put your coat on. We have to go.”

She frowned. “Why?”

“We need to talk to the police.”

“About the guy that was following me? Did they actually arrest him?”

“Chief Watson didn’t say.” Rachel shook her head. “He just wanted me to bring you down as soon as I could. I guess they’ve got something we need to see.”

“We were just going to hold him for a little bit. Run his plates, ask some pointless questions, keep him occupied for twenty minutes or so.”

Brooke listened to the female cop, as she stood next to Chief Watson, who had his hands crossed over his chest. Next to her, Rachel stood quietly. “But?”

“We saw that he had a camera in his lap.” The officer gestured towards the conference room table beside them. “And we saw that in the passenger seat.”

She looked at the table and saw the manila folder. And the photo of her stapled to the front of it. “So he WAS tailing me,” Brooke commented. “He must have been trying to follow me to the secure foster-”

“This didn’t start today,” Watson interrupted her. He stepped over to the table and flipped the folder open. “He’s got photos of you wearing five different outfits. This man has been following you for
Brooke saw that he was right. A shiver crawled down her spine as she studied the photos. “I wore that shirt on Monday,” she said quietly. “I don’t understand. I always look for tails when I’m working, and I’ve never seen that red sedan before this morning.”

“The guy is a registered Private Investigator. Following people is his job; it’s impressive that you saw him at all,” the female officer mentioned. “And there’s receipts in here from Hertz and Enterprise. He’s been changing cars all week.”

“That’s not why we called you down here, though.” Watson walked to the other end of the table, where an open gym bag sat with an evidence tag attached to it. “They found this when they searched the car.”

He flipped the bag over, and the contents spilled out. Brooke felt her heart drop into her stomach as she looked them over; a large folding knife, a heavy flashlight, a taser, a pair of black mechanic’s gloves, a package of heavy-duty zip-ties, and a set of handcuffs.

“In our line of work,” the female officer said heavily, “that’s what we call a murder kit.”
Murder kit.

Brooke stared at the contents of the bag in front of her. And tried not to imagine someone coming up behind her at night, bashing her over the head with the flashlight.

Or sticking the knife between her ribs.

Or hitting her with a taser. Getting handcuffed, thrown into the trunk of a car, and driven somewhere quiet and secluded for whatever came afterward. She couldn’t even think about it before she started feeling ill and light-headed, her legs shaking as she blindly reached for a chair.

She felt Rachel’s hands on her shoulders, guiding her down into a seat. “Easy, easy,” her boss coached. “Take a deep breath. It’s alright. It’s ok.”

“He...” Brooke swallowed, looking up at the officers. “That was in his car?”

“Yes.” The female officer nodded. “It was in the back seat. Since he was following you with a camera, we had probable cause to search it.”

“You... uh... arrested him, right?”

“We did.” Watson gestured outside. “He’s next door in Interrogation. We need you to tell us if he looks familiar.”

She stood back up and followed them numbly, noticing that Rachel stuck next to her like glue. Chief Watson lead the way into the room with the one-way mirror. On the other side of the glass, two detectives Brooke recognized were sitting across from a woman in a business suit. Beside her sat the man she guessed had been driving the car.

“-a lot of trouble, way more than you think,” one of the detectives was saying. “Trust me on this one, Mister Hayford, it is not the time to stay silent.”

“I would ask you speak to me, not my client,” the woman told him. “He’s done nothing wrong.”

“I’m afraid we have a difference of opinion,” the second detective retorted. “He was caught stalking a government social worker. And we have evidence of a pre-meditated assault from the bag in his back seat.”

“A bag that was taken without a search warrant,” the woman countered. “It’s useless in court. We’re not going to-”

Watson hit a switch on the wall, and the speakers died. “Do you recognize him, Miss Scott?”

Brooke shook her head, as she studied the man through the mirror. “I’ve never seen him before.”

“His name is Ryan Hayford. No bells being rung?”

“No.” Brooke looked at the chief. “Did First Light send him after me?”

“We’re not sure,” Watson admitted. “He hasn’t spoken since they arrested him. Have you pissed off anyone from your old church lately?”
Brooke scoffed. “I do it for a living, remember?”

“Fair point.” Watson looked back at the glass. “We’ll get warrants for his phone and finances, and a forensics team is on their way to look through his car.”

“What about her?” Rachel asked. “If this guy has been following her for a week, then he knows where she lives.”

“I was getting to that. Until we figure out who’s paying Mister Hayford, she should remain here at the station, under our protection.” Watson looked at her. “If this takes longer than a few hours, Miss Scott, it might be best if you stayed with a nearby friend.”

“... yea. Okay.” Brooke rubbed her arms, suddenly cold. “Um... what should I-”

The door to the interrogation room opened. Brooke blinked as James Amber walked inside, closing the door behind him. “What’s my dad doing here?” Rachel asked incredulously.

“I called the DA’s office to let them know that we needed warrants.” Watson frowned, as he reached for the switch again. “I didn’t know your father was coming, though. Or that he’d get here so quickly.”

“-essica, how nice to see you again.”

“James.” The female lawyer didn’t stand. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Oh, I heard what was going on. I do have a vested interest in the local CPS office, you know. Figured I’d come down myself.” He turned to the detectives. “I understand Mister Hayford was stalking Brooke Scott?”

One of the detectives stood, offering the prosecutor his seat. “He was, Mister Amber.”

James nodded as he took it, sitting down across from the woman. “And a murder kit was found in his back seat?”

“That is NOT a ‘murder kit’, ”The woman said as she used finger quotes. “That is a tool bag Mister Hayford keeps with him for emergencies.”

“Handcuffs and a taser are for emergencies now?” James rolled his eyes. “Tell me that you’re going to make that argument to a judge, Jessica. I want to be sure I’m in the courtroom for that.”

“Okay.” Jessica stood. “We’re leaving. My client has done nothing wrong, and I insist that you-”

“Before you say something foolish,” James interrupted, “let me correct you on some misconceptions. You may leave, but your client is not. We’re going to charge him with stalking, trespassing, and conspiracy to commit murder.”

“EXCUSE me?!”

“Oh, I’m not done,” James said casually. “Since your client isn’t from Oregon, I’m going to ask the judge to deny bail, as we’re going to consider him to be a flight risk. Your client will remain behind bars for the several months it will take for his trial.”

“Wow,” Rachel said quietly. “Not pulling any punches today.”

The man, Hayford, paled. Jessica’s face flushed in anger. “If you think I won’t get a judge to call this an AGGREGIOUS violation of my client’s rights, then you-”
“Your client is a private investigator who’s been charged with assault twice. Arguing that he’s been hired to commit a murder won’t be hard, especially with that bag of his.” James leaned back in his seat. “And your client has made the very grave error of targeting a social worker who specializes in dealing with high-risk children. Miss Scott is very well known to the county judges, and I can assure you that when I tell them Mister Hayford was planning to kill her, they won’t be very.”

“I WASN’T!!”

The outburst from him startled his lawyer, who nearly jumped out of her shoes. “STOP talking,” she ordered him forcefully. “Mister Amber is trying to intimidate you. He has nothing.”

James shrugged. “I disagree. But either way, Mister Hayford is still going to be spending the next few months in a detention center. And I understand that he has a custody arrangement with his ex-wife that hinges on paying child support. If he misses any payments, he loses it completely.”

“What do you want?” Hayford asked.

Jessica looked at him, frustration on her face. “Mister Hayford—”

“I want to know who hired you,” James said flatly. “I want to know who wants Miss Scott dead.”

“Jesus Christ.” Hayford dragged his hand over his face. “Nobody wants—”

Jessica grabbed his arm, silencing him as she exhaled. “He tells you what he knows, he gets immunity?”

James studied Hayford carefully, before turning back to Jessica. “If he admits to everything, we’ll drop the conspiracy charges. He can pay a fine for everything else. But I want to know exactly what he was doing with that bag of his.”

“I wasn’t going to kill her,” Hayford said desperately. “I was just hired to find and follow her, I swear to God.”

“And the bag, that looks remarkably like a murder kit?”

Hayford sighed. “Christ,” he muttered, slouching in his seat. “It’s not a goddamn murder kit. I use it for my other job.”

James raised an eyebrow. “Which is...”

“Bounty hunting,” he answered. “I’m a licensed bounty hunter in the state of Washington. I do it to pick up cash between PI jobs. Call the Tacoma PD and ask to speak to Sergeant Jamal Hayes, he’ll vouch for me.”

The detectives exchanged glances, and one of them stood, leaving the room. Nobody spoke until the door closed behind him. “You understand that a PI isn’t allowed to work outside of the state he’s licensed in, right?” James asked. “Or a bounty hunter, for that matter?”

“Fuck. Yea, I know.” Hayford rubbed his face with both hands. “The guy offered me an extra three thousand dollars to leave Washington. Said he didn’t want anybody the Oregon PD would know about working for him.” He looked back up at James. “He was cagey as fuck the whole time, but I really needed the cash.”

“Why did he want to find Miss Scott?”
“He didn’t say, and I didn’t ask.” Hayford shrugged. “He hired me for a week’s worth of my time. Wanted to know where she lived, where she worked, places she frequented, that sort of thing. I was going to give him my report tomorrow morning.”

James leaned forward. “Who was he?”

“He didn’t want to give me his full name. Said everything had to be off the books.” Hayford paused. “But he did tell me that I could call him Bobby.”
Brooke watched the two of them, as they continued to talk. But she didn’t hear any of it.

As soon as Hayford said the man’s name was Bobby, she froze in shock. Her hearing slowly dimmed, until all she could hear was a ringing in her ears.

_Bobby._

_Oh, God._

_It’s been about nine years. The judge in California gave him a ninety-month prison sentence, and he got it extended by a year for fighting with a prison guard. He would’ve gotten out recently. And he’s an out-of-state resident, so he could have applied to do parole with his family in Oregon._

_He’s back in Arcadia Bay._

_And he’s looking for me._

_Oh, God._

Rachel laid a hand on her shoulder, and she flinched as she came back to Earth. She realized that her boss had called her name a couple of times. “Brooke? Are you-”

Brooke didn’t speak, as she brushed past her and left the room. She turned down the hall and strode as fast as she could, finally pushing her way into the women’s bathroom. Making a beeline for the toilet, she flipped up the lid and collapsed in front of it, puking up her breakfast burrito and coffee.

She was still dry heaving as the door opened behind her. She threw a quick glance over her shoulder and saw Rachel standing there. After a couple of seconds, she closed the door and threw the dead bolt, then walked over and leaned against the wall next to her.

“We don’t know that it’s him yet,” Rachel said quietly.

Brooke scoffed. “Come on,” she muttered, as she spit into the toilet.

“You know.” Rachel sighed. “Sorry. Sometimes I forget that I’m not your social worker anymore.”

“I thought I was done with this shit.” Brooke wiped her mouth on her sleeve, still breathing heavily as she reached up and flushed. “I figured once he went to prison, after what happened, that was the end of it. I’d never see or hear from him again.”

“You won’t,” Rachel assured her. “One of the conditions of his parole were that he never contact you. Or Max, or Chloe. When a judge finds out he hired a private investigator to find you, they’ll lose their shit.”

Brooke looked up at her. “How do you know that?”

“Because I told the DA’s office in San Francisco about you, and asked them to make it part of the sentencing.” Rachel smiled. “Like I said, social worker.”

“Right.” Brooke stood on shaky legs and made her way over to the sink. She hit the faucet and washed her hands, then cupped some of the water into her mouth, swishing it around and spitting it back out. “Fuck.”
Rachel followed her. “Brooke-”

“FUCK!!” Brooke yelled as she slammed her fist on the counter. She stood back upright, glaring at her reflection as she took a deep breath. “I’m not fifteen years old anymore. I’m an adult. I am not fucking scared of this goddamn psychopath.”

“Brooke, it’s okay if you’re a little-”

“I am NOT fucking scared of him.” Brooke turned and stormed past Rachel, turning the lock and yanking the door open.

She was halfway to the interrogation room when James walked out. He took one look at her eyes and immediately moved to block the door. “Brooke, I’ve got this.”

“Is it Bobby Marshall?” she asked.

“Looks like it.” James nodded. “We showed Mister Hayford his picture, and he identified him as the man who hired-”

“I want to know where the FUCK he is,” she demanded. “I want his address, so I can find him myself and cut his balls off.”

James looked amused at her outburst. “Well, you’re definitely not going to do that.”

“Fine. Then I’ll hang him by his toes and beat him with a baseball bat until I get tired of the noises he makes.” Brooke tried to sidestep around James, but he mirrored her, keeping her away from the room. “God damn it, let me-”

“Enough.” Rachel’s hand came down on her shoulder and pulled her back. “This isn’t helpful.”

Brooke threw her boss’s hand off of her, not taking her glare from James. “Five minutes. I only need five minutes, and I’ll make him tell me where Bobby is.”

“I said, ENOUGH.” Rachel grabbed her with both hands and pulled her away.

She finally turned her glare to Rachel. “You’re not the one he’s stalking. Don’t fucking tell me that-”

“I am your boss, and I will tell you whatever the fuck I want,” Rachel snapped, as she maneuvered Brooke against the wall. “You are angry, and out of your head if you think we’re going to allow you to set foot in that room.”

“It doesn’t matter;” James assured her. “Mister Hayford has already told us that Bobby Marshall is staying in a Motel 6 just outside of town.”

Brooke swiveled her head back to face him. “What room?”

“BROOKE!!”

She blinked, turning back to her boss as she shouted. Rachel looked at her with piercing eyes while she spoke. “I don’t care how mad you are, or what you’re feeling. You do NOT raise your voice to the District Attorney. And you CERTAINLY do not demand things from him. Take a deep breath, and CALM DOWN.”
Brooke did as she was told, feeling herself physically deflate as the fight left her.

Rachel looked at her father. “Are they going to arrest him?”

“The detective just left to put together a team of officers,” James replied. “And an ADA is going to see a judge right now for a warrant. My guess is that we’ll have him in custody by the end of the day.”

“What about Hayford?”

“He’s agreed to testify. In exchange, we’ll let him plead to a lesser charge and pay a fine.”

“Good.” Rachel nodded at Brooke. “Do you need her?”

“No.”

Rachel looked at her. “Anything you want to say?”

Brooke turned to James, crossing her arms and trying not to look him in the eye. “… sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it.” James smiled. “Look, you’ll probably get the chance to say whatever you want at his trial. Guys like these usually aren’t smart enough to plead out.”

“And you’re taking the rest of the day off,” Rachel added. “You can go see Raina tomorrow.”

“I still can’t believe I did that.”

Across the table from her, Emily smirked. “It sounded like he wasn’t that upset about it.”

“I yelled at the DA. I actually used curse words.” Brooke shook her head, her elbows planted on her friend’s table; she’d elected not to go home until she knew Bobby had been arrested. “If it was anyone but Rachel’s father, I’d be in deep shit.”

“It’s still really weird, that you don’t call her Miss Amber anymore.”

“Given that we work together now, I would think it’d be weirder if I did, wouldn’t it?”

In kitchen, Javier stirred a pan on the stove while he finished his beer. “Brooke, you want another one?”

“Yes.” She picked her bottle back up and drank the last of it. “Please.”

Javier grabbed two more green bottles from their fridge, walking over and setting one in front of her. “So, did they arrest fuckface?”

“Rachel told me she’d text when they did.” Brooke glanced at her watch. “Her dad said by the end of the day. Hopefully in the next hour or so.”

“Good.” Javier twisted the cap off his beer as he went back to the stove, stirring the pan some more. “Guys like that need to be locked up. Millions of women in the world, and they get so obsessed with the one who rejects them? That’s just creepy.”

Emily frowned, as she looked at her husband. “Didn’t I turn you down for coffee TWICE, before our first date?”
“I wasn’t obsessed, babe. And I can tell the difference between a hard ‘no’ and a soft ‘maybe’.” He wiggled his eyebrows. “Besides, I was right.”

Brooke shook her head. “You two are adorable.”

Emily leaned forward. “Speaking of adorable, how’s everything going with Mike?”

“Couldn’t tell you.” Brooke shrugged. “Haven’t spoken to him since I broke up with him.”

“Seriously? You broke up with him?” Emily cocked her head. “Why? I thought he was nice.”

Brooke sighed. “He was. I just... I don’t know. We didn’t really click.”

Emily hummed, then turned to Javier. “Hey, weren’t you just telling me that your buddy from work is single?”

Javier looked back at her. “Dave?”

“Was that him?”

“Yea, his girlfriend just left him.”

“Oh, no.” Brooke crossed her arms and shook her head. “I do not want to be set up on a blind date.”

“Why not?” Emily countered. “It’s not like you’re putting yourself out there.”

“Because I...” Brooke paused, trying to come up with a reason.

Emily smirked after several seconds. “Yea, that’s what I thought. You’re coming with us for dinner on Saturday.”

“I have plans.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Emily-”

“Javier,” she interrupted, turning back to the kitchen. “What is Dave like?”

“Oh, he’s a good dude.” Javier lifted the pan, turning it and dishing out their dinner. “Best engine guy in the shop. Speaks pretty good Spanish for a white boy, too. And he plays guitar at the Blue Room on the weekends.”

Brooke raised her eyebrows. “If he’s such a good guy, then why did his last girlfriend leave him?”

“Because she decided that she liked girls better.” Javier smirked as he carried three plates to the table. “I don’t know what that says about his bedroom skills, so take that for face value.”

“Show her a picture,” Emily encouraged him.

“Sure.” Javier pulled out his cell phone.

“No, really, Javier, I don’t want to...” Brooke’s voice trailed off as he worked it for a few seconds and showed her the screen. She found herself looking at a Facebook profile of a man holding a bass guitar. “… hm.”

Emily grinned. “Good enough for you?”
“Fine. He’s handsome.” Brooke shook her head. “I still don’t want to go on a blind... what are you doing?” she asked Javier, as he took his phone back and started tapping the screen.

“Texting him to see if he’s free for a date on Saturday.”

“Javier!!”

His phone made a ‘whoosh’ noise. “Message away.”

“You two are ASSHOLES,” she emphasized. “Seriously, guys.”

“Dude, come on.” Emily leaned forward, putting her elbows on the table. “I’m married. Regina’s engaged. You’re the only single one of us, and you have the least amount of mental baggage. We need to help find you a boyfriend.”

“Why do I need a man to be fulfilled in life?”

“You don’t. Go date a girl if you want,” Emily offered. “But sharing your life with someone is a lot more fun than going home alone to a Netflix subscription and an Xbox.”

“PlayStation,” Brooke corrected quietly.

“Yea, I don’t know if that was meant to help your case, but it didn’t.”

She shook her head, and noticed Javier aiming his phone at her. “What the hell are you doing?”

The sound of a shutter going off answered her. “Dave wanted to know what you look like.”

“Dude! What the fuck?!” Brooke exclaimed. “I’m not wearing makeup, my hair looks like shit, and far more importantly, I haven’t said ‘yes’ to meeting this guy yet!!”

Javier’s phone made the ‘whoosh’ noise again, and he glanced up at her. “Sorry, what?”

She narrowed her eyes. “I miss it when you were intimidated by me,” she grumbled. Javier ignored her, as he continued to type on his phone. “What are you doing NOW?”

“Telling him about you.”

“You’re- wait, what are you saying?”

He spared her a glance. “I thought you weren’t interested in meeting him.”

“I didn’t say if I was or not! And I still want to know what people are saying about me!”

“In a minute.” Javier discreetly showed his phone to Emily. “What do you think?”

She read through the text and took the phone, typing something out quickly before handing it back. Javier smirked as he read the new sentence, glancing back at Brooke quickly. “I’m pretty sure she’s closer to a B-cup, babe.”

“HEY!!”

“Yea, I know. But we can let him figure that out for himself.” Emily ignored her, as she reached over and tapped the screen. Before Brooke could react, the ‘whoosh’ hit her ears. “Besides, by the time he gets there, he’s not going to care.”
“What the FUCK?!” Brooke felt her face flush in anger. “I haven’t-”

“Jesus Christ. You’re not doing anything on Saturday, he’s single, you’re single, and you said he was handsome.” Emily crossed her arms. “You’re going to meet him. Period.”

If she’d been a cartoon, steam would have been coming from her ears as she glared at her friend. After a few seconds, the phone dinged. “He’s interested,” Javier reported. “He thinks you’re cute. But he’s busy this weekend. He’d rather take you out next Friday.”

“... fine.” Brooke sat back in her chair, still mad. “I hate you both. Seriously, you faked my cup size to get me a date.”

Emily shrugged. “Nothing wrong with playing a handicap.”

Brooke was still preparing her retort when her phone went off in her pocket. She pulled it out and read the text. “They arrested Bobby,” she reported. “Rachel says the cops just booked him. And that he had handcuffs, a gun, and printed directions to Canada in his motel room.”

“... shit.” The mirth was gone from Emily’s voice. “He was going to kidnap you.”

“Looks like it.” Brooke shook her head. “What a dumbass. I don’t even have a passport; how the hell was he going to get me into Canada? And did he think they don’t extradite people?”

“Brooke-”

“Whatever.” She put her phone down and picked up her fork, taking a bite of dinner; Javier had fried some plantains, and served them with pork chops and yellow rice. “Damn, that’s pretty good.”

Javier and Emily both had concerned looks on their faces. “Are you okay?” Javier asked. “That’s some pretty heavy shit, Brooke.”

“Yes.” She had another bite of food. “What did you put on these plantains? They’re amazing.”

“Brooke. Stop it.” Emily leaned forward. “Please talk to us.”

She finally sighed, putting her fork down. “What do you want me to say?”

“I don’t know, that you’re glad he’s in jail? That you were scared before, and you feel better? That you don’t want to stay alone tonight?”

“I’m fine.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“That’s your problem.”

A couple of hours later, she pulled into her apartment parking lot and turned her car off.

Brooke sat for a couple of minutes, studying her unit. She always left the blinds cracked, and a light on, so it seemed like she was home. And she’d replaced the dim bulb outside her front door with a bright LED light, that illuminated most of the walkway. Once she was satisfied that nobody was waiting for her, she got out of her car, locking it before she made her way upstairs.

She smirked at the scuffling on the other side of her door, as she unlocked it. Her pit bull, Crash, gave a couple of low barks as she walked inside.
“Hey boy,” she greeted him. “Sit.”

He complied immediately; she’d spent a lot of time training him, and his behavior showed. She smiled as she opened the cookie jar on her hall table, retrieving a dog treat and holding it in her hand. “Lay down,” she ordered, and he obeyed. “Roll over. Sit. Beg.”

Crash followed her every command, ending up sitting back on his haunches with his paws in the air. Finally, she pointed at the locked door behind her. “Get him!”

The dog immediately started barking as he raced past her, towards the door. He stood in front of it, squared off as his barks echoed through the apartment.

Brooke let him go for a couple of seconds. “Sit!” she finally ordered, and he stopped, turning back to her and sitting down. She tossed up the treat, and he jumped, snatching it before it hit the floor.

“Good boy,” she cooed, as she scratched him behind his ears. “Come on. Let’s go watch TV.”

The rest of the night was uneventful. They watched some Netflix, Crash laying his head in her lap as she sipped a beer. Then she took him for a quick walk, letting him use the bathroom. Finally, she changed into her sweat pants and got ready for bed.

Unlike her boss, she didn’t carry a gun; the few times she’d tried to shoot one, she’d had terrible aim, and the loud noise freaked her out. Before she went to bed, she removed a black-and-yellow taser from her purse, placing it on the nightstand as she got under the covers. Crash jumped up onto the comforter, curling into a ball at her feet as she turned off the light.

But she couldn’t sleep. All she could do was stare at the ceiling and take shallow breaths.

... I am not scared.
“No way.”

“No way.”

“No way.”

“No way.”

“But—”

“Young lady, you are not leaving this apartment looking like that.”

Brooke frowned. “Okay, first off, I’m a year older than you. And second, what’s wrong with it?” she asked, looking down at her outfit.

“It’s a date, Brooke, not a business meeting. A pantsuit isn’t going to cut it.” Regina pointed back into her closet. “Go put on a dress.”

“I don’t want to—”

“A NICE dress,” she emphasized, as she crossed her legs while sitting on Brooke’s bed. Crash lay beside her, and she scratched his ears while she spoke. “And don’t give me that nonsense about leaving First Light because of them. Go get that blue one Emily made you buy last year.”

Brooke grimaced. “Don’t you think that one’s a little short?”

“So? That’s the point.”

“... fine.” Brooke walked back into her closet. “You and Emily are really annoying, by the way.”

Regina rolled her eyes. “Don’t get pissy just because we found love and you didn’t.”

“How is that, by the way?” Brooke asked, as she rustled around in her clothes. “You guys decide on a venue yet?”

“We’ve narrowed it down to a couple,” Regina answered. “There’s a really nice rooftop we both like, but it’s stupidly expensive. And a banquet hall just outside of town that looks amazing, but Greg doesn’t care for their catering options, and we think he might be allergic to the flowers on the property.”

“Bummer. And that kind of sounds like a deal-breaker.”

“Well, we still really like the scenery, and he offered to pop Benadryl if I decide that I can’t live without it.”

Brooke hummed. “Have you?”

“Eh. Still thinking about it.”

“What about your wedding colors? Still thinking about those too?”

Regina sighed. “Yes. I want to do black and white, but I keep seeing all these blue weddings on Pinterest, and they look REALLY good.”

“Well, that’s what Max and Chloe did. And they looked great.”

“I saw the pictures. Max totally pulled it off, but I am not walking down the aisle in a blue dress.”
Brooke snorted as she walked back out of her closet, zipping the back of the dress behind her. “Better?”

Regina grinned, as she looked over the dress. The navy-blue fabric hung from one shoulder, hugging her figure before flaring out slightly at the hips. Despite her protests, the dress was not that short; it ended just a couple of inches above her knees. “That’s more like it,” she encouraged. “I mean, damn, girl. You need to wear that more often.”

“This might be the first time it actually leaves this apartment.” Brooke looked at herself in the mirror, turning to check herself out. “I guess I do look pretty good.”

“Pretty good? Brooke, he’s going to want to take you back to his place as soon as he lays eyes on you.”

“Shut up.” She hesitated, and glanced back at Regina. “... you really think so?”

“Totally. What necklace are you going to wear?”

“Hadn’t thought about it.” Brooke reached out and tugged on the edge of her mirror, opening it to reveal her hidden jewelry cabinet. “Yellow or white gold?”

“White. Definitely white.” Regina stood and walked next to her, examining the cabinet. “That one, right there. And the diamond studs.”

Brooke complied, inserting her earrings before she looped a thin chain around her neck. “Bracelet or watch?”

“This bracelet.” Regina plucked a simple band from a hook. “Now, go get your black pumps and let’s put some makeup on.”

When they finally left her room half an hour later, she looked stunning. Regina’s fiancé turned from his seat on the couch and did a double-take. “Brooke? Is that YOU??”

Her face colored. “Dude, shut up.”

“No, seriously, I don’t even recognize you.” Greg nudged the kids next to him. “What do you guys think?”

His daughter, Haley, nodded and smiled. “Wow, you look pretty.”

“Uh huh.” Aaron just looked bored, as he played on his Game Boy. “Can we get dinner now? I’m hungry.”

“Aaron,” Regina cautioned, “you look at your Aunt Brooke and tell her that she’s beautiful.”

He finally glanced up at her. “Fine. You look more like Belle than the Beast for a change.”

“Ooh, someone’s hangry,” Brooke quipped, as she picked up her purse.

Regina was less amused. “Someone’s going to get a slap upside the head is more like it.”

__________________________

*Just calm down. He’s probably nervous, too.*

Brooke checked her phone again, looking over Dave’s Facebook picture. He had an attractive amount of stubble on his face, and nice hair. He also had full-sleeve tattoos on both arms, which she
wasn’t sure if she cared for, but was willing to look past. And he seemed pretty fit; from what she could tell, he liked CrossFit, and there were pictures of him participating in Tough Mudders.

It’s drinks. And dinner. An hour, two at the most, and Emily promised she would rescue me if I asked her. She took a deep breath, as she looked up at the restaurant. Christ. I don’t even remember what I’m supposed to do. Or say. I’m a social worker, and he’s a mechanic; what the hell are we even supposed to talk about?

Maybe I should just go home

...

No. I’ll never hear the end of it from Regina and Emily if I do. She sighed, as she got out of her car. Let’s just get this over with.

Brooke walked inside and looked around, noticing her date at the bar. He cleans up well, at least, she admitted to herself; he’d put on some nice jeans and a button-up shirt under a blazer, matching the atmosphere of the upscale restaurant they were meeting in. He fingered a beer bottle absently, as he tapped on his phone with one hand.

He finally noticed her as she walked into the bar and stood up straight, sliding his phone back into his pocket as he took her in. “Brooke?” he asked cautiously.

She nodded and forced a smile, clutching her purse in front of her. “That’s me.”

“... wow.” Dave looked her up and down. “I mean, I... ah, jeez,” he muttered, a pained look on his face. “I had a really funny introductory line, and I got distracted and forgot it.”

Brooke snorted in amusement. Okay. Score one for Emily’s dress.

“You can do it later, when you remember.” She paused. “So, I have to put something out front.”

Dave’s face turned cautious. “What’s that?”

“I’m not sure what letter Javier gave you, but he was exaggerating.”

He burst out laughing, as he clapped a hand over his eyes. “Oh, God,” he breathed. “Now you think I’m scatterbrained and a creep. We’re off to a great start. May I please buy you a drink before I make it worse?”

“Well, I’m already here, so why not.”

She stood at the bar next to him and ordered a cocktail. “So, what did Javier tell you about me?” Dave asked, as the bartender fixed the drink.

“That you were the best engine guy in the shop.” She smirked. “And that you play guitar at a club on the weekends, and your last girlfriend left you for another girl.”

He grimaced. “Yea, I never should have told those guys about that,” he sighed. “Can I defend myself? Please?”

Brooke raised an eyebrow. “You didn’t really need to. But I’m eager to hear what you have to say.”

“I knew she was a lesbian before we started dating.”

She blinked. “... must not have been very fun dates.”
“We actually did have fun. She was a great drinking buddy, and could play a mean game of pool.” He nodded. “Her parents were also pretty serious Catholics. And they had control of a trust fund her grandmother left her until she turned twenty-five.”

“Aah.” Brooke leaned back. “And you were... what? Her cover?”

“More or less.” Dave shrugged. “She was eight months away from her birthday, and they were starting to get really suspicious. So she asked for my help, to sell that she had a serious boyfriend.”

Brooke’s cocktail was placed in front of her, and she took a drink. “I hope she was at least nice enough to split some of it with you,” she mentioned. “Lot of effort to put in otherwise.”

“I didn’t ask for any.” Dave sipped from his beer. “She did give me enough to pay off my car loan. She figured it was the least she could do, and it wasn’t that much. But nobody should be in that kind of situation.”

“What situation?”

“Felling like you’re trapped in a bad place with nowhere to go.”

“... huh.” Brooke cocked her head. “How much did Javier tell you about me again?”

“Um, that you were a social worker, a D-cup, and liked Netflix too much.” Dave blinked. “Why?”

She shook her head. “Nothing.”

Dave’s phone started ringing in his pocket. He quickly pulled it out, taking one look at the screen and silencing it. “Sorry.”

Brooke raised an eyebrow. “You got a creditor looking for you?”

“No.” He stuck his phone back in his pocket. “That was my buddy with the emergency phone call, in case you were crazy.”

“Ah.” Brooke smirked and nodded. “My plan to excuse myself to the bathroom and call Javier’s wife to come get me.”

Dave hummed, looking up in thought. “Nice. Less intrusive, too. Should’ve done that instead.”

“Like I said, next time.” She smiled and took another sip of her drink. “So, are we ready to eat?”

An hour later, she left the restaurant behind Dave, still laughing. “You CAN’T be serious,” she chuckled.

“I really wish I was kidding.”

“I mean, I’m not really a car girl, but I still know the difference between a Toyota and a Ford,” she chortled. “How long did it take Javier to figure it out?”

“Almost an hour.” He grinned, as he straightened his jacket. “I wanted to step in after a few minutes, but the floor supervisor wouldn’t let us interfere. Said it would be funnier in the long run.”

Brooke laughed again. “God. I am SO busting his balls when I see him next.”

“As you should.” He stopped, as they got to the parking lot, and retrieved his keys. “That one’s me,
right there.”

She looked over the classic Camaro with an appreciative eye. “Nice.”

“Yea. So, uh...” Dave squirmed. “I had fun tonight. Any chance you’d be up for doing it again?”

Brooke bit her lip, considering her answer. *It was great conversation. He was sweet, and he seems like a really good guy.*

*And he has no idea how fucked up my life is.*

“I, uh...” she hesitated. “I grew up in a cult.”

“Huh?”

“I was born into First Light of Christ.” Brooke shifted from foot to foot, as she confessed. “I had to run away when I was fifteen, so my family didn’t force me to marry a boy I didn’t know. Who proceeded to become a psychotic stalker. They just arrested him earlier this week for planning to kidnap me. And my grandfather, dad, and brother all want to kill me because I put them in jail.”

Dave slowly tilted his head. “Wow.”

“So, yea. I’ve got some real heavy baggage.” She shrugged looking down at her feet. “And... well. Not sure if you still want to hang out or not.”

“Mm.” He scratched the back of his head. “Well, if we’re going for honesty, my mother wants to kill me too, because I refuse to give her money. Between her MLMs and a drinking problem, she’s almost two hundred grand in the hole; she lives in a van somewhere in Salem. She also thinks I have a life insurance policy, and that if I die, she’ll get the money.”

Brooke looked up and cocked her head. “Really?”

“Yea. She cut my brake lines last year. I’ve got a permanent restraining order.” Dave nodded. “Also, my sister hates me because I won’t help fund her meth habit. Last time I saw her, she threw a brick at my head.” He paused. “Actually, your office probably has a file on her. My nephews are in the foster system somewhere.”

“... wow.”

“I know. I’ve got matching sets of luggage too.” He shrugged. “So. Tonight was fun. Any chance you’d be willing to do it again?”

She slowly smiled. “... yea. I think so.”

He smiled back. “How’s group therapy sound?”

“Expensive. I’ll settle for dinner and a movie.”

“Oh, thank God.”

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**Emily:** So? How did last night go?

**Brooke:** It was good. I had fun.

**Emily:** Whose bed are you waking up in?
Brooke: Mine, thank you very much.

Emily: ... alone?

Brooke: Yes! It was the first date!

Emily: Just asking. No need to get defensive :)

Emily: You gonna see him again?

Brooke: Yea, I think so. He was pretty nice.

Emily: Did you see his six-pack?

Brooke: I did not.

Brooke: Wait, have you?

Emily: You realize that he’s shirtless in one of those Facebook pictures, right?

Brooke: I did not. Which one?

Emily: <dave_fb.lnk>

Emily: FUCK

Emily: SHIT

Brooke: What?!?!

Emily: I ACCIDENTALLY LIKED IT

Brooke: ROFLMFAO

Brooke: You can un-like it, you know!

Emily: ... oh, thank God. I didn’t realize that.

Brooke: Of course, he’s still going to get the notification.

Emily: NO HE’S NOT

Brooke: “Hey, Javier, why is your wife hitting Like on the picture of my abs? There something you want to tell me?”

Emily: YOU’RE NOT HELPING

Brooke: No I’m being facetious. ‘Not helping’ will be when I send Javier a screenshot of these texts.

Emily: DON’T YOU DARE
Brooke: Sentencing

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**July, 2030**

“You don’t have to do this.”

“Oh, come on.” Dave rolled his eyes, as he parked in front of the courthouse. “I’m not just going to let you go in there and face him by yourself.”

Brooke smirked. “The DA said he’d be in restraints. I’m not worried about him doing something stupid.”

“This is the sentencing hearing. He’s already been found guilty, so he’s got literally nothing left to lose.” Her boyfriend turned the car off and undid his seatbelt. “Besides, I’ve never actually been to court as a spectator before. I’m kind of looking forward to it.”

“Right.” Brooke followed him out of the car. “Wish I was as excited as you.”

He frowned. “Are you nervous? You seemed fine earlier.”

“Of course I am.” she sighed. “I haven’t spoken to him since I told him to go fuck himself when I was seventeen. I haven’t actually SEEN him since he was pulling my ponytail at summer camp, when I was eight. Somewhere between then and now he became a psychopath, and I’m not really looking forward to being in the same room as him.”

Dave wrapped his arm around her shoulder and tugged her in close. “It’ll be fine,” he assured her quietly. “You’ll finally get to say your piece, he’ll get sent to prison for a couple of decades, and then we can go get some food or something.”

“... yea. Okay.”

They walked into the courthouse, Brooke leading the way through security. Dave, not being fortunate enough to work for the government, had to get the full-body scan while she got waved through. “Thanks, Tom,” she mentioned to the guard working the scanners.

“Yea, no problem.” He gestured down the hall. “Your friends are waiting.”

She blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Your friends,” he repeated, like it was obvious. “They came through a few minutes ago. They’re waiting over there, at the bench.”

Brooke turned her head. “... you have got to be kidding me.”

Dave frowned as he walked up next to her, still pulling his belt back on. “Is... that Emily?”

She didn’t answer as they walked over to the group. Emily was the first one to notice as she stood, a wide smile on her face. Beside her was Regina and Rachel. “You’re almost late,” her boss greeted her.
“What are you guys all doing here?” Brooke asked incredulously.

“To support you. Duh.” Regina chuckled. “And watch the fireworks.”

“What fireworks?”

Regina blinked, glancing at Emily. “Did you not tell her?”

“Nope. Wanted it to be a surprise.” Emily turned to her. “Okay, Brooke. So you’re not allowed to lie at the podium. You’re just going up there and telling the judge about the shit Bobby’s put you through, to make sure he spends a long time in prison.”

Brooke crossed her arms. “I’m not a stranger to court, Emily. I know how this works. I’m only allowed to talk to the judge, not the defendant.”

“I know. But there’s nothing that says we can’t send subliminal messages to set him off.” Emily held up a plastic bag, shaking it, and Brooke listened to the contents as they rattled around. “Gimme your hand. We’ve only got a few minutes.”

“Your honor, Mister Marshall is a troubled man. But he’s not a violent one.”

Brooke felt her eyebrow twitch, as she glared at Bobby’s defense attorney. Really? Does this motherfucker not talk to his client?

She exhaled slowly as she looked at the table’s other occupant. Bobby was wearing an orange jumpsuit, his hands cuffed in front of him as he sat at the table next to his lawyer. He seemed to be sitting as still as possible, watching the judge as his lawyer continued to speak.

“It’s true that he has a criminal history. But it was destruction of property, nothing more. He needs psychiatric help, your honor, not a jail cell.” The lawyer paused. “The fact is that Mister Marshall never came up with any kind of plan to kidnap that social worker. Nothing was premeditated; it was all spur-of-the-moment. He plead guilty to possessing a firearm, nothing more.”

Yea, and the handcuffs were just souvenirs.

She felt a hand wrap around hers and squeeze tightly. Brooke let out a slow breath, as she continued to listen to the lawyer. Who she was now convinced had graduated near the bottom of his class.

“Given his cooperative nature and behavior, we would implore you not to sentence my client to the prison that Miss Richards wants to send him to. It would be far beneficial to Mister Marshall if he was in a facility where he could get help for his issues, not be further punished for his mental health.”

The judge nodded as the lawyer sat down, clearing his throat. “Miss Richards, will you be making a statement?”

The ADA stood. “No, your honor. We’ve decided to have another party speak on the state’s behalf.”

Brooke tensed up, knowing what was coming.

“We would ask Brooke Scott to come to the stand.”

Next to the defense attorney, she watched Bobby’s head whip around in surprise, and she got her first good look at him in almost two decades. His brown hair was still long and shaggy, falling haphazardly around his face, just like it had when they were children. He wore glasses with thick rims, and had several days’ worth of unshaved scruff on his cheeks.
Once he was looking at her, she stood slowly. Emily stood next to her, still holding her hand tightly. As Bobby watched, Emily faced her and gave her a tight hug, making sure than her large rainbow bracelet was visible.

“You got this, babe,” she whispered, just loud enough to be audible, but not loud enough to be noticed by the judge.

Brooke nodded and turned back to the front, feeling her earrings jingle. She usually only wore studs, but Emily had swapped them out with a pair of long earrings that terminated in Gay Pride triangles. They weren’t obnoxiously large, but they were certainly noticeable, especially with how they swung as she walked. She also made sure that her own rainbow bracelet was visible as she passed Bobby’s table, taking her place at the podium.

She didn’t look at him. But she could certainly feel the heat coming from him, as her stared daggers into her back.

Thankfully, the judge wasn’t one that she was familiar with; she mostly appeared in Family Court, not Criminal Court. “Miss Scott, the floor is yours,” he stated.

“Thank you,” she said in a small voice, clearing her throat.

*I got this.*

“Your honor... I’ve spent the past decade in a constant state of worry,” she started. “When I ran away from First Light, my family sued the state to get me back. They spent thousands of dollars of their stolen money, paid a psychiatrist to lie on the stand, and even sent my brother to track me down. Then, when I gave the FBI evidence of that church’s fraud, they tried to sue me for slander.”

She shrugged. “But in all that time, none of them ever really scared me. I knew they hated me, but I also knew that they would never try to hurt me.”

Brooke pointed behind her, at Bobby. “He’s the only one from my old church that makes me afraid.”

*Good. Keep it going.*

“He was the one who sent me my first death threats. I still have them saved on my phone. And I brought them here today. The highlights, anyway.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out the paper she’d printed the previous night, unfolding it. “He ordered me to come home, and told me that if I refused, I would die a sinner’s death. And asked if I thought he wouldn’t kill me, rather than risk being shamed further.”

The judge leaned forward, and she could tell that she had his full attention, as she continued.

“He called me a liar, a deceiver, a Jezebel, and a harlot. He told me that if I didn’t come home, he’d make sure I burned in the hottest level of hell. I was bound to return to him when he said so, and if I didn’t come back, I would die.” She looked up, sticking the paper back in her pocket. “I was only seventeen.”

She paused, taking a deep breath as she forged ahead. “He couldn’t find me. My social worker made sure of that. But he did find my friend. Someone who helped me, but had nothing to do with me leaving First Light. He tracked her down all the way to California and set her girlfriend’s car on fire. And when he was caught, he threatened to kill her, too, while he assaulted a police officer.”

“Your honor.” Brooke paused, as Bobby’s lawyer stood. “My client’s record is hardly-”
“You were the one who admitted your client had a previous criminal record,” the judge rebuked. “You’ve made your statement, counselor. Sit back down and let her finish.”

Brooke made an effort not to smirk, as the lawyer took his seat and she resumed talking. “When he went to prison the first time, your honor, I thought that it would be the end of it. I know California offers mental health services to inmates, so I figured that he’d get some real help, and get over the fact that the marriage I was forced into at the age of eight was not binding in any way. And that his delusions were nothing more than that; delusions.”

“And then he came back.” She swallowed nervously. “And this time, he hired a private investigator to find me. I haven’t had a good night’s sleep in months, your honor. I keep having nightmares that he’ll get out of prison and try to kidnap me again. And that next time, he’ll succeed.”

She looked over her shoulder, finally making eye contact with Bobby. She could see that his face was red, and he appeared to be absolutely furious.

*Now, the coup de grâce.*

“I actually feel sorry for him, your honor.” Brooke turned back to the judge. “He’s been brainwashed by his family, and the toxic church we grew up in. But so were a lot of people, and they all overcame it. He either can’t, or won’t. I know it’s not very Christian of me, but you need to put him away.” She paused. “Because it was only by dumb luck that he screwed up his second chance at kidnapping me. Please don’t give him another shot.”

The judge nodded as she turned away from the podium and started walking back to her seat.

Brooke thought she’d be ready, if Bobby tried something. She was wrong. He exploded out of his chair as she passed his table, and she barely had any time to react.

“YOU ARE MINE!!” he screamed in her face. Brooke yelped, and tried to jump back, but he grabbed her arm and they both fell to the ground. She recognized that people around the room were yelling, but she couldn’t hear them as Bobby clutched her collar with cuffed hands. “WE ARE BOUND BY A HOLY COVENANT!! YOU AND YOUR FILTHY DYKE ARE NOT ALLOWED TO DISHONOR ME!!”

She didn’t reply, as she struggled to pull his hands off her. She reached up with her free hand and clawed at his face, but he didn’t seem to notice as her nails left deep, bloody scratches.

“I WILL HAVE YOU!!” He continued to scream, as officers started grabbing his jumpsuit and yelling loudly for him to let go. “YOU CANNOT ESCAPE THE LIGHT, IN THIS LIFE OR THE-”

Starting to panic, Brooke fell back on another self-defense move she’d learn as a last resort; she jammed her thumbnail into Bobby’s eye as hard as she could.

His yelling turned into screams of pain, as his hands finally came loose and the court officers manage to pull him off of her. They piled on top of him as she scrambled away, finally running into the other table.

All she could hear was yelling, as the ADA and her assistant pulled her to her feet and started pushing her out of the courtroom. She was intercepted halfway to the door by Emily and Dave, as well as the rest of her friends, and they carried her away.

“The doctor reported that he has a four-millimeter corneal laceration that will require surgery.”
Across from her, James Amber smirked as he read his phone. “As well as various bruises that came about when he resisted the court officers.”

Brooke shrugged, as she sat on the couch in his office, sandwiched between Emily and Dave. Rachel stood, leaning against the wall beside Elizabeth and Regina.

“It was self-defense,” Brooke said quietly.

James rolled his eyes. “Relax. We’re not charging you.”

“So... that little stunt isn’t going to score him brownie points with the judge?” Emily asked hopefully.

“I spoke to him already, on the way out, and he made it clear that he had every intention of making sure Bobby spent a long time in prison,” Elizabeth assured her. “I imagine that he won’t get out for at least twenty years. Probably longer.”

“What a shame,” Rachel remarked dryly.

“Yes, I imagine we’ll all have trouble sleeping tonight,” James lamented. “Also, Brooke; your sexuality is your own business, and certainly none of mine, but I was under the impression that David here was your boyfriend.” He gestured to her ears. “Care to explain yourself?”

She quickly took her earrings out. “Can’t a girl just support LGBT rights without having her accessories questioned?” she asked.

“You realize I reviewed the security footage, right?” James slowly turned his head to look at Emily. “All of it?”

She squirmed. “... are we in trouble?”

“No. That being said, don’t ever do it again.”

Brooke nodded as she slipped off her bracelet. “So. Now what?”

“Nothing.” He slid his phone back into his pocket. “Mister Marshall hasn’t been formally sentenced yet, so he’ll have to come back, but you won’t; your statement is already part of the record.”

She tilted her head. “I can’t come see that?”

“Technically, yes. You could.” James folded his arms. “But I would ask that you do not. Your presence has already disrupted the judicial process enough.”

“We’ll record it,” Elizabeth assured her. “You can watch him accept a twenty-year prison sentence in high-def footage whenever you want.”

“Works for me.”

Max: So?

Brooke: Well, if he does try to burn down Chloe’s truck again, it won’t be for another twenty years or so.

Max: Nice! Good work convincing the judge!

Brooke: I don’t know if it was that or Bobby trying to strangle me when I went back to my seat.
Max: Jesus!! Are you okay?!

Brooke: I’m fine. He’s not. I stuck my thumbnail in his eye.

Max: ... wow, I just shivered so hard.

Brooke: It didn’t have as much give as I would’ve thought.

Max: Okay, stop. Getting uncomfortable.

Brooke: Hopefully, he is, too. May that be the last I see of him.

Max: Well, by the time he gets out, he’ll be in his fifties. You don’t hear of many geriatric kidnappers, so I think you’ll be safe.

Brooke: I know, right? Hopefully he comes down with a nice case of dementia or something.

Max: Speaking of which, how’s your dad?

Brooke: Don’t know, don’t care.

Max: Is he still in prison?

Brooke: No, they stuck him in a secure hospital. They said it’s highly unlikely that he’ll ever leave.

Max: And your brother?

Brooke: Still has a few of years left on his sentence.

Max: I thought he was getting out soon?

Brooke: Dumbass violated the restraining order by sending me death threats. Judge gave him an extra 24 months for being a moron.

Brooke: As far as I’m concerned, he can rot with my dad and grandfather.

Brooke: And if he does get out, my boyfriend has said that he’s like to have a chat with him. Someplace secluded, with a pair of pliers and a blowtorch.

Max: Oh! Pulp Fiction! I finally saw that movie!

Brooke: I’m proud of you?

Max: I’ve got three kids, man. You know how hard it is for me to actually sit down and watch a rated-R movie?

Brooke: Fair enough.

Max: Thank you.

Brooke: ... it was like sticking my thumb through a cherry tomato.

Max: OH MY GOD WHY
I feel kind of bad. I ran through this storyline really quick.

I'm not running out of material, I promise. I still have plenty to go through. I just didn't have anything for our other characters during this timeframe in the story.

I'm also a little distracted by a new story I'm working on. Not anywhere near ready to start posting yet, but I'm making good progress (writer's block is a bitch). My hope is that it'll be ready to start posting by the time I finish with this one.
“I really don’t think that’s a good idea, Jules.”

Juliet frowned as she relaxed into her couch, her phone in one hand and a tumbler full of bourbon in the other. “Why not? It’s a perfectly legitimate request.”

“Because in three weeks, the network president has to be in Washington to meet with congressmen about...I don’t know, something political and the FCC,” her producer reminded her. “There’s a big picture to think about. Do you really want to put one of those congressmen on blast before that meeting?”

“Yes,” Juliet answered immediately. “I want to light his ass up. I want to drag him in front of his constituents and poke him with a sharp stick until he tells our cameras why he thought it was okay to fuck prostitutes while his wife was going through chemotherapy.”

“...much as I hate your answer, I can only imagine the ratings we’d get from that segment.”

Juliet smirked. “Maybe I should be my own producer.”

“Jules, you’d quit in tears if you had my job.” Her producer sighed. “Look, can I at least run it by the boss first?”

“If it’ll make you feel better.” Juliet rolled her eyes. “He’ll spout off some nonsense, I’m sure, about staying in the good graces of the RNC and not pissing off the wrong people. Just move your head up and down while he talks, then let me know when you leave his office.”

“Oh, okay, fine. We’ll start working on it tomorrow.”

“See you then.” She hung up her phone and took a healthy sip of her drink. “Prostitutes,” she muttered. “Whatever happened to fucking interns?”

Juliet pondered the segment as she stared out the window of her residence. Long gone were the days of her tiny little apartment; as an anchor with her own time slot, Juliet was living large, with her penthouse that overlooked Puget Sound. Tasteful art hung on the walls, rather than posters, and her nice furniture wasn’t from the nearby Ikea. As far as anyone was concerned, it was the pinnacle of her career in journalism.

That must explain why I hate this place so much.

Juliet sighed as she sipped from her glass, slouching further into the couch. She hated her apartment, her art, her nice car, all of it. Some days she only really felt happy when she was at the station, working with her team on a new story. She often spent upwards of sixteen hours at work, simply because she couldn’t stand to go home; she’d spent more than one night on the couch in her office.

But she couldn’t avoid it at the moment. She’d been pressured into taking a personal day, since she
hadn’t taken one in over a year. And she’d wasted most of it by working from home and drinking bourbon.

_Christ, I can’t wait to go into work tomorrow._ She smirked. _Gonna come up with all kinds of uncomfortable questions for Congressman can’t-control-his-dick._

Juliet perused her tablet absently for the next hour, pausing only to fill her glass from the slowly emptying bottle beside her. The clock was just rolling past eight when her doorbell rang.

She picked her head up, confused. _Who the hell is that?_ she wondered, as she opened the doorbell app on her tablet.

Dana stared back at her. And Juliet did a double-take at the expression on her face. The girl looked like she was about to fall apart, as she patiently looked into the camera with an incredibly crestfallen expression. And even through the video’s mediocre resolution, she could see the red rims around her eyes.

Juliet hit the button to unlock her apartment, and got up to get the door. Her friend opened it slowly as she got closer, and she finally noticed the duffle bag over her shoulder. “Dana?” Juliet asked, concerned. “What are you doing here so late?”

“... can I stay in your guest room tonight?” Dana asked quietly. “Please?”

“What’s wrong?” Juliet looked at her bag. “Are you okay? What happened? And what’s with the bag?”

“I, uh...” Dana’s voice cracked as she sniffed deeply, rubbing her nose on her sleeve. “I think I’m getting a divorce.”

“You don’t have any wine?”

Juliet shook her head, as she put down a second glass in front of Dana. She’d dropped her friend’s bag in the guest bedroom, and sat her at the kitchen island. “I don’t drink wine. All I have is bourbon.”

Dana shrugged. “Fine.”

Juliet poured her a half-glass, and Dana immediately picked it up to take a healthy sip. Her face scrunched as she swallowed. “Oof.”

“Sorry. If I’d known you were coming, I would have picked up some Chardonnay.” Juliet refilled her own glass and set the bottle down. “Are you... okay?”

Dana sighed, as she took another sip. “Not really,” she muttered dejectedly.

“What do you mean, you’re getting a divorce?”

Her friend stared into the glass of liquor in front of her. “I mean, I’m pretty sure my marriage is over.”


Dana didn’t answer.

“Did Trevor cheat on you?” Juliet pressed. “Is he abusing you? Dana, did he kick you out of—”
“No,” Dana interrupted. “He didn’t cheat. He’s not abusive, either. And he didn’t kick me out. Trevor didn’t do anything wrong.”

Juliet blinked. “Then... what happened?”

“... I don’t know,” Dana murmured. “We were fine, until a few months ago. And then, we just... weren’t.” She swallowed. “We were annoyed at each other all the time. For stupid shit that didn’t matter, like what TV show we were watching and what we were having for dinner. And then he’d leave, on a weekend trip to go check on his other stores, and I’d dread it when he came back. And then he started traveling more and more...”

Dana glanced at Juliet. “We had a really big argument tonight, during dinner. He finally said he’s been on the road more because he preferred it to being home with me. And that when he was away... he didn’t miss me.”

Juliet’s face fell. “Shit. I’m so sorry, Dana.”

“Yea.” She sighed. “We kind of laid everything out, and when we were done, we both admitted that we didn’t really love each other anymore.” She lifted the glass, taking a healthy swallow before she resumed speaking. “He left for a long weekend to his stores in Portland. I just couldn’t stay in our house anymore, and Courtney just had her baby, so...”

“I get it.” Juliet nodded. “You can stay for as long as you want.”

“Are you sure?”

Juliet snorted. “Of course I’m sure. You don’t have to suffer in an empty shell of a house.”

“... thank you.” Dana sniffled again, wiping her nose on the back of her hand. “I, uh, really appreciate it.”

“Absolutely.” Juliet paused. “Um... where’s Sophie?”

“At a girl scout camp for the next ten days.” Dana sighed. “I don’t even know how we’re gonna tell her. Trevor and I have been so good about keeping up appearances in front of her... God, she’s gonna be devastated.”

Juliet laid a hand on Dana’s arm. “She’ll get over it,” she assured her.

Dana shot Juliet a look. “I was there when your parents got divorced,” she reminded her. “I know what you went through, remember? You fell asleep crying at my house more than once.”

“My parents were assholes who weaponized me against each other every chance they got,” Juliet countered. “There’s a reason I don’t speak to either of them anymore. Are you and Trevor going to be like that?”

“No,” Dana said instantly. “I can’t do that to her. And I know Trevor won’t, either.”

“Then she’ll be fine. She’s ten, she’ll adjust.” Juliet smirked. “And then she’ll figure out that she gets two Christmases, and two birthdays, and she’ll be over the moon.”

Dana snorted, as she stared into her glass. “Thanks.”

“Silver linings.” Juliet sipped her drink. “Have you eaten yet?”

“I’m not hungry.”
“That wasn’t what I asked.”

Dana glanced at her. “… not since breakfast.”

Juliet stood, walking over to her fridge. “What do you want?”

“Really, Jules, I’m not-”

“You’re eating something.” She opened the door and scanned her shelves. Then closed it and checked the freezer. “Um... you’ve got the option of pepperoni Hot Pockets or a frozen four-cheese pizza.”

Dana smirked. “Wow. You sound like the people who frequent Trevor’s dispensaries.”

They wound up splitting the frozen pizza and talking for almost an hour, before Dana asked to go to sleep.

Juliet followed suit, but not before sending a text to her producer that she’d be taking the next day off, too. She put the phone on silent after assuring him that she hadn’t been kidnapped, then turned out the light to try and sleep.

After a couple of hours, she got back up to get a drink from the fridge. She silently opened the door, not wanting to wake Dana as she crept down the hall to the kitchen. Halfway there, though, she saw that a light in the kitchen was on.

She peeked around the corner, and froze.

Dana was awake. And she was standing at the sink, filling a glass of water. In a white tank top, with no bra underneath, and boy shorts. Juliet watched silently, heat filling her face as Dana lifted the glass and took a long drink.

Then she turned around and crept back to her room just as quietly, closing the door gently before getting back under the covers. Juliet listened silently as Dana returned to the guest room and closed the door.

*She still looks good.*

...

*God damn it.*

Courtney: Dana’s staying at your condo?

Juliet: Yea, for the past couple of days. How’d you know?

Courtney: Bryan called Trevor, to see if they wanted to have dinner next week. He told us what was going on.

Courtney: How is she?

Juliet: Not great. Mopey. Had to bribe her out of bed with breakfast this morning.

Juliet: She’s sitting on my balcony now, drinking wine from the bottle.
Courtney: Shit.

Courtney: Is it cool if I come visit?

Juliet: Yea, of course.

Juliet: Maybe stop by a liquor store and pick up some more Chardonnay.

Courtney: You think that’s a good idea?

Juliet: Sophie’s at her summer camp for another week. Dana can get day-drunk for a little bit.

Courtney: Fair enough. Man, this sucks.

Courtney: She was seriously the last person in our group I thought this would happen to.

Juliet: ... Taylor?

Courtney: Can you blame me?

Juliet: The fact that we both had the same thought means that I clearly cannot.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry, guys. For the longer-than-usual wait time for an update.

Life just got in the way, as it sometimes does. In this case, it was a mixture of traveling across the country for work, finishing a grad school application, and dealing with a fair amount of personal stuff. Nothing bad, everything is fine, it was just a lot to handle.

Hopefully this chapter makes up for it :)

August, 2032

“And what’s her name?”

The girl smiled as she pointed to the crude drawing. “Princess Harriett,” she informed Rachel.

“Oh?” Rachel smiled back, as she squatted on the child-sized chair and hunched over the drawing table. “And what is she the princess of?”

“The world.” Still smiling, the child took a blue crayon and drew a big circle around the figure. “See?”

“The WHOLE world?” Rachel gasped dramatically. “Even Oregon?”

“Yea!”

“But where’s her castle?” Rachel frowned, as she looked over the paper. “A princess has to live in a castle, right?”

“Oh huh.” The girl picked up another crayon. “I’ll draw a big castle!”

Rachel watched her carefully, as she drew a rough rectangle, then started adding towers to make it look like a castle. “How are you liking Doctor Christy?” she asked.

“She’s nice,” she said distractedly, as she drew. “We talk a lot.”

“Oh, yea? What do you guys talk about?”

The girl shrugged. “Stuff,” she muttered.

Don’t push. Not with her.

“What’s the name of Harriett’s castle?” Rachel asked.

“I dunno.” She paused. “What about Castle Big?”

“Castle Big?” Rachel couldn’t help but grin. “Is it because it’s a big castle?”

The girl finally broke back into a smile. “Yes.”

“Ahem.” Rachel glanced up to see the doctor standing in the doorway, waiting politely. “Miss Amber?”

“Yea.” Rachel stood awkwardly. “Keep drawing, Melissa. I’ll be back in one second, okay?”

The girl hummed as Rachel made her way over to the doctor. “She seems better,” Rachel said quietly.

“We’re making progress.” Christy looked back at the four-year-old. “But she’s going to need professional help for a long time. Maybe even the rest of her life.”
“Yea.” Rachel looked at Melissa sadly. “I know.”

“Her father...” Christy hesitated. “I’m sorry. I know I’m supposed to remain impartial. But I have to ask.”

“I spoke to the DA yesterday, about the case. I know they want to throw the book at him, but I can’t in good conscience agree let her take the stand.” Rachel shook her head. “Even if she was ready and willing to talk about it. She’s only four, for Christ’s sake.”

Christy looked worried. “Will they still have enough to convict him?”

“Between her medical records, and your testimony, and my testimony? Absolutely.” Rachel nodded. “My father put a plea deal on the table for him; twenty-five years, instead of life without parole. He’d be an idiot not to take it.”

“And her mother?”

“Already pled out. She’ll do a mandatory twenty years.” Rachel looked back at Melissa. “I see some dark shit in this job, but this almost made me start smoking again.”

Christy still looked apprehensive. “As far as placing her...”

Rachel was already shaking her head. “We’ve got restrictions about who can accept sexually abused children,” she said. “And the people who meet that criteria are stretched thin. She has to stay in the group home for now. I hate it just as much as you do, I promise.”

The doctor sighed. “Right.” She glanced at her. “You know she really looks forward to seeing you?”

Rachel snorted. “Because I bring her McDonalds?”

“No. The caretakers at the home told me that she asks a lot, about when she’s going to see you next.” Christy smiled. “You’ve got a little admirer.”

“Really?”

“Is it so surprising?” Christy tilted her head. “You pretty much held her hand for a week straight. She slept on the couch in your office while we were waiting for the group home to be ready for her. You might be the only adult who’s ever actually been nice to her in her whole life.”

Rachel bit her lip. “... that’s my job, Christy.”

“And you went above and beyond for her.” She smirked. “I know you don’t have to keep coming back here, either. You’ve got a dozen social workers in your office that could be here right now.”

“Are you getting at something here?”

The doctor shrugged. “I’m just saying.”

Rachel left soon afterwards, heading home. But she couldn’t keep what Christy had said from her mind.

Christy hadn’t been wrong. Ever since Stacy had been promoted, and Rachel had become the office supervisor, she’d taken a hard backseat to field work. Even with the First Light teenagers; Brooke had them well in hand, to the point where the younger social worker had her implicit trust.
When the call had come in about the four-year-old girl who told an officer about “playing mommy and daddy” with her father and his friends while her mother smoked white powder, it shouldn’t have been Rachel taking it. But the on-call social worker had experienced a sudden death in the family, and she had been the only one free. So she’d made the drive to the hospital, to speak to Melissa and the doctors.

Melissa hadn’t been the first abused child she’d dealt with. But she had been one of the youngest. Rachel had carried her through that entire week; she’d even slept in the office with her, while they waited for a bed to free up at the group home. And Melissa was the only child their office cared for that she personally visited; all the others were delegated to the social workers under her.

Placing her in a foster home wasn’t an option. Melissa still required immediate access to mental health professionals, and whoever she lived with needed special training. Few foster families qualified, and none of the ones that did had any free space in their homes.

And Christy hadn’t been wrong. Something lurched in Rachel’s heart every time she went to see the child.

_I have that training. Hell, our office gives that training._ Rachel drummed her fingers on the steering wheel, as she waited for a light to change.

_I’ve got mental health experience. There’s a child psychologist’s office twenty minutes from our house._

_Stop. You can’t do this._

... 

Okay, technically I could. But I shouldn’t.

... right?

She jumped, as a horn sounded behind her; she hadn’t noticed the light turn green. She quickly accelerated through the intersection.

Ten minutes later, she pulled into the driveway. As she walked inside, she saw Steph sitting at the kitchen island, holding a phone with one hand and waving her iPad around with the other.

“I don’t give a damn what Jackie said,” Steph snapped as Rachel closed the door. “If it was up to Jackie, all of our characters would have the emotional depth of a kiddie pool. She’s a terrible writer, and as far as I can tell, the only reason she still has her job is because she’s fucking John.”

Rachel snorted in amusement, as she dropped her purse on the counter. Steph beamed and waved, smiling widely. “Yes, she is, Kyle. Everyone in the office knows that they go fool around in the back of John’s car over lunch. But that is neither here nor there. I’m not changing the character, or the backstory. Deep, personal trauma shapes people, and the character needs a reason to be passionate. And Jackie needs to stop reading old Danielle Steele novels and figure out what makes real people tick.”

Steph listened to the other end of the phone for a few seconds.

“Well, tough shit. It’s my call, not hers, and certainly not John’s. Tell her to either learn to write better, or fuck her way higher on the company ladder. But remind her that Audis have really small back seats.” Steph finally hung up, dropping the phone back on the counter and heaving a sigh.

“I love it when you get all bitchy.” Rachel opened the fridge and grabbed a beer. “You thirsty?”
“I’ve already had three of them just trying to deal with that idiot.” Steph dragged her hand down her face. “This new girl thinks that the main character shouldn’t have such a tragic backstory, because it’s too sad and it makes her cry. We’re making an emotional game, so I’m not sure why she thinks that’s bad.”

“Mm.” Rachel twisted the cap off, as she came around the counter and kissed her girlfriend on the lips. “What’s it about?”

“A lot of stuff that’s very upsetting. And possibly aliens.”

She frowned. “Wait, you didn’t get roped into that ‘For Earth’ sequel Mark was trying to get you on board with, did you?”

“He didn’t get me, did he?” Steph smirked. “If, by some miracle, it does get the green light? That game’s gonna be a shit show.”

“With all the original writers that they don’t have? Fuck, no. If, by some miracle, it does get the green light? That game’s gonna be a shit show.”

Steph smiled. “How was work?”

Rachel sighed, as she sat down next to Steph. “It sucked.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really.” Rachel paused. “Hey, what you said before. About personal trauma shaping people.”

Steph tilted her head. “What about it?”

“You really think that’s true?”

“Oh, yea?” She smirked. “You’re living proof of that, babe.”

“How?”

“Why did you decide to become a social worker again?”

“... oh.” Rachel leaned back. “Good point.”

Steph nodded. “Why do you ask?”

“What if it’s really, really bad trauma?” Rachel asked quietly. “People can’t overcome some shit.”

“People can overcome anything,” Steph answered. “People beat ridiculous odds all the time. Amputees climb Everest, immigrant refugees become doctors, the poor become rich... history is full of people who overcame shit that should have broken them.”

Rachel pursed her lips, then nodded. “True.”

“Hey.” Steph leaned forward. “What’s going on? I don’t think I’ve seen you like this before. Is it another First Light kid?”

“No. Brooke has them under control.” Rachel played with her fingers. “Shit, she’s got a better grip on them than I did at her age.”

“Well, she’s got more experience than you when it comes to her old church.”

“I know.”

Steph watched her carefully, looking her up and down. “Seriously, babe. What’s wrong?”
“I’ve signed NDAs too, Steph.”

“Yea, but this is the first time I’ve seen you bring work home like this. And you’ve been lost in your head a lot over the past few weeks. You can’t at least tell me what you’re thinking about?”

Rachel bit her lip. “Sorry.”

“... okay.” Steph sighed as she picked her tablet back up, tapping it a few times. “Oh, by the way, we need to send out the presents for the twins this week, or else they won’t have them for their birth—”

“How would you feel about adopting a kid?”

Rachel couldn’t say who was more surprised at her blurted-out question, her or Steph. Her girlfriend looked up from the iPad, not even blinking. “... why?”

“Something someone said to me today.” Rachel averted her eyes. “Forget it. It’s stupid.”

“Babe.” Steph craned her neck, forcing Rachel to meet her gaze. “Is that what you’ve been thinking about?”

“... maybe.”

“Isn’t taking in a kid... I don’t know, a conflict of interest or something?”

“Once everything is resolved, not really. It’s not unheard of, either.” Rachel shrugged. “Like I said, forget it.”

“No, I’m not going to forget it.” Steph set the iPad down and folded her arms. “You’ve worked with hundreds of kids. Hell, probably thousands at this point. We’ve been together for almost eleven years, and in all that time, I’ve never heard you express any interest in children. Having them, or otherwise.” She paused. “What’s going on?”

“I can’t—”

“Tell me a hypothetical story.”

Rachel blinked. “What?”

“Tell me a hypothetical story,” Steph repeated. “I don’t want to know if it’s true or not. But tell me, hypothetically, what could be going on that’s got you thinking like this.”

Rachel was highly conflicted as she wrestled with herself. But after a few seconds she relented, sighed, and started talking.
August 2032

“Can I play in the ball pit?”

Rachel smiled sadly at Melissa through the rearview mirror, as she drove her car. “Sorry, kiddo. This McDonalds doesn’t have a ball pit.”


“I don’t know.” Rachel shrugged. “We’ll go to the one with the ball pit next time, okay?”

“Okay.” The child perked up. “Can I get an ice cream?”

“You can if you finish your happy meal.” Rachel turned into the parking lot. “Come on, let’s eat.”

Melissa pushed herself out of the booster seat as Rachel opened the back door for her, and dutifully held her hand as they walked inside. Rather than go to the counter to order, they hung an immediate left and went straight for the table.

Steph and another social worker, Casey, were waiting for them. “Hey Melissa!” she greeted her. “How are you doing?”

“Good.” Melissa cocked her head. “Are you here for lunch too?”

“We sure are.” Casey smiled. “Do you want your chicken nuggets again?”

Melissa nodded.

“Okay, I’ll go get it.” Casey glanced at Rachel. “What about you?”

Rachel pulled out a twenty and passed it to her, as she craned her neck to check the menu. “A number five with a Diet Coke. And whatever Steph wants.”

“A number six,” Steph added. “With a Sprite.”

Casey nodded and left the three of them alone, as Rachel smiled and squeezed Melissa’s shoulder. “Melissa, this is my girlfriend, Steph.”

She frowned. “Steph?”

“Yep.” Steph smiled, as she folded her hands on top of her iPad. “It’s nice to meet you, Melissa.”

“That’s a funny name.”

A snort came from Steph’s nose. “So I’ve heard.”

Melissa frowned, as her eyes found the iPad. And the white pencil sitting next to it. “What’s that?”

“Yea, why do you have that?” Rachel frowned. “I thought you had the day off.”

“I do. You guys took a while, so I was doing some detail work on a character.” Steph slid the iPad
and pencil to the side. “Sorry.”

“Why does your pen look weird?” Melissa asked.

Steph picked it up and held it out to her. “It’s an Apple Pen,” she explained. “I use it to draw.”

Melissa took it, turning the stylus over with a frown. After a few seconds, she put the tip on the placemat and scribbled with it.

“Oh no no,” Steph said quickly, as she laid a hand on Melissa’s to stop her. “Please don’t do that, sweetie, you’ll damage the tip.”

“It doesn’t work,” Melissa pouted.

“It only works on a tablet like this one.” Steph slid the iPad back over and hit the power button. The screen turned on, revealing her sketch program with a character Rachel couldn’t identify; a female warrior, wearing black and green armor, with white angel’s wings extending from her shoulders. She held a pair of short swords, one in each hand, and seemed to be standing on a fantasy battlefield.

Steph put the tip of the Apple pen down on a corner of the screen and scribbled back and forth, a faint black line tracing across the drawing. “See?” she said to Melissa. “It doesn’t work on paper.”

Melissa blinked as she leaned towards the tablet. “Who’s that?” she asked, her interest clearly piqued.

“That’s, uh...” Steph quickly hit the Undo arrow in the corner of her screen, before she continued. “Her name is Kara. She’s a Valkyrie.”

“What’s a Valkyrie?”

“A Norse warrior princess,” Steph explained. “She can fly, and hit people with lightning.”

Melissa looked up at Steph with wide eyes. “She’s a princess?”

“Oh, there we go,” Rachel smiled at Steph. “Melissa likes drawing princesses.”

Steph smiled, looking back at Melissa. “Do you like to draw?”

“Uh-huh.” Melissa glanced between the iPad and Steph. “Did you draw her?”

“I did.”

“Cooooool.”

“Do you want to try?” Steph asked, holding up the pen.

“Yes,” Melissa replied, nodded enthusiastically.

Steph tapped the screen a few times, saving her work and bringing up a blank page. “Here you go,” she said, gently placing the white stylus in Melissa’s tiny hand. The four-year-old gripped it tightly as Steph guided her hand onto the tablet. “Give it a shot.”

Melissa pushed down on the pen, and a huge spot followed the stylus tip as she drew. “Oops.”

“You’re pushing down a little too hard.” Steph hit the Undo arrow, and took Melissa’s hand as she showed her. “Here, use gentle pressure. See?”
The line flowed much more smoothly, as Melissa started drawing.

Steph and Melissa spent almost the whole hour on the tablet, even while eating. Melissa seemed to enjoy her time, as Steph helped her draw the princess, adding details and color as the four-year-old dictated. When lunch was over, Melissa hugged Steph, and elicited a promise that she would get a printed copy of her drawing as soon as possible.

Casey took Melissa back to the group home, Steph getting into Rachel’s car as the other social worker drove away. “Okay,” she said as she closed the door.

Rachel looked at her. “Okay... what?”

“I mean... okay.” Steph bit her lip. “I never thought it would be our thing, like Max and Victoria. But that kid is adorable. So... if you really want to do this, I’m on board.”

“She needs a LOT of help,” Rachel cautioned. “Seriously. She might need to see a professional for the rest of her life.”

“The two of us combined make enough to get her whatever she needs.” Steph looked back at Rachel. “I work mostly from home anyway, at this point. I’m in the office, like, twice a week.”

“You’ll have to go through the training we give to new foster families.”

“Oh, no, how will I ever cope?”

Rachel bit her lip. “I... I do want to do this,” she finally said quietly. “I know we’ve never talked about it before. But I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it for the past week. I really, really want to do this.”

“Then... I want to do it with you.” Steph reached over and grabbed Rachel’s hand. “So... what do we do now?”

“Get a lawyer,” Rachel said immediately. “And start scheduling home visits.”

Steph rolled her eyes. “Call Brooke. She’s coming over for dinner with Dave in a few days anyway.”

“Can’t be her. Or anyone from my office.” Rachel sighed. “I’ll have to call Stacy, and get one from another part of the state, so nobody can claim impropriety. And we’ll need to get you scheduled for the foster parent training.”

“Okay.” Steph let go of Rachel’s hand and pulled out her phone. “I’ll call Max, and get the name of the guy she used for Faith. You can call your boss.”

Ultimately, it wound up being Rachel’s former ward that did the home visit anyway.

Rachel did a double-take as she opened the door to see her subordinate. “What are you doing here?”

“Miss Rachel Amber. What a pleasure to meet you.” Brooke smiled widely. “My name is Brooke Scott, and I’m a social worker. You should have been told that a home visit was scheduled for this week?”

“This isn’t funny.” Rachel folded her arms. “You can’t do this. I called Stacy to-”
“Yea, Stacy called me after you called her,” Brooke interrupted. “She said, and I quote, ‘the girl’s parents are in jail, and we don’t have anyone else who can take her, so nobody gives a shit’. And then told me to go do the home visit when I had a chance.”

Rachel’s face twisted as she tried to come up with an argument. “I don’t want the judge to accuse me of.”

“Dude, it’s YOU,” Brooke emphasized. “There isn’t a Family Court judge in the state who will accuse you of using the system for your own benefit. Now, are you going to let me in or what?”

Defeated, Rachel stepped aside and let Brooke in. “Do you need anything? Coffee?”

“Please, Miss Amber, you’re not allowed to bribe a state employee.” Brooke pointed. “I see you have a pet. Do you usually keep it muzzled when you’re home?”

Steph sat up from her seat on the couch, lowering her tablet. “Fuck did you just call me?”

“Oh, cursing. We expect better from a prospective foster parent.” Brooke pretended to scribble on her notepad. “Do you still smoke that dank bud, Miss Gingrich?”

“Are you having fun?” Rachel asked before Steph could reply. “Enjoying your temporary authority over your boss?”

“Immensely.” Brooke grinned. “Now, Miss Gingrich, if you do still get baked in your off time, I’m going to need a sample. Preferably pre-rolled.”

Steph stood. “You were a lot more adorable when you were a teenager.”

“I get that from literally nobody.” Brooke smirked. “Okay, for real. You don’t still have pot, right?”

“I stopped smoking years ago.” Steph waved her arm. “Feel free to search the house.”

“This isn’t a raid, I’m not going to tear the place apart.” Brooke glanced at Rachel. “Is there even a point to this visit? You literally wrote the guidelines on what we’re supposed to look for. I feel like I’m trying to explain cooking to Martha Stewart. You cannot POSSIBLY have me believe that your place isn’t already up to our standards.”

Rachel sighed. “Yea, I went through it last week.” she admitted. “But you still need to do a thorough job, Brooke. I don’t want a judge tossing anything out because you didn’t do your due diligence.”

“I will.”

Brooke proceeded to go through their entire house over the course of the next couple of hours. She seemed to enjoy asking Rachel and Steph a more than usual amount of personal questions, interrogating them about their living and financial situations. Steph was very put-off, though Rachel answered each one easily.

“Oh, I think I’m all done.” Brooke closed her notepad. “Any questions?”

Rachel smirked. “How fast can you clean out your desk?”

“Yea, yea. I need to sit for a minute.” Brooke set down her things and plopped onto a chair at their kitchen table. “I’m exhausted.”

“It’s three in the afternoon,” Steph pointed out. “Dave keeping you up that late?”
“No. School is.” Brooke rubbed her forehead. “I, uh... I decided that I want a second Masters.”

Rachel arched her eyebrows. “Really? What made you decide that?”

“Your dad.” Brooke smirked, as she met Rachel’s gaze. “We were at court a couple of months ago, for the Higgins case, and we got to chatting while we waited for the judge. I made a joke about him running for Congress, and he thought it was funny.”

“You’re not the first, and it’s usually not a joke.” Rachel sat down beside her. “I know the DNC has approached him before, about running for a higher office. Several times, actually.”

“He told me. I guess they’re actually bugging him about running for Governor next year.” Brooke nodded. “He told them that he wasn’t interested. I mentioned something about the current Governor being an idiot, on account of cutting funds for social work and welfare so they could build that hundred-million-dollar stadium in Portland.”

“It’s for an NFL team that will bring a shitload of money to the economy,” Steph cut in, as she took her own seat. “It’s not a terrible idea.”

Brooke shot her a glare. “Tell you what; come with me, to the food bank, and explain to the single mother who can barely feed her kids that the stadium will help make rich people richer.”

Rachel laid a hand on Steph’s arm before she could retort. “What did my dad say?”

“That if I didn’t like it, I should change it, instead of complaining about it.” Brooke rubbed her hands together. “He said I was young, and picked a good job to get familiar with the way the government works. Told me that if I kept at it, I could theoretically run for office someday.”

Steph raised an eyebrow. “You want to be Governor?”

“Ah, I don’t know.” Brooke sighed. “But I’ve already got the one Masters. I mean, yea, I’ll have to write ANOTHER thesis, but the classes to get an Master’s in Public Administration aren’t too bad. And it could help at work, or at least open a few more doors.” She looked back at Rachel. “Is that dumb? Am I being dumb?”

“Of course not,” Rachel assured her. “My dad knows a fair amount about politics. He does have to run for re-election every few years. If you’re interested, his advice isn’t something you should ignore. And an MPA will definitely help you get a better government job, if that’s what you’re looking for.”

Brooke tilted her head. “I figured you would give me shit about wanting to do something else. You know, besides this.”

Rachel leaned forward onto her elbows. “Brooke, I would never give you shit about wanting to find other ways to help people,” she said. “Besides, with First Light’s world crashing down around them, we don’t have as much to do as we used to. I mean, how many parishioners do they even have anymore?”

“Last I heard, only a few hundred.” Brooke nodded. “You’re right, it is a far cry from their heyday. Did you hear that the IRS seized one of their grocery stores for failing to pay taxes?”

“I did. My dad was the one that called them.” Rachel grinned. “After that raid, we had close to fifty kids to keep track of. Now we’ve got, what? Ten, eleven?”

“Twelve,” Brooke corrected her. “And five of them will age out when they graduate high school next summer.”
Rachel nodded. “The work we do is important, Brooke, and it needs to be done. But it’s not the only way you can help people. If getting involved in politics is the way you want to go, then do it; you’ll probably help a lot more people than you will in our office.”


“Don’t mention it. Unless it’ll make the report better.”
“So, when do classes start back up?”

Sophie shrugged as she laid a card down, taking Juliet’s as well as hers. The two of them were playing a game at Juliet’s kitchen table while they waited for Dana to return from a meeting with Trevor and the arbitrator. “The twenty-second, I think.”

“Only a couple more weeks.” Juliet smiled as she put down another card, the ten of clubs. “Ready to go back to school?”

“No.” The ten-year-old sighed. “I don’t want to.”

“Don’t think you have a choice, kiddo.”

“Yea.” She laid down the six of diamonds, and Juliet took them both. “But I don’t want to be in fifth grade. They won’t let us have recess.”

Juliet tilted her head. “Really? I thought all the elementary grades got recess.”

Sophie shook her head. “They said not after fourth grade.”

“Bummer.” Juliet shrugged as she dropped the two of diamonds. “That’ll be yours.”

“Mm.” Sophie dropped the six of spades and put both cards in her pile. “How much longer are they gonna be?”

“I don’t know.” Juliet glanced at her watch, then at the apartment door before laying down the seven of hearts. “Your mom should be back any time now. She said they’d probably be done by five.”

“Okay.” Sophie laid down the seven of diamonds, and her face brightened. “War!”

“Sure is.” Juliet grinned as her and Sophie each laid out three cards face-down, then flipped over the fourth card. Juliet’s came up as the jack of hearts.

Sophie’s came up as the king of spades.

“I win!” The girl smiled triumphantly as she swept all the cards into her pile, which was substantially larger that Juliet’s.

“Good job.” Juliet smiled back. “You gonna shuffle those?”

“Yea.” Sophie started mixing the cards.

Juliet watched her for a few seconds. “How are you doing?” she finally asked.


“Do you want to talk about it? My parents got divorced, too.”
Sophie looked up. “They did?”

“Uh huh.” Juliet nodded. “When I was fourteen. Little older than you.”

“Did they get back together?”

The hope in Sophie’s voice made Juliet’s heart break. “I’m afraid not, kiddo,” she said sadly. “Most parents that get divorced don’t.”

“... oh.” Sophie looked down at her cards, not touching them. “Okay.”

“Hey.” Juliet bent over to make eye contact. “You know it’s not your fault, right?”

Sophie nodded. “Mom and Dad told me,” she said quietly. “They said they just don’t want to be married anymore.”


“Yea. I know.” Sophie picked her cards back up, shuffling them into a neat pile. “Dad said they’re gonna sell the house.”

“Your mom told me.” Juliet tilted her head. “Is that what you’re sad about?”

“A little,” Sophie admitted. “I liked my room. And I lived next door to my friends.”

“I’m sorry, sweetie.” Juliet smiled. “I’m sure you’ll make lots of new friends, wherever your parents live.”

“That’s what Mom said.”

“Well, you know your mom’s always right.”

The child smirked. “She said Santa got me my iPad last year.”

Juliet cocked her head. “... didn’t he?”

Sophie rolled her eyes. “Santa’s for kids, Aunt Juliet.”

The lock on the door clicked before Juliet could come up with a counter-argument. They both turned as the door opened, and Dana walked in wearing business attire. “Hey guys!” she said brightly, though Juliet could tell she was faking it; the words were too forced for her to be in a good mood.

“Hi Mom!” Sophie waved.

“Hey, Dana.” Juliet sat up straight. “You okay?”

“I’m fine.” Dana came over and kissed the top of Sophie’s head. “What are you two doing?”

“Playing War.” Sophie pointed to her cards. “I’m winning.”

Juliet smirked. “Pretty sure she’s cheating, too.”

“Am not!”

“Then why do you have all the aces?”

“You were the one who dealt them out!”
“Okay, enough of that.” Dana rustled Sophie’s hair. “Dad’s waiting downstairs, sweetie. You’re gonna spend the night with him, and I’ll pick you up tomorrow afternoon. Go get your backpack.”

Juliet had just finished pouring her drink when Dana got back to the apartment. Her second entrance wasn’t nearly as enthusiastic as her first; the brunette practically dragged herself towards the kitchen island.

“How did it really go?” Juliet asked.

“About what I expected. No surprises.” Dana plopped down into the bar stool and folding her arms, leaning her elbows on the counter and sighing heavily. “We’re gonna sell the house and split the proceeds. We’ll each get fifty percent of the savings account, but I get sixty percent of our investment portfolio since I started it before we married.”

Juliet placed a stemless wine glass full of Chardonnay in front of her. “And Sophie?”

“Joint custody, since we’re so close together and the divorce is pretty amicable. We’ll work out real schedules when everything’s said and done.” Dana took a sip of her drink. “I’ll get some alimony for a couple of years, too, since I stopped working when Sophie was born. Probably gonna save it up for a little while and start day-trading again.”

“Were you not before? Courtney said you were doing it full-time when you got married.”

“Between keeping the house and Sophie, I never had the opportunity to focus on it. Now that she’s old enough to fend for herself, to some degree, I can get back into it.” Dana shrugged. “Guess I need to start researching the market. I haven’t kept up with anything for the past decade.”

“Fair enough.” Juliet paused. “How are you feeling?”

“... like a failure.” Dana rubbed the bridge of her nose. “I always swore that when I met the right guy, it’d be for life. I didn’t want to be one of those women who got divorced. And now I can’t stop thinking about it, trying to figure out where it all went sideways.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Dana. You’re not a failure.”

Dana snorted. “I’m crashing in your guest bedroom because my marriage has fallen apart. I don’t feel like a success story right now.”

Juliet arched an eyebrow. “Would you rather be stuck in a relationship where you two didn’t love each other?”

“... I don’t know.” Dana dropped her gaze. “God. If Trevor came back and asked if we could work on everything right now, I might race him to the car.” She paused. “How was Sophie? Did she say anything about it while I was out?”

“Not really.” Juliet shrugged. “She seemed pretty bummed, though. And she still has hope that you two will stay together.”

Dana shook her head. “Yea.”

“Do you... think that’s a possibility?”

Her friend inhaled deeply, before answering. “Much as I wish otherwise... no. I don’t think so.” She exhaled. “Trevor and I are over. I might as well start accepting that.”
Juliet bit her lip. “I really am sorry, Dana.”

“Me too,” Dana muttered. “Sophie didn’t say anything else?”

Juliet smirked. “Only that she was too old to believe in Santa Claus anymore.”

The corner of Dana’s mouth twitched. “The iPad again?”

“Heard it before?”

“Yea. She might be nice to you, but my kid’s a little bit of a smart-ass.”

“He’s not gonna give her the rose.”

“He totally is. You watch.”

Dana scoffed, as she tilted her bottle of wine back and took a long drink. Her and Juliet had changed into sweatpants and moved to the couch. A box of pizza sat on the coffee table, and a reality show was on TV as they both drank their respective booze. “She’s about as fake as a three-dollar-bill. Ray Charles would have seen through her catty bullshit. He’s not gonna give her one.”

“She’s putting on the nice-girl act for him.” Juliet swallowed the last of her bourbon, then started to refill the glass. “He doesn’t see her bitchiness, he still thinks she’s a southern charmer. And she’s got tits you could swan-dive into.”

“Those are fake.”

“Doesn’t make them less good-looking.”

“You really don’t have faith in him?”

Juliet held up a finger as the man picked up the last rose, then dramatically turned and handed it to the blonde woman in question. “Told ya.”

“God damn it.” Dana shook her head as the credits started to roll. “I changed my mind. This guy’s a tool.”

“Yea, but look at his jawline.” Juliet smirked. “You could sink the Titanic on that thing. Plus, his biceps look like they’re made of marble, and I’ll bet that haircut cost at LEAST a hundred bucks. He’s gorgeous.”

“I suppose I can’t argue with that.” Dana shrugged. “You have the next episode, right?”

“I’ve got the next couple. I’m pretty behind on my TV shows.” Juliet worked the remote. “Who do you think he’s gonna pick?”

“The Asian girl, what’s-her-face,” Dana said immediately. “They’ve got good chemistry. I think he really likes her.”

“I’m banking on Alisha. They’ve held hands a few times in the last episodes.”

“Hmm.” Dana took another drink from her bottle, tipping the whole thing upright as she finished it. “Maybe.”

“You need another one?”
Dana started to shake her head, then paused. "Know what? Sure. My kid’s not here, I can be a bad mom for the night."

"Atta girl." Juliet got up, wobbling for a second as she went to the kitchen to get another bottle of wine. And noticing that her selection of bourbon was running low. "Christ, woman, you’re turning me into an alcoholic."

"Hey, getting drunk and watching badly-scripted reality TV was your idea."

"Fair enough." Juliet walked back to the couch just as Dana bent over, to get another slice of pizza. She watched her friend’s tank top ride up to reveal the smoothness of her lower back, complete with the dimples on either side of her spine that Juliet thought was sexy as hell. She felt her face flush a little bit as she looked.

*Stop it.*

She shook her head as she handed Dana the bottle by the neck. "Here you go."

"Thanks." Dana took it and picked up the corkscrew next to her. "So... can I ask a weird question?"

"Sure."

"Are you still, like... bi?"

Juliet blinked. "What? Why?"

"Well, you said the bachelor was gorgeous, but I haven’t heard you say that any of the girls were cute. Actually, I haven’t heard you make comments like that for a while now." Dana shrugged. "I was just curious."

"Ah." Juliet leaned back. "For future reference, is there a ratio of gender-specific compliments I’m supposed to adhere to?"

"Come on, don’t be a bitch."

Juliet smirked. "Yes, I’m still bi. And for the record, the brunette with the tattoo on her arm is very fuckable."

Dana smirked back. "So it brunettes that get you going?"

"Well, based on empirical evidence..."

Her friend scoffed, as she pulled the cork from the wine bottle and set it aside. "Christ, I really am gonna get shit about that for the rest of my life."

Juliet snickered. "Victoria and the others?"

"Dude, at least once a month I hear about it from those guys." Dana took a drink. "Like, I really don’t think it’s funny anymore, but they just will NOT let it go."

"Well, you know, the harder you fight something, the more it tends to stick." Juliet took a sip of her own drink. "Did you ever tell Trevor what happened?"

"No." Dana shook her head as she leaned back into the couch. "And thankfully, the others were nice enough not to bring it up when he was around. Probably because they knew if they did, I would have killed them."
Juliet laughed as they both took another drink, Dana tilting the bottle back again. Her white bra strap fell out of her shirt, down her shoulder, and Juliet couldn’t take her eyes off of it. Several seconds passed before Dana put the wine bottle down and tucked the strap back into position.

... fuck.

“Okay, let’s keep going,” she said quickly as she picked the remote back up. “I want to see if knucklehead figures out that blondie’s a fake bitch.”

Dana hummed in agreement as Juliet hit the Play button, and the episode started.

Juliet tried to focus on the episode, and ignore her friend. But it wasn’t easy. The more bourbon she drank, the more her mind wandered. And she caught herself sneaking looks at Dana a few times.

*Cut it out. She’s not interested. She’s made that very clear.*

She took a deep breath and renewed her focus on the TV, as she forced herself to pay attention to the plot. It worked for several minutes as they watched the show silently, the shenanigans unfolding.

When they finally got to the rose ceremony, Juliet decided to break the silence. “I think he’s got blondie figured out,” she commented, turning to her friend. “He certainly-”

Dana was asleep.

... go figure. Juliet shook her head as she paused the show, glancing at the second bottle of wine; it was mostly empty. *God, she really is a lush for Chardonnay.*


“Mm.” She stirred. “Wha’s... time is it?”

“Eleven or so.” Juliet grabbed her arm. “Come on. Let’s get you to bed.”

“... ok.”

Juliet pulled the brunette slowly into a standing position. She brought Dana’s arm around her shoulder as her friend started to stumble. “There we go, come on,” she encouraged as she half-carried her, stumbling a little herself; Juliet remembered that she was hardly sober, either, as the two of them made their way haphazardly towards the hallway.

Dana’s foot slipped a few seconds later, and she started to collapse into Juliet. She tripped in turn, and the two of them collided heavily with the wall.

“Ouch,” Juliet groaned as Dana leaned into her. Both of her friend’s hands grabbed the wall on either side of her, as she struggled to get the brunette back upright. “Come on, girl, gimme a hand here and-”

The kiss shocked the hell out of her.

Juliet froze as she felt Dana’s lips against hers. She felt her heart rate spike as her mind went blank. *Drunk! She’s drunk! She doesn’t know what she’s doing! Stop this!*

“Hey, hey wait,” Juliet gasped, as Dana pulled away; the brunette stared at her with somewhat-glossy eyes. “Dana. Dana, stop, it’s me, it’s Juliet. It’s not Trevor, it’s Juliet.”
Dana was breathing heavily, and Juliet felt a hand grab the back of her neck as her friend licked her lips.

“I know.”

And then she felt her lips again, but this time her mind didn’t go blank. She was kissing back, and she felt hands on her waist. Her fingers started dancing their way up Dana’s rib cage as she completely lost track of what she was doing.
**Juliet: Next Morning**

*Fuck.*

That was all Juliet could think the next morning, after she sobered up.

*Fuck. Fucking, fucking, fuck.*

She’d woken up in her bed, and the first thing she’d seen was Dana’s face. The brunette had been sleeping beside her, completely naked and snoring lightly; even hours later, there was still a hint of wine on her breath. Juliet hadn’t moved for several minutes before she finally slipped out of bed, put on a long shirt, and make her way out to her balcony.

That was where she’d been sitting for forty-five minutes, chain smoking cigarette after cigarette while she stared off into space.

*I fucked up.*

*I fucked up so bad.*

She took a long drag of her cigarette, slowly blowing the smoke out her mouth as she watched the cloudy sky.

*She was drunk. Hell, she was shit-faced. I took advantage of my shit-faced best friend.*

*Fuck. She’s gonna leave. And then it’ll be just like last time, except now she knows better, so she’ll never come see me again.*

*I just lost my best friend for good.*

Juliet didn’t realize there was moisture collecting in her eyes until she felt a tear slide down her cheek. She wiped it quickly, feeling sick to her stomach as she finished her cigarette and lit up a new one with shaky hands.

*Fuck, fuck, FUCK.*

She felt, rather than saw, movement from inside the apartment. The door to the balcony slid open a few seconds later, and Juliet turned her head.

Dana was back in her sweatpants and shirt. And her face had a completely unreadable expression. She rubbed her arms as she stepped out onto the balcony. “Morning,” she said softly.

“... hey.” Juliet swallowed, as she looked down and itched at her fingers. “Um... how’re you feeling?”

“Hungover.” Dana paused. “And... I don’t...”

Neither of them spoke for a few seconds.

“I, uh...” Juliet licked her lips. “Do you... are you...”

Dana looked at her silently.

“We don’t have to.” Juliet settled for that.
Her friend exhaled slowly, as she rubbed her arms again. Juliet waited for her response, her heart in her throat.

“Okay.”

Juliet nodded.

“I’m, uh... gonna... get dressed.”

With that, Dana stepped back inside, closing the door behind her.


*Fucking fuck.*

*You fucking goddamn horny stupid son of a-*

The balcony door opened again, to her surprise. Juliet turned as Dana stepped back outside, this time closing the door behind her as she took a deep breath.

“No,” she started. “I’m not doing this again.”

Juliet blinked. “Dana-”

“I did this last time, where I refused to talk about it. And then we didn’t speak for almost a decade.” Dana shook her head. “So now we’re gonna talk about it, because I’m not losing one of my best friends for a second time.”

Neither of them spoke, as Juliet looked up at her.

“... that was as far as I got on that train of thought.” Dana walked over and sat in the chair next to her. “Your turn.”

Juliet took a shaky breath. “Dana, I am so fucking sorry.”

Her friend blinked. “You’re- wait, you’re sorry? Why?”

“Because you were drunk.” Juliet sniffled, as she wiped her eyes on the back of her hand. “I shouldn’t have... you’re going through a divorce, you had two bottles of wine under your belt, and I took advantage of you while you were-”

“I wasn’t so drunk I didn’t know what I was doing.” Dana leaned forward, putting her elbows on her knees. “My tolerance has gotten better since the Junior Prom.”

“I still should have stopped you.” Juliet shook her head. “You’re not in a good place, mentally, and I shouldn’t have...” her voice trailed off.

Dana sighed. “Would it make you feel better if I said that I really, really wanted it?”

Juliet glanced at her. “... did you?”

“Yea, kinda. Maybe not with you, specifically, but given the circumstances...” Dana bit her lip. “This is gonna sound really pathetic, but Trevor and I hadn’t had sex in months, before we separated. I honestly don’t even remember when the last time was; it might have been our anniversary, back in February.”
“Really?” Juliet rubbed her nose, looking at Dana in surprise. “That was... shit, six months ago.”

“Trust me, I know.”

Juliet absorbed that for a moment. “So... why?”

Dana shrugged. “There were a few reasons, I guess, but I don’t think either of us were really in the—”


Her friend bit her lip, playing with her fingers for several seconds as Juliet watched the wheels grind away in her head. “... promise you won’t make fun of me?” she asked quietly. “Or bust my balls, or get mad?”

“Of course not.”

Dana swallowed. “Because what we did, after the Junior Prom, was the best sex I’ve ever had.”

Juliet did a double-take. “... wait, really?”

“Yea.”

“We were both drunk off our asses. It lasted, like, ten minutes.”

Dana looked back at her. “I’ve had a fair amount of experience, before and after the Junior Prom. But nothing I’ve ever done with Trevor, or any of my other boyfriends, really compared to how I felt when we were fooling around during that party.” She paused. “Or last night.”

Juliet found it within her to give Dana a half-smirk. “I have gotten a lot better since then.”

“I could tell.” Dana smirked back, before she dropped her gaze to her feet. “That was one of the other reasons why I never wanted to talk about it, especially after I met Trevor.”

“... I don’t get it.”

“The best sex I ever had was ten minutes of drunken fondling with another girl, Jules.” Dana sighed. “I’m straight. Or at least that’s what I’ve labeled myself for the past couple of decades. I liked sex with boys. And then we did our thing, and it was fucking incredible, and I was...”

Her voice trailed off, as she looked away.

“You were...” Juliet hesitated. “What? Nervous? Scared?”

“Those, too. Freaked out, I guess, seems like the best answer.” Dana shrugged. “I had a definition of who I was in my head, and it didn’t include having sex with girls. I didn’t know what to do, or how to interpret what I felt. Ignoring it seemed like a good short-term solution.”

Juliet hummed.

“Yea, I know. It got me fifteen years of mediocre sex and a divorce at the age of thirty-five.” Dana averted her gaze. “I don’t know how many more times I can apologize for what I did.”

“Hey.” Juliet turned her chair. “You’re forgetting something.”

Dana looked up at her blankly.
“You got a kid out of that, too,” Juliet reminded her. “I know you don’t regret that.”

“No, of course not.” Dana shook her head. “I... shit. Jules, I really have no idea what to think right now. Or what I’m supposed to do, or say.”

Juliet took a deep breath, slowly letting it out. “What do you want, Dana?”

Her friend tilted her head. “Of... what?”

“You don’t have to label yourself. Or decide that you’re gay, or bi, or whatever.” Juliet shrugged. “But... you should decide what you want.”

“I still don’t get it.”

“It’s... look. We’ve had sex. Twice now, actually. And in my experience, friends who’ve fucked and enjoyed it aren’t going to just stop.” Juliet nodded back towards the apartment. “Are you going to move out, so it doesn’t happen anymore?”

Dana was shaking her head before Juliet could finish. “I mean... if you’ll let me stay,” she added. “I’d rather be here with you than an empty apartment, when Sophie’s with Trevor.”

“Of course you can stay.” Juliet waved her hand dismissively, then took a deep breath. “Do you want what happened last night to happen again?”

Her friend opened her mouth, as if to speak, but stopped. Dana seemed at a total loss, and Juliet watched as she struggled to form words.

“That’s what I mean, Dana,” she finally said after several seconds. “You have to figure out what you want.”

“... right.” Dana met her gaze. “Well... what do YOU want?”

Juliet hadn’t been ready for that question. “Huh?”

“You asked what I wanted. What about you?” Dana cocked her head. “There were two of us rolling around your bed last night. I think it’s a fair question to ask.”

It took Juliet a few seconds to respond, as she decided on her answer. “Honestly, Dana, I don’t really know either,” she admitted, looking at her friend. “But I’m... okay, I guess, with where we’re at now. If you decide that last night was a one-time thing, then I still love you and all that shit. If you decide that you want it to happen again...” she shrugged. “I’m okay with that, too.”

Dana bit her lip, as she looked over the city. “... I need to think.”

“Yea, you do.” Juliet dropped her forgotten cigarette in the ashtray, then stood. “I’m grabbing breakfast. It’s been a long morning, and I’m starving.”

They didn’t speak of it for the rest of the day.

Dana brought back Sophie in the afternoon, and the three of them hung out before Juliet went to the news station for the evening. She didn’t come home until after midnight, when Dana and Sophie were both asleep; the child shared the bedroom with her mother when she stayed over, so Juliet was able to slip into her bedroom quietly.

They didn’t discuss it the next day, either. Or the day after that.
Juliet came back from work in the late evening on Saturday, just after midnight. She repeated the process of changing and getting into bed quietly, so as not to wake Dana.

She’d only spent a few minutes laying down before she heard footsteps. Her eyes opened and she picked her head up as her bedroom door opened, revealing Dana standing there in her pajamas. Neither of them spoke for a few seconds.

“I’m done thinking about it,” Dana finally said.

Juliet slowly turned in bed and sat up, her feet hitting the floor. “... and?” she asked nervously.

“I’m still not one hundred percent certain.” Dana bit her lip. “I don’t know if I’m just indecisive, or scared, or nervous, or what. But... I can’t deny how it felt, when we were together.”

“What, how good it was?”

“Yea. It... I don’t know. It was incredible, and amazing, and it just felt... right.” Dana took a deep breath. “And if there’s a possibility that this is who I’m supposed to be... then I want to give it a shot.”

“Are you sure?” Juliet asked quietly. “You’re my best friend, Dana. I don’t want to screw up what we have.”

“Neither do I.” Dana shook her head. “But I don’t want to let that stop me.”

Juliet exhaled slowly. After a few seconds, she stood, walking up to Dana as the other girl itched nervously at her fingernails. She slowly took her hand, squeezing gently as she pulled her closer.

“Me either.”

Dana blinked. “... really?”

Juliet nodded. “I want to do this, too.”

“You...” Dana frowned. “I thought you said you were good either way.”

“I lied,” Juliet admitted. “Like I said, you’re my best friend. I didn’t want to fuck that up, if you weren’t interested. But this is something I’ve thought about since high school.”

Dana slowly smiled. “So... now what?”

Juliet leaned in and kissed her softly, Dana kissing back. They parted after a few seconds. “Well, uh...” Juliet paused. “I guess we see if we still fuck as good while we’re sober.”

Dana burst out laughing as Juliet pulled her back towards the bed.

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**Courtney:** So? Did it go through?

**Taylor:** Did... what go through?

**Victoria:** She’s not talking to you. Dana?

**Dana:** Yes. Trevor and I signed the paperwork this afternoon.

**Dana:** I’m officially a bachelorette again.
Taylor: I’m sorry.

Victoria: Me too.

Courtney: FUCK YEA LADIES WEEKEND

Victoria: Dude, seriously?

Courtney: What? She’s still young and hot. Time to find a nice piece of meat to try on.

Dana: As much as I appreciate the compliment, I’ll pass.

Courtney: Come on! It’s been too long since we went out drinking!

Taylor: That’s because you gave birth four months ago, idiot. Aren’t you breastfeeding?

Courtney: First of all, what I do with my tits is between me, Bryan, and my son. Second, I’ve been watching the baby nonstop for the past sixteen weeks, so my husband owes me some girl time.

Victoria: Dana, ignore the peanut gallery. How are you doing?

Dana: Okay, I guess. Didn’t figure that I’d be one to get divorced.

Taylor: How’s Sophie handling it?

Dana: So far, so good. Trevor and I talked to a counselor, and we’re taking his advice to make sure she knows that we both still love her.

Victoria: Do you need anything?

Courtney: Yes. She needs to meet me at PaddyWagon tomorrow night in her shortest dress and makeup.

Taylor: Christ, Court, have you heard of an acceptable period of grief?

Courtney: Yea, and it’s bullshit.

Courtney: Dana, you’re still in your prime and hot as hell. You can totally rock the MILF thing, and we’ll find you a suitable stallion to ride for a little while.

Victoria: ... ew.

Dana: Really, Courtney, I don’t want to.

Courtney: I’m serious. Ask Juliet, I’m sure she agrees. Shit, she should come too.

Dana: I am fine, Courtney. I don’t need to jump into the sack with the closest willing participant.

Courtney: Okay, your divorce has been going on for months, so unless you found someone to satisfy you, I’m sure you could use a good lay.

Taylor: Dude, drop it.

Dana: Yea, Courtney, I’m good.
Taylor: Wait, you are?

Dana: ... shit.

Courtney: OMG, you already found someone, didn’t you?!

Dana: I don’t want to get into this.

Victoria: You DID!!

Courtney: Look at you, moving on like a CHAMP!! Who is he?! Where did you find him?!

Dana: Guys, seriously.

Taylor: NO!! WE NEED DETAILS ABOUT YOUR POST-MARITAL COITUS!!

Victoria: We don’t, actually. But are you really dating someone else already?

Dana: ... fine. Yes.

Taylor: Of course she is! She’s a smokin’ hot babe! There’s no WAY she was staying single for long!

Courtney: You have to give us SOMETHING, Dana! You’re the queen of gossip!

Dana: Hey guys, this is really hard for me, okay? I swore that when I did get married, it would be the guy I spent the rest of my life with. And having it all come crashing down really sucks. I’ve felt like a train wreck for the past few months. There were a couple of days that I didn’t even get out of bed.

Dana: I wasn’t looking for anything after Trevor and I separated. I found it by accident. And I feel really guilty for moving on before everything was finalized. My daughter and my ex-husband don’t even know yet. I hate keeping secrets from them, and not being honest is killing me.

Dana: So can you guys please dial it back a LITTLE?

Courtney: ... I’m sorry.

Taylor: Me too.

Dana: Thank you.

Victoria: We’re serious, Dana. If you need anything, just ask.

Dana: I know. I really do appreciate it.

Dana: You guys are my friends, and I don’t like keeping things from you either. But I need you all to swear that you’ll keep it to yourselves, and not tell anyone. Not even spouses.

Courtney: Promise.

Victoria: Deal.

Taylor: You got it. Who are you dating?
Dana: Juliet.

Victoria: ... what?

Taylor: Excuse me?!

Courtney: No you’re not.

Dana: Yea. We... kind of had a thing.

Dana: We talked for a while, and... well, it was kind of a big thing. But I decided to give this a shot.

Dana: So, congrats. All your guys’ years of giving me shit for the Junior Prom has come to a head, and now I’m dating Juliet.

Courtney: NO YOU’RE NOT

Taylor: OH MY GOD YES SHE IS

Victoria: Guys, this is NOT the time!

Taylor: PAY ME MY MONEY BITCH

Courtney: FUCK YOU IT WAS A JOKE

Dana: ... ?

Taylor: NO IT WASN’T

Taylor: WE SPIT-SHOOK

Victoria: Seriously! Stop it!!

Taylor: NOT UNTIL I GET THE THOUSAND DOLLARS SOMEONE OWES ME

Courtney: COME GET IT FROM MY COLD DEAD HANDS

Dana: You guys seriously made a bet? For a THOUSAND dollars?!

Victoria: THEY made a bet. I had no part in this.

Courtney: THE FUCK YOU DIDN’T, YOU WERE THERE WITH US

Taylor: YOU JUST GAVE US SHITTY ODDS

Victoria: SHUT THE FUCK UP

Dana: ... Juliet was right. I need more friends.
Max: Did you guys get ahold of the lawyer?

Steph: We did. Our first meeting was the day before yesterday.

Max: How did it go?

Steph: Good. He felt very strongly that we had an excellent chance of getting Melissa, given her circumstances.

Max: Are you going to tell us why Rachel decided that she wanted to adopt her?

Steph: I can’t. There’s NDAs, and gag orders, and legal stuff. You know how it goes.

Max: What matters is that she’ll be in a good place. Are YOU ready to be a parent?

Steph: Well, I’ve started practicing Dad jokes. Rachel asked me to stop, though.

Max: Joyce sent us a bunch of books about how to raise kids, but I guess the sense of humor is important, too.

Steph: I got a book about anti-gravity. It’s impossible to put down.

Max: GROAN

Max: You’re terrible.

Steph: No, I’m Steph.

Max: Okay, now I want you to stop, too.

Brooke: I’m so fucked.

Regina: ... I don’t need to know the details of your sex life.

Emily: Eh, I’ll hear her out.

Brooke: Shut the fuck up. I think I just agreed to buy a house with Dave.

Emily: Wait, really?

Regina: How are you not sure? That’s something you should be sure about before you move forward.

Brooke: We were just chatting about the apartment, and how combining our stuff last year was such a pain in the ass. We’ve still got unopen boxes in the other bedroom, and I had to tear through them last week for some paperwork.

Brooke: I just mentioned off-hand that I wished we had a little more space. Then I apparently blacked out, because now we’re going to meet a realtor tomorrow, and I don’t know how the fuck I
agreed to that.

**Emily:** ROFLMAO

**Brooke:** Shut up!

**Regina:** Oh, God, this is hilarious! I can’t WAIT to tell Greg that you accidentally got Dave to buy a house!

**Brooke:** SHUT UP AND HELP ME!

**Emily:** Dude, is it really so bad? You guys are great together, you’re not breaking up anytime soon, and you can have us over for parties and whatnot.

**Regina:** Yea, this isn’t really a bad thing.

**Brooke:** What if we do break up?! Then I’m stuck in a house with my ex-boyfriend!

**Regina:** You are being such a Negative Nancy right now.

**Emily:** Yea, do kids these days still use the term “basic’?

**Brooke:** Have you seen the price of a house?! They’re so fucking expensive!!

**Emily:** ... she says, to the two people who own homes already.

**Brooke:** You guys brought them after you got married!

**Regina:** No I didn’t, Greg owned it before I met him. He just had me added to the mortgage when he re-financed, because I helped him pay for points to get a lower interest rate.

**Brooke:** See, individually, I know all those words. Then you put them together and it’s a foreign language.

**Emily:** It’s not as intimidating as it seems, dude. It wasn’t hard for me to understand.

**Brooke:** You have a Master’s degree in mathematics.

**Emily:** Aerospace Engineering.

**Brooke:** Close enough. What do I do?!

**Regina:** Sounds like you buy a house.

**Emily:** Don’t get a pool. They cost more than they’re worth in terms of upkeep.

**Regina:** However much closet space you think you’ll need, double it.

**Emily:** And make sure your Master Bath has two sinks. You’ll fight a lot less.

**Brooke:** You two aren’t being as helpful as you think.

**Emily:** I think we are.
Brooke: Whatever. At least Dave is taking charge of most of it.

Regina: He is?

Brooke: Yea, he’s been over to the realtor’s office a few times while I’ve been at work. I’m getting the sense that he’s nervous about it, too.

Regina: (O.O)

Emily: (O.O)

Brooke: ... what?

Regina: Nothing.

Emily: Hey, you know what I just thought about? We should get pedicures this weekend.

Regina: That’s a great idea. Brooke, you up for it?

Brooke: I guess? Why?

Regina: Saturday, eleven, nail salon on Baker?

Emily: Works for me. See you girls there!

Emily: I need you to confirm a theory for me.

Dave: What? Car trouble?

Emily: Sort of. What’s Brooke’s ring size?

Dave: 5.5. Why?

Emily: I FUCKING KNEW IT

Dave: Knew what?

Emily: Drop the act. There’s only one reason for a man to know his girlfriend’s ring size.

Dave: ... shit.

Emily: You are SO not as slick as you think you are.

Dave: Does Brooke know?

Emily: Totally fuckin’ clueless, dude. Is that why you’re going to buy the house?

Dave: I mean... it is a pretty nice house.

Emily: I need a picture of the ring.

Dave: Why?
Emily: Regina and I are taking Brooke to get a pedicure this Saturday. I need to make sure she gets something complimentary.

Dave: <ring.jpg>

Emily: ... damn, you really do love her.

Dave: I thought that was clear.

Emily: Wait, why is the diamond flanked by sapphires? Her birth stone is Topaz.

Dave: Because Topaz is ugly as hell. And she was wearing a blue dress when we met.

Emily: Man, all you rough-around-the-edges mechanics are just big softies at heart, aren’t you?

Dave: It’s a trade secret that you must take to your grave.

Steph: Dude. I don’t even know what to say.

Victoria: ??

Steph: Your character letter.

Victoria: What’s wrong? Is it not good?

Steph: It’s amazing. It’s just not what I expected to get from you, of all people.

Victoria: Really? Why?

Steph: ... come on.

Victoria: You guys are trying to adopt a kid. I’m not going to hold on to high school shit that happened twenty years ago and cost a little girl her chance for an actual family.

Victoria: Do you two think I took a sacred blood oath to hate you forever or something?

Steph: No. Just... would it really surprise you, to find out that Rachel and I still hate ourselves for what we did?

Victoria: Look, nobody’s going to say that what you did wasn’t shitty. But everything is fine now. Max is married, she’s got three kids, and she’s making buckets of money by making my dad truckloads of money. Everything turned out okay.

Steph: You didn’t mention her amazing wife.

Victoria: Chloe is one bad day away from getting ejected through my office window.

Steph: Still calling you ‘Vic’, huh?

Victoria: Her and Faith think they’re so goddamn funny.

Brooke: YOU BOTH KNEW
Emily: I think she figured it out.

Regina: I’m starting to suspect.

Brooke: I HATE YOU GUYS SO MUCH

Regina: She’ll get over it.

Emily: Yea, I know.

Brooke: I’M GOING TO KILL YOU TWO

Emily: Oh, hey, how was the house Dave wanted to show you?

Brooke: I don’t know!! I kind of forgot to look around after he pulled the engagement ring out of his pocket!!!

Emily: <shocked>

Regina: <ditto>

Brooke: KHLSLNSAJFASNFLKBJN

Emily: Twenty bucks says she cried.

Regina: Not betting against that.

Emily: So, who’s your Maid of Honor? Hint, hint, nudge, nudge.

Regina: Excuse me, you did it last time!

Emily: I’m her best friend!!

Regina: So am I! And it’s MY turn!!

Brooke: I’m going to hire a homeless woman off the street instead of my two friends who didn’t give me a heads-up!

Emily: Why the fuck would we do that? This was much funnier.

Regina: I just can’t believe you didn’t see the writing on the wall.

Brooke: I will have revenge for this.

Regina: Of course you will, sweetie

Emily: Hey, you did say yes, right?

Brooke: Goddamn right I did!

Sadie: Are you guys going to RSVP or what?

Rachel: Oh, crap, I’m sorry. The envelope is still sitting on my counter.
Rachel: Yes, Steph and I are both coming.

Sadie: Thank you. Beef, chicken, or pork?

Rachel: Chicken for me, pork for Steph.

Rachel: Do you still want the card back?

Sadie: Yes, please. Michelle is collecting them all.

Rachel: Um... I don’t want to impose, but I kind of have a favor to ask.

Sadie: What?

Rachel: We MAY need a +1 by the time your ceremony rolls around next year. Would that be a problem?

Sadie: ARE YOU PREGNANT?!

Rachel: No. Nonono. I am not pregnant.

Sadie: Is it Steph?

Rachel: Neither of us is pregnant. We’re going through an adoption process.

Sadie: Aww! That’s so sweet! Is it a kid from work?

Rachel: Yes. It’s a four-year-old girl we’ve been having trouble placing.

Sadie: That is so cool! You guys can totally bring her if she’s there by the time the ceremony rolls around.

Sadie: Is it a difficult process? Michelle and I have been talking about it, for further down the road, debating between that and IVF.

Rachel: It can be. But if you guys are considering it, you know I can help out.

Sadie: We may have some questions later, then. Michelle wants kids really, REALLY bad.

Rachel: Do you not?

Sadie: I guess it would be nice to have someone else mow the lawn.

Rachel: ... huh. An unexpected perk.

Kate: Faith is in the Jacobson school district, right?

Max: You mean the high school? Yea. Why?

Kate: Guess who’s gonna be her principal!

Max: YOU GOT THE JOB!!
Kate: I DID!!

Kate: The director called me to let me know this morning!

Max: Congratulations!!

Kate: Thank you!!

Max: So she’ll pass all her classes with flying colors, right?

Kate: Come on, Max. She doesn’t need my help, I’ve seen her report card.

Max: Hey man, college is expensive. The more scholarships she can qualify for, the better.

Kate: I think it’s a little far ahead to worry about that.

Max: Not when I’ve got three tuitions to save for, it isn’t.

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Juliet: Hey, I need some background for a story. How much do you know about fabric that comes out of Vietnam?

Courtney: YOU’RE FUCKING DANA

Juliet: ... or we could do this instead.

Courtney: WHAT THE SHIT

Juliet: I don’t know how to answer these non-questions. And how did you find out, anyway?

Courtney: I think you would call her an anonymous source.

Juliet: I’m much more sure that I would call her my girlfriend.

Courtney: ARE you guys? Girlfriends?

Juliet: What are we, in fucking high school again?

Courtney: Hey, man, there are titles you discuss with each other before using.

Juliet: We’re dating, we’re living together, we’re fucking. I’m pretty sure we’re girlfriends now.

Courtney: Fair enough. So, how’d you seduce her?

Juliet: Is that your impression? That I initiated it?

Courtney: Oh, God, please tell me she did. That would make my week.

Juliet: Man... she was SO handsy...

Courtney: :) :) :)

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Chloe: You and your wife are coming to a surprise party at our house this Saturday.
Victoria: ... dare I ask why?

Chloe: Dress code is leather and latex, or a French maid costume. Bring your own riding crop.

Victoria: The fuck is wrong with you?

Chloe: Max just got her Master’s, you idiot.

Victoria: Oh, shit! I didn’t know she was finished! I thought she was still on a break for the twins!

Chloe: She started her classes up again last year.

Victoria: Dude, this is PERFECT!!

Chloe: Why?

Victoria: Because there’s a Senior Executive position opening up in Acquisitions next week. There’s only a couple of them, but they handle the really large purchases and mergers.

Victoria: With her experience, Max was a serious contender to begin with. Now that she’s got an MBA? She’ll be a shoo-in, once I tell the Acquisitions Director.

Chloe: Damn.

Chloe: I’ll let you tell her that one, for the party. Just try not to overshadow my efforts too much.

Victoria: I make no promises.

Rachel: You’re not planning to go to the office the rest of the week, are you?

Steph: No. Why?

Rachel: We’re getting Melissa for the holiday weekend.

Steph: We are?!

Rachel: Yep. Which means we need to have a room ready for her.

Steph: The spare room is still full of boxes from the storage locker!

Rachel: Move them into the office.

Steph: We don’t have any bedroom furniture!

Rachel: I’m gonna swing by Big Lots on the way home. Hopefully we can get a bed delivered by tomorrow.

Steph: What if we can’t?

Rachel: One problem at a time.

Rachel: I’m supposed to pick her up on my way home on Thursday. We’ll have her for Friday through Sunday, then I bring her back on Monday.
Rachel: Where she’ll be interviewed about her weekend, by the way, so we need to come up with some fun stuff to do.

Steph: ... and now I’m drawing a blank. I have no idea how to plan a weekend for a kid.

Rachel: Same. Is there a festival or something going on this weekend? Maybe we can do that.

Steph: There’s a craft beer fair in Portland.

Rachel: ... that would certainly lead to an entertaining interview, for the social workers.

Steph: Figured. We could bring her to the park near our house.

Rachel: That kills about an hour or so.

Steph: Oh! We could go to Dave and Buster’s!

Rachel: We’re supposed to be entertaining her, not you.

Steph: There’s games for kids there!

Rachel: So you won’t want to spend an hour in that Star Wars X-Wing game?

Steph: I mean, if we’re there already...

Dana: ... seriously?

Juliet: :) :) :)

Mom: By the way, your father’s been on the phone all evening.

Rachel: Why?

Mom: He’s talking to Judge Haskins about getting your hearing moved further up on the docket.

Rachel: Oh, Jesus, please tell me you’re kidding. Haskins already doesn’t like me.

Mom: Wasn’t it her father that used to give you trouble during hearings?

Rachel: Yea, but the fruit didn’t fall far from the tree.

Mom: Well, they’ve been chatting and laughing for the past ten minutes. I think your father might have a better relationship with the county judges than you, sweetie.

Rachel: Haskins is in Family Court, not Criminal Court.

Mom: I don’t know what to tell you, except that it sounds like they’re having a grand time.

Mom: And you saw how enamored he was with Melissa at dinner.

Rachel: I think he’s excited for grandkids in general.
Mom: We both are! But he wouldn’t stop talking about her in the car. He made the phone call as soon as we got inside.

Mom: He said that child deserves you and Steph, especially after everything she went through?

Rachel: Right, I forgot that he knows about her history.

Mom: How bad was it?

Rachel: You really, really don’t want to know.

Mom: Oh, he’s off the phone. He said you should expect a call from the court clerk shortly.

Rachel: TOMORROW?!?!

Dad: You’re welcome.

Rachel: Steph and I have to work!

Dad: You’re in charge of your office, you can take a day off. And I know Steph works from home most days. The hearing isn’t until two anyway.

Rachel: How did you even convince Haskins to push it so far forward?!

Dad: My undeniable charm.

Rachel: Dad, I’m serious!

Dad: Hi, Serious, I’m Dad.

Rachel: AND STOP TEACHING STEPH DAD JOKES!!

Dad: Sweetie, that girl needs a family. The caretakers at the group home are wonderful people that do an incredible job, but nobody wants Melissa to stay there. She needs someone who can focus on her directly, not balance her between twenty other children.

Rachel: But... it’s TOMORROW.

Dad: I hope you’ve got a professional outfit ready.
“Quite simply, this may be the shortest amount of time I’ve seen for a placement hearing to reach my desk.”

Rachel felt Steph shift nervously next to her. *God damn it, I knew it,* she thought morosely. *Cutting corners always comes back to bite you in the ass. I should’ve told Stacy and Dad to do things the right way. Our lawyer couldn’t even make it, for fuck’s sake.*

Across the desk, Judge Haskins peeked over her glasses. “Miss Scott. Don’t you work for Miss Amber over at CPS?”

Brooke cleared her throat. “I do, your honor.”

“You don’t see a problem with doing a home visit on your supervisor?”

“Quite frankly, your honor, I don’t think it would have mattered which social worker did the home visit,” Brooke replied. “Miss Amber headed the committee to re-write the checklist we use to evaluate homes prior to child placement. She knows exactly what we look for; the home was in perfect order when I did my inspection, and I was very thorough.”

“Ah hah.” Haskins nodded. “Did Miss Amber ask you to do her home visit?”

“No, your honor. Miss Amber asked the state’s Deputy Director of Social Work, Stacy Hemingway, to have someone from another office handle it. Miss Hemingway made the decision to send me instead.”

“Did Miss Hemingway say why?”

“That given the circumstances, the relationship between whomever did the home visit and Miss Amber didn’t matter, so long as it was done in a timely manner.”

Haskins nodded slowly, as she looked back at the file. “THE shortest amount of time,” she repeated. “An expedited visit from a social worker is one thing. The recommendation from Doctor Edwards came within a week; they usually take at least a month. And the DA calling to push a hearing to the front of the line is unheard of.”

Rachel’s gut clenched.

“But if there was ever a case that called for the fast track, it’s this one.” Haskins drummed her fingers on the file. “I’ve seen people to terrible things to their children, but this... being appalled doesn’t even come close.” She looked back at Rachel and Steph. “Does your girlfriend know, Miss Amber, what young Melissa has been through?”

Rachel nodded. “We know what we’re getting into, your honor.”

“That little girl is going to receive the help she needs?”

“Chr- I mean, Doctor Edwards is going to see her for a few more sessions,” Rachel explained.
“There’s another child psychologist near our home, Doctor Winter; we’ve spoken to her, and she’s agreed to take Melissa on as a patient when she’s ready.”

“Good.” Haskins nodded before turning back to Brooke. “Their financial records were examined?”

“They were, your honor.” Brooke nodded. “Both Miss Amber and Miss Gingrich have full-time jobs. Their combined income, along with their savings and investment accounts, are more than adequate to support a child. And Melissa will fall under the state’s benefits package after the adoption, due to Miss Amber’s status as a government employee.”

Haskins turned back to Steph and Rachel. “If you’re both working full-time, what’s the care plan for Melissa?”

“I’ve already worked out a deal with my boss to work from home more often,” Steph answered. “I’ll only go in if I absolutely have to. And the office is near a child care facility, should the need arise.”

“Remind me what your occupation is again?”

“I’m a Senior Content Creator at a video game studio based out of Portland. We specialize in VR gaming.”

Haskins raised an eyebrow. “My son has one of those headsets. Anything I might’ve heard of?”

“Maybe. I’ve worked on a few big titles. We’ve got one coming out next summer called Adrift; we expect it to sell pretty well.”

“What kind of game is it?”

“A survival/horror game set in a wrecked spaceship.”

“Oof.” Haskins smirked. “I’ll make sure not to play it, then. Melissa won’t be exposed to anything scary, will she?”

Steph shook her head. “We’ll make sure she doesn’t see anything like that.”

“Good. Now, then.” Haskins looked back at Brooke. “Where is Melissa, Miss Scott?”

“Outside, your honor.” Brooke stood. “Do you want me to get her?”

“Yes, I do.”

Brooke vanished out the door, returning after a few minutes with Melissa. The child was wearing a purple dress, and her hair was done up in a ponytail. She looked around as she held Brooke’s hand, finally smiling as she saw Rachel and Steph. She waved enthusiastically as Brooke put her in a chair.

“Good morning, Melissa.” The child turned back to the judge, who smiled. “How are you?”

“Good.” Melissa nodded.

“Did Carol get you anything while you were waiting?”

“Oh huh.” Melissa nodded again. “She gave me an orange juice and cookies.”

“What kind?”

“Chocolate chip.”
Haskins tilted her head. “Chocolate chip? Did you save any for me?”

Melissa shook her head.

“Well.” Haskins pointed at her comically. “For future reference, young lady, when you see a judge, you’re supposed to bring her cookies. Okay?”

Rachel and Steph both smiled as Melissa nodded. “Okay.”

“Good.” Haskins leaned forward on her desk. “Do you know why you’re here, Melissa?”

“Uh huh.” She looked beside her. “Rachel and Steph want me to live with them.”

“That’s right.” Haskins paused. “Do you know what being adopted means, Melissa?”

The four-year-old shook her head.

“It means that you get new parents.” Haskins pointed at Rachel. “It means that Rachel and Steph would be your family.”

Melissa glanced over at them, and Rachel held her breath while she waited for the child to respond. After a few seconds, she turned back to Haskins. “Okay.”

The judge couldn’t keep a smile from her face. “Okay, what?”

“Okay, they can be my family.” Melissa nodded. “Can we leave now?”

Like Max and Faith, Haskins signed a temporary guardianship order. Rachel and Steph would have a year to file for formal adopting proceedings, but they called the lawyer right after they left the hearing and asked him to file as soon as he could.

Then they took Melissa out to ice cream. Steph left them for a few minutes, to use the bathroom, and as soon as she was out of sight, Rachel leaned over. “Hey, Melissa.”

The child looked up from her banana split, spoon still in her mouth. “Mm?”

“I need you to do me a huge favor. And it’s really important.”

She pulled out the spoon with an audible ‘pop’. “What?”

Rachel put something in her hand and whispered quietly. Melissa was nodding just as Steph came back.

They finished their ice cream, and got up to leave. Melissa grabbed onto the back of Steph’s jeans as soon as they made it outside. “Steph?”

She looked down and smiled. “What’s up, kiddo?”

Melissa held her hands together in front of her. “I think you dropped something.”

“Oh?” Steph bent over. “What?”

The child opened her hands to reveal a silver ring with a diamond. Steph’s eyes widened. “Um... wow. That’s not mine, but we should find out who it belongs to. Someone’s probably missing it.”

“Let me see.” Rachel knelt next to Melissa and took the ring, then reached out for Steph’s hand. She
slid the ring over her girlfriend’s finger quickly, before she could figure out what was going on; the ring fit perfectly. “I, uh... I don’t know, Steph. I think it’s yours.”

Steph blinked, realization slowly dawning on her as to what was happening. “... oh my God.”

“Oh... I’m not good at this.” Rachel swallowed the lump in her throat. “We’ve been together for so long, it almost feels real as it is. And now we’ve got a kid that we’re gonna raise together.” She smiled, watching Steph’s wide eyes. “Wanna get married and make it official?”

“Oh my G- YES!!” Steph exclaimed. “Holy SH-”

“Language,” Rachel said automatically.

“ Shut up.” Steph grabbed Rachel’s biceps, pulling her upright and kissing her passionately. Rachel kissed back, feeling tears slowly start to leak from her eyes as Steph broke away.

The brunette hastily wiped her own eyes. “I am SO marrying you,” she breathed. “Oh my God. And YOU!” she exclaimed, looking down at Melissa. “Was that ring really on the ground?!”

The child shook her head, grinning mischievously.

“I didn’t think so. Come here.” Steph bent down and scooped her up. Melissa squealed, as Steph kissed her on the cheek. “That was good, kiddo. Very smooth.”

“Yes it was,” Rachel wiped her eyes quickly, wrapping Melissa and Steph both in a hug as she kissed the girl’s other cheek. “Thank you, Melissa.”

“You’re welcome.” The girl beamed. “Can we get more ice cream?!”


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**Rachel:** LOOK LOOK LOOK

**Max:** Huh? At what?

**Rachel:** At what I gave Steph!

**Max:** Wait a minute...

**Rachel:** <ring.jpg>

**Max:** OH MY GOD

**Max:** DID YOU PROPOSE?!

**Max:** DID SHE SAY YES?!?!

**Rachel:** She said yes!!

**Max:** YES YES YES I JUST WON FIFTY BUCKS YES YES YES

**Rachel:** Excuse me?

**Max:** Don’t worry about it. How did you do it? Where did you do it? Did she cry? Did you cry?
Was Melissa there? Did she help? Do your parents know yet? Have you set a date?

Rachel: Jesus, are you okay?

Max: Chloe and I have been waiting for one of you idiots to do this for years! I want to know details!

Rachel: I’ll tell you everything, but you’re gonna have to do something for me in return.

Max: ... oh my God anything.

Rachel: Just the response I want from my Maid of Honor.

Max: JKDFDNKYVKTYUS OMG I AM SO RUBBING THIS IN CHLOE’S FACE

Rachel: Actually...

Steph: Hey, are you with Max?

Chloe: No, she’s upstairs. I’m working in the office.

Chloe: Should I go get her?

Steph: No, this is perfect. Wanna see something cool?

Chloe: Is it another VR demo? Because I’m gonna be honest, I’m kind of over them.

Steph: No, it’s not another VR demo.

Chloe: What is it?

Steph: <ring.jpg>

Chloe: Is that a new ring?

Chloe: IS THAT AN ENGAGEMENT RING??

Steph: Yuh-huh!!

Chloe: Who proposed to who?

Steph: What? Why?

Chloe: I HAVE FIFTY BUCKS RIDING ON THIS

Chloe: WHO PROPOSED TO WHO

Steph: Are you kidding me?! Did you BET on our relationship?!

Chloe: ANSWER MY QUESTION

Steph: Rachel asked me.

Chloe: FUCK
Chloe: YOU GODDAMN USELESS SLOW-BURNING LESBIAN COWARD

Steph: You bet on ME to propose to Rachel?!

Chloe: I had faith in you! I believed in you! You were my Rocky, and Rachel was my Drago!

Chloe: Now Max is going to lord this over me. And I’ll bet Rachel is gonna ask her to be the Maid of Honor, too.

Steph: Pretty sure you’re right. Mostly because she told me she was gonna.

Chloe: Figured. Also, I can hear Max losing her shit upstairs.

Steph: Sorry I cost you fifty bucks :(.

Chloe: Oh, Jesus, I don’t actually care. I am SO fucking happy for you and Rachel!! And it’s about goddamn time, too!

Steph: I still feel bad that you’re out some money. Can I make it up to you?

Chloe: You really don’t have to. Especially now that you’ve got a kid. Take it from me, they get expensive quick.

Steph: How about I just ask you to be MY Maid of Honor and we call it even?

Chloe: STEPHANIE GINGRICH NOW IS NOT THE TIME FOR GAMES

Steph: No games here. Are you gonna be my Maid of Honor or not?

Chloe: FUCK yes!!

Chloe: WE ARE GOING TO HAVE SUCH A KILLER BACHELORETTE PARTY!!

Steph: I don’t smoke pot anymore, Chloe.

Chloe: WE ARE GOING TO HAVE SUCH A MEDIOCRE BACHELORETTE PARTY!!
February 2033

“You’re sure Trevor didn’t tell her?”

Dana nodded, as she stirred the pan on the stove while Juliet leaned on the counter next to her. Sophie sat on the couch behind them, playing a game on her tablet with headphones on. “Yes. We agreed she should hear it from us, not him.”

Juliet glanced at the eleven-year-old, whose birthday they’d celebrated a couple of months prior. “Any idea what she’s going to say? Or what she’ll think?”

“Why?” Dana arched an eyebrow. “Are you worried the kid that I’ve raised to accept all lifestyles is going to shame us?”

“No, of course not.” Juliet scratched the back of her neck. “I’m more worried she’s going to decide that she doesn’t like her Aunt Juliet anymore.”

Dana hummed. “We might have to change that name. It’ll be a little awkward to call her mother’s girlfriend by ‘aunt’,”

“That doesn’t alleviate my worry.” Juliet glanced back at Sophie. “I love your kid, Dana. I don’t want her to hate me.”

“You gave her a two-hundred-dollar gift card for her birthday. She’s still gonna love you back.”

“Oh, right.” Juliet grinned. “I forgot that her love is for sale.”

Dana scoffed. “Of course it is. Why do you think Trevor and I spent so much on her Christmas presents?”

Juliet rolled her eyes. “And yet, the gift card was too much.”

“She’s ELEVEN, Jules.” Dana put the spoon down and turned off the burner. “Are the meatballs done?”

“They should be.” Juliet opened the toaster oven and checked. “Yea, they’re ready.”

“Okay.” Dana turned towards the living room. “Sophie!”

The child ignored them, focusing on her game.

“SOPHIE!!”

The girl still didn’t move.

Dana sighed. “Trevor had to get the noise-cancelling model,” she muttered.

“I got it.” Juliet picked up an oven mitt, took aim, and whipped it across the room. The fabric-and-rubber glove spun end-over-end as it sailed through the air, finally smacking Sophie on the back of the head.
“OW!!” She took off her headphones and turned to glare. “Mom!”

“It wasn’t me, sweetie.” Dana smirked. “But if you’re going to use those headphones, you’d better pay more attention for when we call your name. Now come on, it’s time for dinner.”

The girl grimaced. “Five more minutes?” she asked hopefully.

Dana started dishing out the pasta. “Only if you don’t want your favorite.”

Sophie perked up. “Spicy spaghetti? With meatballs?”

“Yes. Pause the game and come to the table.”

“Okay.” Sophie carried the iPad and headphones towards her seat, setting them next to her as Dana brought their bowls to the table. “I got to level sixteen, Aunt Juliet.”

“Wait, for real?” Juliet raised both eyebrows. “I’m still on level ten! How did you beat it?”

Sophie grinned smugly. “I’m not telling. Figure it out on your own like I did.”

“No fair,” Juliet protested. “You play it more than I do.”

“Then make an effort.”

Juliet shook her head as they all sat down, Sophie digging into her food. “How is it?” Dana asked after a few seconds.

“Good,” Sophie mumbled. “Can I have the cheese?”

Dana passed her the container of parmesan. “How was your weekend at Dad’s?”

“Fun.” Sophie swallowed. “Me and Nina got pedicures.”

Dana nodded. Trevor’s girlfriend had been making an effort to bond with their daughter, which she’d been encouraging; she’d confided in Juliet that she actually liked Nina, though at the age of twenty-eight, she still thought the woman was a little too young to date her ex-husband. “Did you get your toenails painted?” she asked.

“No. We didn’t have time.” Sophie shrugged. “She said we might try next weekend.”

Juliet leaned forward. “Do you like your dad’s girlfriend?”

Sophie nodded. “Yea. She’s nice.”

Dana exhaled slowly, and she glanced at Juliet before she looked at her daughter. “Well, sweetie... I, uh...” she hesitated. “I wanted to tell you that your mom’s been dating someone too.”

The girl looked up, turning her focus to her mother. After a few second, she tilted her head expectantly.

“It’s your Aunt Juliet.” Dana reached over and took her hand. “We’ve been dating for a few months, sweetie.”

Sophie blinked. Juliet felt a nervous pit develop in her stomach as she watched the child glanced look at her silently for several seconds, before she turned back to her mother.
The eleven-year-old opened her mouth and, in the flattest voice Juliet had ever heard, stated “No shit.”

Juliet couldn’t stop herself. Laughter exploded from her mouth as she doubled over from the girl’s delivery. Dana, for her part, sputtered in surprise. “What- I’m- you- excuse me!” she finally exclaimed. “Young lady, you are NOT allowed to use that kind of language!”

Sophie shrugged. “Sorry.”

“And what do you mean, no shit?!”

Juliet sat back up as she tried to recover from her laughter. “Way to stay on message,” she gasped between breaths.

“Not now.” Dana looked at her daughter intently. “What did that mean? How did you know?”

“Because when I came home from Dad’s after Christmas, the bed was still made how I did it.” Sophie smirked. “And the toothbrush you have in our bathroom was dusty. So either you didn’t brush for two weeks, or you have another one somewhere else.”

“Ah ha.” Dana breathed deeply as she glanced at Juliet. “I thought I was being clever, getting the second toothbrush.”

“I did too.” Juliet shrugged. “I would’ve fallen for it.”

Sophie grinned. “That’s probably why you’re stuck on level ten.”

“Excuse me, I have a JOB, you little-”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Dana interrupted, laying a hand on Juliet’s arm to stop her. “Or ask?”

Sophie shrugged. “You said that it’s rude to ask questions like that.”

“... okay,” Dana breathed. “And... you don’t have any questions now?”

The child pursed her lips. “Since I know, and we’re not gonna share the bed anymore, can it be my room now?”

Juliet and Dana both snorted, as they looked at each other. “It’s your condo,” Dana said after a few seconds.

“Eh. I’m good with it.” Juliet shrugged. “But we’re not repainting.”

“Aww. I want pink walls.”

“Too bad.”

“But I thought you wanted to buy my love.” Sophie smirked maliciously. “It’s for sale, remember?”

Juliet and Dana both blinked several times. Juliet finally reached over and snagged the headphones, switching them on and putting them around her ears. After a few seconds, she looked at Sophie and narrowed her eyes. “You’re a little too clever for your own good, you know that?”

“Are they not noise cancelling?!” Dana exclaimed.
“No.” Juliet pulled them off her head. “Just regular headphones.”

Dana glared at her child. “Why did you tell me they were noise-cancelling!?”

Sophie grinned. “Because it was funny.”

“Ha ha.” Dana grabbed her fork and reached across the table, spearing one of Sophie’s meatballs. “This is mine now.”

“Hey!” Sophie tugged her bowl away, shielding it with her hands. “Mom!”

“And I’m gonna have your room painted green.” Juliet nodded. “Deep green, with little splashes of orange and red. We’ll tell all your friends that we painted it to match your diaper from when you were a baby.”

“Come on, Aunt Juliet!”

“... mm.” Juliet glanced at Dana. “You’re right, I guess that is a little weird now.”

Sophie tilted her head, still protecting her bowl of pasta. “Um... should I not call you Aunt anymore?”

“Maybe we can stick with just Juliet,” she allowed.

“Okay.” Sophie bit her lip. “You’re not really gonna paint the bedroom green, are you?”

Juliet sighed heavily. “You still love me, right?”

Sophie nodded.

“Fine. We can paint it pink, if you want.”

The girl’s face brightened. “For real?!?”

“Sure, why the hell not.” Juliet pointed at Sophie. “But this is your only chance. Whatever color you want is what you’re gonna live with until you go to college. You sure you want pink?”

Sophie nodded vigorously.

“Okay.” Juliet sat back. “We’ll work on it later. Maybe next week.”

“Yay!”

“You don’t actually have to paint her bedroom, you know.”

Juliet smirked as she sat at her vanity, removing her earrings and necklace. “It’s fine. Not like I have any intention of getting rid of this place anytime soon. Besides, repainting it later is easy.”

“She’ll learn to live with it if you don’t.” Dana sat on the edge of their bed in a bathrobe, drying her wet hair. “Besides, I don’t think refusing to paint it will cost you her love.”

“Oh, I know.” Juliet threw a smirk over her shoulder. “She wants a pink bedroom, she’s getting a pink bedroom. And like I said, she’s never allowed to change it.”

Dana frowned. “... what are you playing at?”
“My revenge for your kid being a smartass.” Juliet turned back to her mirror as she retrieved a skin cream, applying it to her face. “I did the same thing, when I was ten. I begged my parents for a pink bedroom, and they gave in and painted it for me.”

“Your bedroom was pink? I thought I remembered it being white.”

“That’s because I begged them to repaint it when I was twelve. Just before we met, I think.” Juliet snickered. “Trust me, in a couple of years, your kid’s going to HATE having a pink bedroom. And I’m going to sit back and smile, because we made a deal.”

Dana slowly grinned. “You’re pretty conniving.”

“And you love it.”

“I really do.” Dana stood, dropping the hair towel as she walked up behind Juliet and wrapped her arms around her shoulders. “I think it went really well, with Sophie.”

“Yea. Me, too.” Juliet leaned back into Dana’s embrace. “It’s pretty nice, not to have to tiptoe around her anymore.”

“Agreed.” Dana nodded. “And I missed sleeping in here when we had her over.”

“Mm hm.” Juliet smiled through the mirror. “I’m really glad you guys both like living here.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because before you two showed up, I couldn’t stand this place.”

Dana blinked. “Wait, really?”

“Yep.”

“But this is a penthouse. You’ve got the nicest kitchen I’ve ever seen, a balcony with a view most people would kill for, and a private elevator.”

“I know. All of that was part of why I brought it, once I started making serious money at the station.” Juliet nodded. “But every second I spent here was miserable.”

“Why?”

“Because I was by myself.” Juliet shrugged. “I spent more nights on the couch in my office than I did here. My producer used to joke about replacing it with an army cot.”

Dana raised an eyebrow. “And now that I’m here, half-invading your closet while Sophie leaves a mess everywhere she goes?”

“I could do with her picking up her stuff more often,” Juliet acknowledged with a snicker. “But if it was between that and not having you guys here at all, then she could turn this place into a landfill for all I care.”

“Mm.” Dana hugged her tighter. “I’m glad I’m here, too. And that I decided to stick around.”

“Yea?”

“Uh huh. If it wasn’t for you, I’m pretty sure I would’ve gone crazy.” Dana nodded. “I’d say that I’m sorry it took so long, but...”
“Right.” Juliet smirked. “Then I wouldn’t be playing the Long Con against your kid.”

“You know she worships the ground you walk on, right?”

“... does she really?”

Dana grinned. “She used to watch you on TV a lot. She told Trevor and I a couple of times that she wants to be a reporter, too.”

“... shit.” Juliet put a hand over her heart. “I had no idea.”

“Yea.” Dana squeezed her tighter. “Maybe consider, once she’s learned the error of her ways, repainting her bedroom a neutral color.”

“I...” Juliet scrunched her face, before sighing. “Fine. But she’s paying for the paint.”

“Deal.”

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**Dana:** Has having gay parents ever affected your son negatively?

**Victoria:** I take it this means you guys told Sophie?

**Dana:** Yea. She took it well.

**Dana:** But you know Juliet’s a pretty public figure. Our relationship will be common knowledge eventually, especially since we’re not really trying to hide it. I’m just worried about Sophie dealing with the consequences.

**Victoria:** Ah ha.

**Victoria:** I will say that issues have popped up that affected Kevin. When Kate was promoted to assistant principal at her old elementary school, there was a group of parents that were very vocal in their objections to having a lesbian in that position.

**Victoria:** Kevin was uninvited from a couple of birthday parties as a result.

**Dana:** Wow. What a bunch of pricks.

**Victoria:** No kidding. Kevin did get teased a little bit, about not having a dad.

**Victoria:** I’ll also say that the school faculty was great at stepping in and shutting it down whenever it happened. He got a little upset about it, when he was younger, but it hasn’t been a problem for years.

**Dana:** So you guys didn’t even have to do anything?

**Victoria:** ...

**Dana:** What?

**Victoria:** I MIGHT have borrowed one of my dad’s McLaren Spiders to pick him up from school a couple of times.

**Dana:** Really? Your solution was to show off in a half-million-dollar supercar?
**Victoria:** Excuse me, you know what a great way of boosting your kid’s reputation at their school is? Revving up a twin-turbo V8 and then dumping the clutch in front of half their class.

**Dana:** That sounds bad for the engine.

**Victoria:** Yea, my dad wasn’t happy when he got the servicing bill. But we looked really cool, and Kevin didn’t complain as much about getting teased, so it was totally worth it.

**Victoria:** Honestly, Dana, I don’t think you need to worry that much. Sophie can hold her own, you know that.

**Dana:** I do. I’m just worried about her.

**Victoria:** I’d be more worried about the kids teasing her.
Brooke: I am so sorry.

Rachel: For what?

Brooke: We’re not gonna be able to make it to your wedding.

Rachel: Why not?

Brooke: That’s the weekend Dave brought tickets to the cruise for. And airplane tickets, and the hotel room for the night prior. They’re non-refundable.

Rachel: ... shit.

Brooke: I am seriously sorry.

Rachel: It’s okay. I wish you guys could be there, but I get it. I probably should’ve checked with everyone before we put the deposit down on the venue.

Rachel: I appreciate you telling me now, too. Gives me time to find a new bridesmaid.

Brooke: This sucks. I really want to be there.

Rachel: Me too. Don’t stress it. I know you guys saved for a while to get those tickets.

Brooke: Any idea who you’re going to ask?

Rachel: Not yet. I gotta give it some thought.

Steph: Did you guys get the invites?

Michael: We did. I think almost everyone will be able to make it.

Steph: Awesome. Are you guys staying with the Hell Hounds again?

Michael: Yep. Vinny’s already set up a block of rooms at their motel.

Steph: Sweet. I can’t wait to see everyone.

Michael: Us either. It’s not often that a club member’s kid gets married, and they don’t always invite the club. It means a lot to the guys to come out and support you and Rachel.

Steph: Actually, that leads to the other thing I wanted to ask.

Michael: What’s that?

Steph: Is there a tradition, or something, that MCs do when a kid gets married? Like... I don’t know, a big ride or something?

Michael: Nothing established, but there can be. Do you want something like that?
Steph: I mean, it would be pretty cool.

Steph: Plus, it’s an outdoor ceremony. Rachel and I thought it would be pretty neat to have the MC do something. Or MCs, if the Hell Hounds wanted to help.

Michael: Of course they would. Let me talk to Vinny and Rick, I’m sure we can come up with something badass.

Rachel: So... I have a favor to ask.

Victoria: What?

Rachel: I know you and I are cool now. But I still feel like we’re on shaky ground, friendship-wise.

Victoria: I really don’t know how many times I have to say it, Rachel. High school was over twenty years ago. We’re more than good.

Rachel: I know. And we super-appreciate your help, with the letter you wrote for us to the social workers.

Victoria: How is that, by the way? Melissa doing good?

Rachel: She’s great. Amazing. I really never thought Steph and I would ever do the kid thing, but we really couldn’t be happier.

Victoria: Yea, I thought that, before Kevin. I guess an affinity forparenthood sneaks up on you.

Rachel: Anyway. My favor. And it’s cool if you don’t want to.

Victoria: Jesus, I’m not getting younger. Spit it out already.

Rachel: One of my bridesmaids backed out. It would mean a lot if you took her place.

Victoria: Seriously? All this wind-up for that? I thought you were about to ask for a kidney or something!

Rachel: Like I said...

Victoria: Of course I will. I don’t know why you thought I wouldn’t.

Rachel: ... thank you so much.

Victoria: No problem. I assume your MoH is Max, who else is in your wedding party?

Rachel: My old supervisor, Stacy Hemingway.

Victoria: Cool. What about Steph?

Rachel: Chloe is her MoH, and her stepmom/aunt is a bridesmaid. She’s still debating on the third.

Victoria: You know when you call her the stepmom/aunt, it sounds a little Jerry Springer-ish, right?

Rachel: ... I do now.
Chloe: Hey, Michael, it’s Chloe. Steph should’ve told you I’d be texting?

Michael: Hey, Chloe. Yea, she mentioned it. What’s up?

Chloe: Bachelorette party planning. Or lack thereof.

Michael: You’re having trouble?

Chloe: There is NO nightlife around their part of town, man. We’d have to go almost an hour and a half out of our way to have real fun.

Chloe: But the Hell Hounds club is thirty minutes from their house. And I remember how much those guys love to party.

Michael: Oh, boy.

Chloe: Bad idea?

Michael: I didn’t say that. If you ask, those guys will throw a party to end all parties.

Chloe: That sounds cool.

Michael: Not if the wedding is the next day. They don’t do anything halfway, Chloe. There will be enough alcohol to kill a small town, and enough food to feed a medium-sized county.

Chloe: What about pot?

Michael: No, the Hell Hounds have rules against that. Marijuana isn’t allowed on club property.

Chloe: Bummer.

Michael: I don’t think Steph would go for that anyway.

Chloe: ROFLMAO

Michael: ... what?

Chloe: You seriously have no idea how much grass your kid used to smoke?

Michael: She did?!

Chloe: She’s an artist, man. Where do you think her early creativity used to come from?

Michael: I had no idea.

Chloe: I’m kind of surprised that you don’t partake yourself. You’re ruining my image of MCs.

Michael: I never said I didn’t. But it’s been years. I never realized that Steph did at all.

Chloe: Yea, she used to get some good dope. Which is how we became friends, by the way, over a blunt at my apartment.

Michael: Note to self.
**Courtney:** So... Victoria says you desperately need my help?

**Rachel:** Okay, I object to the use of the word “desperately”.

**Courtney:** What’s up?

**Rachel:** Apparently the bridesmaid dresses I picked are ugly.

**Courtney:** Aren’t they usually? What did you pick?

**Rachel:** <dress.jpg>

**Courtney:** Oh.

**Courtney:** My.

**Courtney:** God.

**Rachel:** Is it really that bad?

**Courtney:** You’re no longer allowed to object to the word “desperately”. Did you take inspiration from Big Bird or something?

**Rachel:** Okay, in my defense, I don’t really know what I’m doing.

**Courtney:** You’re letting down gay people everywhere with your lack of taste. Ellen DeGeneres is on her way to your house right now, to revoke your membership.

**Rachel:** Jesus, you made your point. No need to be mean.

**Courtney:** What are your wedding colors?

**Rachel:** Red and grey.

**Courtney:** At least you picked a good combo.

**Rachel:** ... it was Steph’s idea.

**Courtney:** I believe you. Why did you pick yellow dresses then?

**Rachel:** Again, I have NO IDEA what I’m doing.

**Courtney:** Alright. We can fix this. I want you to send me pictures of the dresses Steph’s wedding party is going to wear. We’ll find outfits that don’t look like rejected colors for highlighters.

---

**Steph:** Hey kid. Jimmy ask you to the prom yet?

**Marcy:** Ugh. No.

**Steph:** How much longer does he have?

**Marcy:** Well, if he hasn’t by next week, he’ll have cemented his place as a bitch.
Steph: You sure your father isn’t too intimidating for him?

Marcy: I’m sure he will be. But if Jimmy wants to date a Thompson girl, he better grow a spine.

Marcy: Worse comes to worse, I’ll third-wheel with Iris and her boyfriend.

Steph: I’m sure she’ll appreciate that while she’s trying to give her virginity up to him.

Marcy: Pfft. She did that months ago.

Steph: Ah ha. What about YOU??

Marcy: Christ, you sound like my mom. She actually made me put condoms in my purse last month.

Steph: Have a chance to use them yet?

Marcy: Maybe I would’ve, if Jimmy would grow a pair. I mean, aren’t football players supposed to be alpha males or something?

Steph: I think you’d be shocked, about how infrequently those stereotypes are actually true.

Marcy: Like you’d know.

Steph: Fair point. Hey, unrelated note, wanna be my third bridesmaid?

Marcy: WHAT

Steph: I know you can read.

Marcy: FUCK YES I’LL BE YOUR BRIDESMAID

Steph: Cool. That was easy.

Marcy: Wait, this isn’t a thing where I have to ask my mom and dad first, right?

Steph: I already got their permission to ask you.

Steph: I’ll send you an email with the dress you’ll have to get. Your Aunt Amanda said she’ll help measure you for it. And you’ll have to be at my bachelorette party the night before.

Marcy: What kind of bachelorette party? Will there be strippers?

Steph: I have no idea what my MoH is planning. Maybe. Though the gender of possible strippers is up in their air.

Steph: I’m sure there will be good food. And copious amounts of alcohol.

Marcy: Well, twist my fucking arm why don’t you.

Max: So... what are we thinking about? Bachelorette party-wise?

Rachel: An extremely watered-down version of whatever Steph is doing.
Max: LOL. No partying until three in the morning?

Rachel: Given what I’ve been hearing your wife is planning, I’m sure they’ll be drinking past that.

Max: I got a promise that they’d have an easy night.

Rachel: Aw, you’re adorable.

Max: They don’t have a choice. Faith is gonna be with them.

Rachel: Wait, really?

Max: She’s adamant that she doesn’t want to hang out with Kate and the twins. Chloe said that the Hell Hounds have a room at their club house for her to hang out at. And they’re doing a real get-together, which means there will be a few other kids there, too.

Rachel: You’re letting your little sister hang out at an MC club house while they party it up?

Max: Only because Amanda has assured me that she’ll keep an eye on her. Besides, Faith is Steph’s flower girl, so she has to be with them to get ready in the morning anyway.

Rachel: You’re seriously not worried about this?

Max: Of course I am. I’m not oblivious. I have decided to place a little trust in my wife. And Steph’s aunt.

Rachel: Mm hm.

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Steph: I’M GOING TO KILL YOU

Chloe: What? Why?

Steph: YOU TOLD MY DAD I USED TO SMOKE POT?!

Chloe: Uh... yea? Why the hell wouldn’t I?

Steph: BECAUSE HE’S MY DAD! WHAT IF I TOLD YOUR MOM THAT YOU SMOKED POT?!

Chloe: Then she’d look at you and say “No shit.” Her and my stepfather caught me doing it often enough.

Steph: I STILL DON’T WANT MY DAD TO KNOW I DID DRUGS!!

Chloe: Is he under the impression that you qualify for sainthood or something?

Steph: ... okay, no. But I still didn’t want him to know!

Chloe: Did he tell you that he used to do it, too?

Steph: Yea.

Chloe: Then calm the fuck down. Recreational use is legal in half the country anyway. Nobody
gives a shit.

**Chloe:** I mean, you’re not seriously trying to still impress him, are you?

**Steph:** ...

**Chloe:** Oh, Jesus, really?!

**Steph:** He’s my Dad, man.

**Chloe:** Yea, and you’ve known him for a decade now! You went to college, got a kickass job, adopted an adorable little grandkid for him, and he’s about to walk you down the aisle to marry your amazing fiancée.

**Chloe:** Do you really believe he’s gonna think less of you just because you used to toke up?!

**Steph:** ... no.

**Chloe:** Christ, between you with your dad and Rachel with Victoria, I don’t know who’s got the more baseless insecurities.

**Steph:** Shut up.
Most Everyone: Morning Of

November 2033

“Ten bucks says she comes down the aisle wearing her beanie.”

Victoria smirked, as she looked at Max. The two of them were in the hotel suite that had been reserved for the bridesmaids, and they were getting ready for the ceremony. “I’m not dumb enough to take that bet.”

“It’s not dumb,” Max countered, as they did their makeup in the large bathroom mirror. “She took it off for our wedding.”

“Yea, for a grand total of forty-five minutes.” Victoria rolled her eyes. “She will have convinced Rachel to let her keep it. And I’ll bet she found one to match whatever kind of dress she’s wearing.”

Max sighed. “Maybe.”

The bathroom door opened, and Rachel’s old boss Stacy walked in. “Maybe what?”

“We’re talking about a possible bet.” Max looked at her. “I’m willing to put down ten bucks that Steph is wearing a beanie when she goes down the aisle.”

Stacy snorted in amusement, as she took a position next to Max for the mirror. “I’m not stupid enough to bet against that.”

Victoria choked on laughter, as Max sighed. “Nobody here is any fun.” She looked back at Stacy. “Do you want to make a bet on how many of Steph’s bridesmaids are hungover?”

Stacy paused, as she considered the answer. “I don’t know your wife very well, but she seemed like someone who was pretty desperate to cut loose. Her cousin looked pretty young, but her aunt looks about my age…” she glanced back at Max. “I’ll bet ten bucks that only one of them isn’t miserable.”

“Ugh.” Max shook her head. “That was going to be my bet.”

“Why do you feel the need to make a bet of some kind?” Victoria inserted her gold earrings, which matched perfectly to the red dresses they were wearing. “Is your job not high-stakes enough for you?”

Max scoffed. “With all the money I’ve made you and your dad? I’m fairly certain that my employment is secure.”

“Yea, we’re not firing you any time soon,” Victoria acknowledged. “But we’ve owned QuantumCloud for almost a year, and they’ve eaten up hundreds of thousands in R&D without turning a single dollar in profit. Important people are starting to ask if we should be concerned.”

“Six months,” Max stated.

Victoria looked at her after several seconds, when she didn’t elaborate. “Six months... what?”

“That’s it. Six months. Then you and the naysayers will be eating those words.” Max smirked as she touched her face with the makeup brush. “You’ll see.”
A few miles away, Chloe groaned into a pillow, as she lay face-down on Steph and Rachel’s couch. “I want to die,” she muttered heavily. “My head feels like a washing machine rolling down a set of stairs.”

Across from her, a young woman with black hair lay sprawled on the recliner, one arm over her eyes. They were both wearing their red dresses, and were equally miserable. “Please stop talking,” she moaned. “Your voice is like ear sandpaper.”

“Oh, shut up.” Chloe picked her head up, looking at the girl with bleary eyes. “This is all your fault.”

“Excuse me?” Marcy lowered her arm as she looked at Chloe. “How is this my fault?”

“You and your young, healthy liver insisted that we could handle doing shots of Patron.” Chloe dropped her head back onto the couch. “Could have stuck to beer and cocktails like responsible bitches, but noooo..."

“I didn’t hear any fuckin’ arguing out of YOUR corner, you know...”

Across the room, the door cracked open, and two sets of eyes looked at them as they bickered. After a few second, Amanda looked down. “I don’t think your sister-in-law feels very well,” she remarked quietly.

Faith looked up at her with raised eyebrows. “You think she’s going to be sick?”

“Not yet. We’ll see how she feels after the car ride.” Amanda closed the door and looked back at Steph. The brunette was sitting on the floor in her wedding dress, leaning against the wall while her head hung between her knees. “How are you doing?”

“Urgh.” Steph peeled her eyes open and looked up at her aunt. “I think I forgot how old I actually am last night.”

“Yes you did.” Amanda walked over to the nightstand and picked up a fresh bottle of Gatorade. “Here. Chug this.”

Steph wrinkled her nose as she took the white sports drink. “I hate this flavor.”

“Well, you three were passed out when I drove to the gas station, so I got to pick the color.” Amanda checked her watch, as Steph tilted the bottle back and started drinking. “Your father should be bringing some McDonalds with him.”

“Thank God,” Steph gasped, as she lowered the bottle. “The greasier the better.” She paused. “Um... my memory is still kind of fuzzy. Did I dance on a table last night?”

“Yes you did.” Amanda smiled widely. “So did Marcy. You two had a grand time while Chloe threw ice cubes at you.”

“Oh, wonderful.” Steph closed her eyes. “Please tell me nobody took pictures.”

Amanda sat on the bed across from her. “Do you really think I would have let anyone take pictures?”

Steph cracked her eyes open. “... you were filming, weren’t you?”

“I’ll show you later. You do the Macarena very well, by the way.”

“Oh, good.” Steph closed her eyes again. “How long do we have?”
Amanda checked her watch. “Ninety minutes, before we need to get on the road.”

“Okay.” Steph inhaled deeply. “Okay. I can be vertical by then.”

“Let’s hope so. Try not to move while I go rustle your cousin and Maid of Honor.” Amanda stood. “Faith, go get your phone and turn on that app I showed you.”

Steph glanced back up at her aunt. “We’re not going to get in trouble for Marcy drinking, are we?”

Amanda grinned, as she picked up two more bottles of Gatorade. “From Frank? Probably not. His wife, on the other hand…”

Steph groaned as Amanda walked into other room, pushing the door open. “… the one who insisted that she could keep up with us,” Chloe was grumbling.

“I’m young,” Marcy said, countering Chloe’s argument. “By all arguments, I should have.”

“Yes, but you’re also stupid,” Amanda stated as she walked into the room. She tossed a bottle at each of them. “Drink.”

Marcy’s bottle landed on her stomach, and the girl yelped in pain, rolling onto her side and clutching her gut. “Why?” she whimpered.

“Because if I’m going to catch shit from your mother, then I’m going to enjoy myself. And you need to learn a valuable lesson about your limits.” Amanda smiled smugly. “Building up a tolerance takes time. And you did not even come CLOSE to keeping up with Steph and Chloe, I promise.”

Chloe snickered, as she picked her bottle of Gatorade from the floor. “Lightweight.”

Amanda turned to her. “And you. Are you ready to get up?”

“No. Go away.”

“We leave in ninety minutes.” Amanda checked her watch. “Eighty-five.”

“I’ll be there in spirit.”

Amanda turned to Faith, as the girl stepped up behind her. “Hit it, kid.”

Faith grinned maliciously as she hit a button on the phone screen. The sound of a train horn blasted through the room at full volume, making Chloe and Marcy jump in their respective seats.

“Stop!” Marcy yelled, as she covered her ears. “Shut that thing the fuck up!!”

The thirteen-year-old removed her finger from the screen, and the sound disappeared. Chloe lifted her head and glared at her. “If you do that again, you’re grounded.”

Faith jammed her finger on the screen again. Chloe and Marcy both yelled, as the smacked their hands on their ears.

“You little shit!” Chloe yelled.

Faith’s grin widened and she stopped the noise. “Amanda says you’re not allowed to mess with me today.”

Chloe finally sat back up, narrowing her eyes at her sister-in-law. “Maybe not. But remember, kid,
you’re not going home with Amanda when this is over.”

A knock on the door interrupted them. “There he is,” Amanda said as she turned to get it. “Food’s here.”

She came back a minute later, Steph’s father following her. Michael had put on a sharp-looking tuxedo under his leather vest, and trimmed his beard neatly. He looked at Marcy with an amused expression on his face and lifted a pair of large McDonald’s bags. “Who’s in the mood for greasy carbs?”

“I love you,” Chloe replied, as she stood on shaky legs.

Marcy followed her. “Please tell me there’s a chicken sandwich in there.”

“I got a little of everything. And I bring other goodies.” He glanced at the man who followed behind them in a suit. “Ready?”

“I’ll need a few minutes,” the man replied, setting down his duffle bag on the kitchen table. “I thought you said there’d be three?”

“Steph’s still in the bedroom. Just a second.” Amanda went to go get her. When she came back, Steph was stumbling alongside her, one arm over her shoulder.

“There’s the party girl.” Michael grinned. “How’s the head?”

Steph groaned, as she sat down. “Heavy. And fuzzy.”

“Do you remember drinking half a bottle of Patron?”

“I drank Patron?”

“You did.”

“Explains why my mouth tastes like Mexican tap water.” Steph smacked her lips as she reached into the bag, pulling out a hamburger. “Thank you for the food.”

“Oh, I bring more than food.” Michael glanced around, noticing the lamp in the corner. “That’s tall enough to hang them from. Hank?”

Steph looked up with squinted eyes at the other man. “Who is this?”

“This is Hank. He’s one of our new Prospects. And a licensed EMT.” Michael dragged the lamp between Steph and Marcy. “He’s going to get you girls upright faster.”

Hank smirked as he produced three bags of yellow liquid. “Full disclosure, these have been expired for about a week now,” he informed them. “But you’ll be fine.”

Chloe looked at him with wide eyes. “Are you giving us IVs?”

“That’s the plan. Unless you girls don’t want them.”

“Fuck that.” Chloe stuck her arm out. “Plug me in, doc. Stat.”

An hour and fifteen minutes later, Amanda’s car pulled up to the front of the hotel.
Rachel’s bridesmaids were waiting in the lobby, as Steph’s bridesmaids got out of the car. Max raised an eyebrow as Chloe came through the door. “You look a lot better than I thought you would.”

“I am the pinnacle of recovery,” Chloe stated with a smile on her face. “My body is a medical marvel. Scientists will exhume my casket long after I’m gone, to see how I lived after so much mileage.”

Victoria frowned. “We figured you’d all be hung over. What did you guys do last night?”

“Nothing,” Marcy said immediately. “Aren’t we supposed to be walking in five minutes? We should go get in position.”

Max and Victoria traded glances, as the others started walking through the lobby. Max quickly fell into step next to Amanda. “Please tell me that nobody got arrested,” she said quietly.

Amanda smirked. “Nobody got arrested.”

“Or fined? Or killed?”

“Nobody got too wild.” She paused. “I will show you the video later, though. It’s hilarious.”

Max shook her head as they stopped near the glass doors, quickly shuffling into position. Max and Chloe stood at the back, behind Marcy and Victoria. Amanda and Stacy led the bridesmaids, just behind Faith and Melissa.

“Just hold my hand,” Faith coached Melissa, as they held their flowers. “And try not to trip, like rehearsal.”

Melissa nodded, as she rubbed her eyes with the hand that held the flowers. “You okay, kiddo?” Amanda asked.

“Tired,” Melissa yawned.

“How late were you up last night?”

The five-year-old shrugged.

“Wonderful.” Amanda shook her head. “I guess nobody went to bed on time.”

After a couple of minutes, they heard a door open. They all looked up as Rachel rounded the corner. Her and Steph had elected for very simple dresses, as opposed to the lavish ones Max and Chloe had worn at their wedding. But she looked all the more elegant for it. And it was one of the few times they could remember seeing her without her blue feather earring. She smiled, as she saw them all.

“How do I look?”


She smirked. “Do I still have bags under my eyes?”

“No,” Stacy assured her. “You look fine.”

“Is it obvious that I chugged a Red Bull?”

Marcy arched an eyebrow. “How late were you guys up drinking?”
“Eleven. But I got up early because I couldn’t sleep.” Rachel shot her a look. “How late were YOU up drinking?”

“I didn’t drink,” Marcy said immediately.

“Yea, kid, I’m sure you-”

“What’s that?” Max interrupted, grabbing her wife’s arm as her eyes zeroed on in a tan bandage wrapped around her elbow. “You didn’t have that yesterday! What happened?”

“Uh... I slipped,” Chloe said lamely. “Busted my elbow.”

“Then why does Marcy have one too?!”

The teenager squirmed, shifting her arm to hide her own bandage. “I fell down some stairs,” she said, in just as ill-convincing of a voice as Chloe.

Max got one finger under the bandage before her wife could stop her, yanking it down her arm. An angry red mark on the inside of Chloe’s elbow greeted her. “What the hell is... is that from an IV?!?”

“No?” Chloe replied hopefully.

“Yes it is! I had the same thing when I was in the hospital!” Max glared at her wife. “Did you guys drink so much that you needed IVs to get back on your feet?!”

Stacy snorted in amusement, looking between Chloe and Marcy. “I guess that’s one way to recover from a hangover,” she remarked.

“What the hell happened?!” Max exclaimed. “I thought you guys were going to have an easy night!”

“We DID have an easy night,” Chloe protested weakly. “But the Hell Hounds had a bunch of booze, and... we might have gotten a little carried away. But we didn’t get crazy!” she quickly added. “And we were safe!”

“Faith was with you guys!”

“She was fine!” Chloe turned to the front. “Faith, tell your sister that you were fine!”

Faith turned to look at them, an innocent expression on her face. “I drank something called vodka,” she said. “It burned, and made my head heavy.”

“No you did NOT, you little-”

Max stuck her finger in Chloe’s face, before she could finish her sentence. “We have young children,” she said sternly. “Our son and daughter are sitting next to Kate right now. They do not need their Mama getting rushed to the ER for alcohol poisoning! You PROMISED that you would take it easy! That does NOT mean to get so drunk that you needed IV fluids to get back on your feet!”

Chloe wilted under her wife’s glare. “... sorry,” she muttered.

The others had been watching with amused expressions. When Max was done, Victoria turned to Stacy. “You know, all of the sudden, I feel inadequate as a parent,” she commented.

Max gave her a look. “Shut up.”
James took that opportunity to come around the corner in his tuxedo. “Sorry,” he greeted them. “Had to make a phone call. What did I miss?”

“Chloe’s in trouble, Victoria’s a terrible parent, and Steph may be walking down the aisle with a five-alarm hangover,” Rachel reported.

“Ah. Well, that’s how it goes some days.” He shrugged, smiling as he stood next to his daughter while the others snickered. “Are we about ready?”
Most Everyone: Ceremony

When the music finally started, everyone filed out quickly to take their positions.

The bridesmaids went down the aisle first, Max and Chloe trailing behind them, and took positions on either side of the alter. Once they were in place, the music changed as Rachel came out, James escorting her down the aisle. The stopped in front of the alter, the two of them waiting patiently as the music tapered off.

They didn’t wait long. The noise was faint, at first, as a few of the guests frowned and turned to identify the source. It slowly but gradually turned into a loud roar, as a pack of motorcycles rounded the bend of the road; the entirety of the Locos Lobos and Hell Hounds, riding in formation, all of the bikers wearing suits under their vests. They all slowed in a practiced motion, finally stopping their bikes in two lines as they all turned to face each other and form a path.

Michael’s motorcycle rounded the bend just as they were finished, Steph sitting behind him in her wedding dress and white helmet, and he rode down the path all the way to the front as the other bikers revved their engines. Everyone started applauding as he parked and dismounted, turning to help his daughter off of the bike. She immediately took off her helmet, shaking out her hair.

Which was decidedly lacking a beanie.

“Damn,” Victoria muttered. “Maybe I should have taken that bet.”

Max snickered as Steph took her father’s arm, letting him lead her down the aisle. “Hey Dad?” Rachel asked quietly.

“Yes, sweetie?”

“You ever think about getting a motorcy-”

“Never gonna happen.”

The remarks were brief by design; Steph and Rachel had elected to spend more money on the reception than the ceremony. As a result, the vows were over almost before they began.

“Do you, Rachel, take Steph to be your lawfully wedded wife, from this day forward, through sickness and health?” the officiant asked.

Rachel nodded. “I do.”

Steph couldn’t keep the smile from her face as she accepted the wedding ring from Chloe, sliding it over her wife’s finger.

“Do you, Steph, take Rachel to be your lawfully wedded wife, from this day forward, through sickness and health?”

“I do.” Steph nodded, holding out her hand.

Rachel turned to Max, to accept the ring. Her Maid of Honor looked at her blankly. “I don’t have it.”

“... what?”
“I don’t have it.”

“What do you—” Rachel did a double-take. “Yes you do!” she exclaimed quietly. “I gave them both to Chloe!”

“You only gave me one,” Chloe corrected her.

“I most certainly did n—”

She was interrupted by a tugging on her dress. “Rachel?” Melissa asked, as she tugged again.

“Huh?”

The child held up her hand, a silver wedding ring between her fingers. “I think you dropped something.”

The entire venue started laughing, including the wedding party as Rachel looked blankly at Melissa, finally shaking her head. She turned back to Steph as her wife snickered. “... really?”

Steph nodded, a wide grin on her face.

“You are all so very funny.” Rachel bent over and scooped up Melissa, the child laughing. “Did Steph tell you to do that?”

Melissa nodded.

“Nice job, kiddo,” Steph encouraged as she held up her hand, Melissa meeting her high five. “Very smooth.”

“Yea, yea.” Rachel pecked Melissa on the cheek. “Hey. Do you want to help me put it on?”

“Uh huh.”

Rachel took Steph’s hand, holding it up as Melissa slid the ring on her finger carefully.

The officiant cleared his throat into the microphone, bringing everyone’s attention back to him. “By the state of Oregon, I pronounce you both to be married,” he finished. “You may now kiss your bride.”

The crowd burst into applause as their lips met, Steph making sure she got her arm around Melissa, too.

“You know, I almost can’t even see it.

Steph smirked as the two of them sat at the sweetheart table, watching their other guests dance while they held hands. “Amanda put some concealer on it.”

Rachel nodded as she looked at the inside of her wife’s elbow. “She did a good job.”

“Agreed.”

“Why didn’t she do that for Chloe and Marcy, too?”

“There wasn’t time.” Steph shrugged. “I finished my IV first. By the time she was done with mine, we had to leave. She said they would have to make do with the bandages, but she wasn’t going to let
me walk down the aisle with one.”

Rachel smiled. “We should send her a gift basket or something.”

“Probably.” Steph looked over the room, her gaze stopping at the kid’s table. “Oh, no.”

“What?”

She pointed, and Rachel followed her gaze to see what appeared to be the beginnings of a food fight. They watched Jennifer throw peas at Melissa, who immediately picked up a tater tot and returned fire, the fried snack exploding against Jennifer’s forehead. Meanwhile, William and Kevin threw corn kernels at Faith, who protested while shielding herself with her hands. “This won’t end well.”

Rachel smirked. “Should we try to stop it?”

“We could.” Steph paused. “Or we could wait for someone else to do it, and see who wins.”

“Does that make us good parents?”

“No. But it’s our wedding, so we can get away with being okay parents.”

It didn’t last much longer. Kate made an appearance behind Jennifer, grabbing the five-year-old’s arm while she began scolding the entire table.

At the same time, Faith had apparently become fed up with Kevin and William’s antics. Steph and Rachel watched as she grabbed her spoon, took a big scoop of mashed potatoes, and let fly at the two boys.

And missed completely.

The mass of potatoes flew right over Kevin’s head, breezing past his hair as they arced gracefully, finally splattering against Kate’s chest and neck.

“Oooooh,” Steph and Rachel both hissed as Kate gasped, her mouth gaping as the shock of what had just happened hit her. Faith reacted much faster, as she saw what she’d done, and jumped off her chair to vanish into the crowd.

“She’s gonna pay for that later,” Rachel remarked, amused, as Kate grabbed a napkin while the other children shrank away from her. “We might find her on our doorstep tonight.”

Steph chuckled. “You think she’s more scared of Max or Kate?”

“Mm.” Rachel pursed her lips. “We might have to call that a wash.”

“Fair point.” Steph looked at Rachel. “Can I... confess something to you?”

Rachel raised an eyebrow. “Is it that you’re secretly rich?”

“You already know that’s not true.”

“Well, a girl can dream.”

Steph shook her head. “It’s... well...” she paused. “I don’t feel any different.”

Rachel cocked her head. “How do you mean?”
“We’re married now,” Steph elaborated. “I’m not your girlfriend anymore. Or partner, or significant other, or whatever title people use. I’m your wife. That’s, like, the highest level of a relationship you can get. But... I feel the same as I did last week,” she admitted. “It’s like nothing has changed.”

“Mm.” Rachel reached over at took Steph’s hand, interlocking their fingers. “What were you expecting?”

“I’m not sure.” Steph shrugged. “I just... I guess what I was trying to say was that I don’t love you any more than I did before we put those rings on each other’s fingers. And... I’m pretty sure that’s because I don’t think it’s possible to love you any more than I already do.”

A smile slowly broke out over Rachel’s face, before she sighed. “Dammit.”

“What?”

“I don’t think I have anything romantic enough in the bank to match that.”

Steph snorted in amusement.

“But I get it.” Rachel nodded. “I loved the crap out of you yesterday. And I still love the crap out of you now that we’re married; the rings don’t change how I feel.” Rachel grinned. “They just make it obvious to everyone else.”

Steph smiled back. “Works for me.”

“Good.” Rachel reached over and kissed her. “So. Should we go out there and start thanking people for coming?”

“Fine,” Steph sighed. “Only because a polite society dictates that we-”

“Hello, Steph.”

They looked over and noticed an older blonde women looking at her, arms folded and an unhappy look on her face. “... hey, Nat,” Steph greeted carefully. “How are you-”

“How was your bachelorette party?”

Rachel watched her wife squirm uncomfortably. “That... depends on what you heard.”

“What I heard? Nothing. My daughter refuses to discuss it with me, and swears that you guys had a very easy night.” Natalie produced her phone, turning it on. “Which is interesting, considering the pictures that she put on Instagram.”

She turned the phone to show them a selfie of the eighteen-year-old in the yard behind the Hell Hound’s clubhouse. Her free hand held a bottle of vodka by the neck, tilted all the way back as the teenager drank from it.

“How was your bachelorette party?”

Rachel watched her wife squirm uncomfortably. “That... depends on what you heard.”

“Not looking, Natalie flipped to the next photo, which was a picture of Chloe drinking from the same bottle as Steph laughed behind her. The next was Marcy taking a shot of brown liquor, then her holding a bottle of Patron as she grinned stupidly, then a picture of Chloe passed out on top of a table while holding the same bottle of tequila. “Was it, Steph?” Natalie asked. “Or was my eighteen-year-old daughter drinking underage at a motorcycle club?”

Steph inhaled slowly. “Okay, can I just say that an occasional wild night is GOOD for a young adult
“Is the bandage around her arm from an IV?”

“... would you believe me if I said no?”

Natalie sighed, as she lowered her phone. “She got accepted into USC, Steph. My daughter wants to be a teacher. You know that, right?”

“Of course I-”

“Then tell me how you think I, as a parent, might feel about these pictures of her being online?” Natalie waved her phone. “She wants to hang out and do stuff with her cool Cousin Steph. You’re an EXAMPLE to her. And now there are pictures of her breaking the law on Instagram, for all the world to see.”

Steph deflated, and cast her eyes at her lap. “I’m sorry.”

Natalie sighed. “... I’ll have her delete them. Will you just do me a favor?”

“What?”

“Next time my daughter and you decide to be dumb together, will you take her phone away?” Natalie smirked. “I would really, really appreciate it.”

Steph nodded.

“Good.” Natalie nodded. “Congratulations on your wedding day.”

“Congratulations on your wedding day,” Victoria told them. “Especially the thing with Melissa.”

Steph nodded with a smirk, as they stood by their friends’ table. “I thought that was funny.”

“Was that an inside joke?” Kate asked. She had cleaned most of the potato residue from her dress, but there was an obvious outline that Steph and Rachel fought to ignore. “I don’t get it.”

Rachel nodded at Steph. “I proposed by having Melissa pretend to find the ring on the ground.”

“Aww!” Kate placed her hand on her chest. “That is so sweet!”

“Yea it was.” Max smiled smugly as she sat back in her chair. “And you should have seen the look on your face, when I told you I didn’t have the ring.”

“Which was not cool, by the way.” Rachel crossed her arms. “I almost had a heart attack. I actually thought for a minute that I really had only given Chloe one ring.”

Max shrugged. “Blame your wife. It was her idea.”

“Gee, thanks,” Steph said dryly.

“Hey, man, I’m not taking the fall for you.”

Victoria cleared her throat. “Are you guys doing a honeymoon?” she asked.

“Next month,” Rachel replied. “No place too far away, just Seattle. Melissa’s going to stay with my dad for a couple of weeks while we do the tourist thing.”
“Ooh, that sounds like fun,” Kate allowed. “We should definitely send you a list of places to hit up.”

“Yea, we should.” Victoria produced her phone, tapping rapidly on the screen.

Steph frowned. “You have a list of places ready to go? Seriously?”

“No. I’m sending an email to the GM of the hotel we own near Pike Place Market.” She tapped her phone again before she set it down. “I copied you two. He’ll give you guys the friends-and-family rate.”

Rachel raised her eyebrows. “For real?”

Victoria shrugged. “Why not? You guys are friends.”

“...wow,” Steph remarked quietly. “I don’t even know what to say, Victoria. Thank you.”

“You’re wel-”

“There she is,” a voice said behind them. “Come on, let’s go.”

They all turned as Chloe dragged Faith by her shoulder up to the table, planting her in front of everyone. “Found her outside,” she mentioned, as she nudged the girl towards the table. “Go on.”

Faith bit her lip as she looked at Kate. “... I’m sorry, Aunt Kate.”

Kate raised an eyebrow silently as she watched Faith.

“I was aiming for Will and Kevin,” Faith continued. “I didn’t mean to hit you. I’m, um, really sorry I...” her voice trailed off as Kate picked up her spoon, taking a scoop from the plate in front of her. “What are you-”

Before anyone could stop her, Kate pulled back on the spoon and let it spring forward like a catapult. The morsel of mashed potatoes flew across the table like a laser, impacting Faith’s nose mid-sentence.

Everyone started laughing as Faith flinched, sputtering as she wiped her face. “Aunt Kate!”

“Apology accepted.” Kate put the spoon down and stood, looking at her wife while smiling. “I feel like dancing. Will you come with me, Vicky?”

Victoria grinned as she got to her feet. “Absolutely.”
“No! Dude! The big one! You gotta kill the big one!”

“There are too many little ones! You need to kill them first!”

“Once the big one is dead, THEN we can kill the little ones!”

“No, you kill the little ones FIRST, so you can focus more on the big one!”

Kevin and Faith focused completely on the TV in front of them, each working a controller as they fought their way through the video game. “I’ve done this level before,” Kevin said intently. “You HAVE to get the big one first. He can kill you in, like, three hits!”

“Why don’t you focus on him, and I’ll keep killing the little ones?” Faith twisted her controller, and her character danced across the screen, slashing through smaller minions. “That seems like a solid plan.”

“Because I’m at half health! He’ll kill me if he touches me again!”

“Well, maybe you should suck less.”

“Maybe YOU should help, instead of being useless.”

A throat cleared behind them. “If you two can’t be nice to each other, I’m turning that TV off.”

“Yes, Max,” they both said without looking.

“And you two are also supposed to be watching the twins,” Kate added. “Do you know where they are?”

“On the balcony,” Kevin answered, as he mashed buttons on his controller. “They’re watching the cars drive by on the highway.”

“Oh, really? You sure about that?”

The two of them finally looked outside and saw the empty balcony. “What- they were there five minutes ago!” Faith exclaimed.

“Okay, enough.” Max and Kate walked around to the front of the couch, standing between them and the TV as they folded their arms. “Pause it.”

“We can’t,” Kevin protested, leaning to the side to see around them.

“Yes, you can,” Max countered. “Your Aunt Chloe plays this game at home, too.”

Kate raised her eyebrows. “Is that true, Kevin?”

Her son sighed, hitting a button on the controller. The game froze behind them. “Fine.”
“Well, just for that...” Kate turned and hit a button on the PlayStation. The screen went dark, as the disk ejected.

“Mom!”

“Aunt Kate!” Faith exclaimed. “We were so close to the end!”

“That’s what you get for lying.” Kate planted her hands on her hips. Her and Max were both ready to go out for the evening, in formal dresses and makeup. “In case you’ve forgotten, you two are being paid twenty dollars each to babysit William and Jennifer. Which means you’re supposed to know where they are at all times.”

“And for the record, they’ve been watching TV in the other room for fifteen minutes,” Max added. “Not five.”

The two teenagers traded glances, as they slumped into the couch. “Fine,” Faith muttered. “We can still play until you guys leave, though.”

“We’re leaving NOW,” Max told her. “Chloe and Victoria are already at the party. It’s time for your duties to commence.”

“Okay, okay,” Kevin mumbled. “We’ll watch the twins.”

“I know you will.” Max turned around, taking the disc from the system and placing it in the open case beside it. She scooped up the rest of the games beside the console with it. “We’re taking these with us.”

“Max!” Faith protested. “What about after we put the twins to bed?!!”

Her sister smirked. “Read a book. Or do that English paper you’ve been putting off.”

“But-”

Kate’s smart watch beeped. “Shoot,” she muttered, reading the text. “Vicky said her father’s going to be there in thirty minutes.”

“Then let’s get going.” Max looked back at the teenagers on the couch. “Watch the kids. We’re leaving two of them in this apartment, and they had both better still be here and in good health when we get back.”

Faith and Kevin groaned as they walked out the door, closing it behind them. Faith waited for a couple of seconds before looking at her cousin. “You’ve got games downloaded on that thing, right?”

“Yea, a few of them.” Kevin smirked. “Good thing Chloe wasn’t here. She probably would’ve taken the power cable.”

“Nah, she wised up, after I ordered a spare online when she grounded me last year.” Faith grinned. “She probably would’ve just taken the whole system.”

“Small favors.” Kevin sighed. “I guess we should get them out here, so we can keep an eye on them.”

“You didn’t put hot dogs in it.”
Faith looked at Jennifer, exasperated. “There aren’t any hot dogs here, Jen.”

“I don’t like it without hot dogs.” The six-year-old folded her arms, as she glared at the macaroni and cheese Faith had spooned into her bowl. “I want hot dogs.”

“We don’t HAVE any,” Faith stressed. “I can’t give you when I don’t have, Jen. You love mac and cheese anyway, just eat it.”

“No. I want hot dogs.”

“What about bacon?” Kevin interrupted, from his seat at the kitchen island. “I think my mom has some in the pantry, for salads.”

“Hot dogs.”

Faith took a deep breath. “You know we have brownies for desert, right?”

Jennifer finally blinked. “Brownies?”

“Aunt Kate made them this afternoon. Do you want one?”

“Yes.”

“Then eat your dinner. Or else Will’s gonna eat yours.”

Across from Jennifer, William brightened at the prospect of a second desert. He dug into his food with renewed vigor; unlike Jennifer, who was a picky eater, William ate whatever was in front of him and asked for seconds.

“Look at that, he’s already on his way there.” Faith raised an eyebrow. “Are you gonna let your brother eat your desert?”

“... no,” Jennifer mumbled, as she picked up her fork.

“Good.” Faith brought the pot back to the kitchen island, scooping some into her own bowl. “I swear to God, some days I want to commit infanticide,” she muttered.

Kevin snickered, as he took the spoon and slapped a heaping pile of food onto his own plate. “Curse of being the cool aunt.”

“Dude, she didn’t even like hot dogs until a month ago.” Faith sat down, eyeballing the second scoop Kevin took. “Are you trying to get fat or something?”

“I’m not gonna get fat.”

“You will if you keep eating like that.”

“Coach has been making us do sprints all week,” he countered. “I probably burned a thousand calories in one afternoon. He actually told Mom that I needed to eat more.”

Faith sighed, as she took a bite of her dinner. “Wish we were still playing soccer. Then I could eat whatever I wanted, too.”

“Are you not?”

“Season ended last month.”
“Don’t you still practice when you’re not playing?”


“Uh, yea. I’m at the field three times a week. It’s called dedication.”

Faith shrugged. “Call it whatever you want. I’m not that serious about it.”

Kevin hummed. “Well, why don’t you play another sport? Run track or something.”

“Ooh, running in circles for half an hour.” Faith scoffed. “Screw that. Sounds boring as hell.”

“What about basketball, or swimming, or softball?”

“Basketball sucks, we don’t have a swim team, and the softball girls are all snobs.”

Kevin raised an eyebrow. “Seriously?”

“Ever since they became district champions? SO fuckin’ arrogant, dude.”

“Swear jar!!” William called between bites.

Faith glared as her nephew. “Nobody likes a tattletale, Will.”

Kevin shook his head, as Will went back to his food. “That’s stupid. Like, district champions? Who cares?” He waved his hand dismissively. “We were third in the state. You don’t see me bragging about it.”

“God, you should see those girls, though.” Faith rolled her eyes. “Mary Cartwright was going on and on, about how the first thing that pops up when she Googles herself is that district game.”

“She Googles herself?”

“Apparently. Like, how big of a fu-” Faith paused, glancing back at the twins. “-frickin’ narcissist can you be, to have to plug your name into a search engine for validation?”

Kevin smirked. “Sounds like someone’s a little jealous.”

“Dude, shut up.”

“What’s the first thing that comes up when you Google yourself?”

“I have no idea.” Faith shook her head. “I’m not a narcissist.”

He shrugged. “It’s not validation if you want to know what’s online about yourself. I mean, hey, maybe it’s a web site about how you’re a bitch.”

“Swear jar!” Will called again.

“I’m allowed,” Kevin shot back. “Your swear jar doesn’t apply to me.”

“... oh.”

Faith sighed. “I should have told them that years ago,” she muttered, looking at the twins. “Now it feels like I’m living in a house full of narcs.”

“Mm.”
She glanced back to see Kevin with his phone in his hand. “What are you doing?”

“Plugging ‘Faith Caulfield’ into Google.”

“Don’t!”

Kevin glanced up, eyebrows raised. “Why?”

“Just...” she paused. “I would rather you didn’t.”

“Why?”

She sighed. “Because you’ll probably pull up the articles about why my mom and dad are in jail,” she muttered. “I already read through them, and they kind of suck.”

“Oh.” He paused for a minute, they started typing again.

“Dude!”

“Calm down, I'm not Googling you.” He rolled his eyes. “I’m putting my name in. I want to see what comes up.”

Faith smirked. “Trying to see if mister third-in-the-state is the top result?”

“That was last year, so I doubt it. Our defense tanked since a quarter of them graduated.” He hit the enter button on his phone, waiting as it loaded. “Huh.”

“What?”

“Top entry is my Facebook.” He showed her the screen. “Guess I should’ve figured.”


Kevin scrolled before answering. “Not a lot. That one’s an article someone wrote about my mom, and just mentions that I’m her kid. There’s my name on the team’s roster... another one about a touchdown I made last year... and I think that’s my birth announcement.” He looked at Faith. “That’s... actually kind of depressing. There really isn’t much.”

Faith hummed. “What about your mom?”

“Which one?”

“It really is weird, that you don’t use a nickname to differentiate like they do.” She nodded to the twins.

Kevin shrugged. “I’ve never had to explain who I meant to them. So, which one?”

“I don’t know. You pick.” She pulled her phone from her pocket. “I’m gonna search Chloe.”

“Not Max?”

“I really don’t want to type Caulfield into a search engine. Pretty sure those same articles will come up.”

Kevin finished typing and waited, smirking after a few seconds. “Figured.”

“What?”
He showed her his phone, the words ‘Kate Chase’ in the search bar. “It’s boring as hell. Mostly stuff about her being the principal. What about Chloe?”

“Still loading.” Faith perked up. “Try your Aunt Lynn, or Aunt Jessica. I bet they’ve got some cool stuff.”

“Ooh, good point.” He typed rapidly into the phone. “I’ll do Aunt Lynn first.”

“That sounds... oh, my, GOD.”

Kevin picked his head up. “What?”

“San Francisco County ARREST RECORDS,” Faith whispered conspiratorially. “Dude! Look!”

He checked the screen on Faith’s phone and was rewarded with a picture of a younger Chloe, without blue hair, glaring into the camera. As well as a list of charges. “Holy crap!” he chortled. “Wow, your sister-in-law was a little hoodlum!”

“Man, I can’t even.” Faith grinned, as she read the web site. “Disturbing the peace, pulling a fire alarm, vandalism, driving without a license, driving without insurance, truancy, petty theft, and littering?” She looked up at Kevin. “How the hell do you tack on littering to all that? Is it, like, an afterthought?”

“They busted her for spray-painting, and then because she dropped the can on the ground while running, they got her for littering?” Kevin offered. “That is funny as hell.”

“Oh, yea. I am giving her SO much grief later.” Faith shook her head, as she took her phone back. “After all the crap she gave me for smoking with my friend? Next time she mentions that, I’m gonna come back with knowing that you need insurance to drive a car.”

An hour later, the twins were both sitting on the couch, watching TV. Faith and Kevin had moved to the kitchen table and broken out their laptops.

“I can’t believe I’ve never watched your aunt’s YouTube videos before,” Faith mentioned. “She’s funny as hell.”

Kevin looked up and smirked. “Which one are you watching?”

“The one where she hid a bunch of ping-pong balls in the other astronaut’s sleeping area.” Faith grinned as she turned back to the video, watching two astronauts struggle to round everything up while Lynn laughed in the background. “How did she even get them all up there? Did NASA not check her bag or something?”

“She mentioned someone owing her a favor,” Kevin replied. “And that her bosses were actually kind of pissed about that one, but they let it go since she’s got so many subscribers.”

“Forty million, looks like,” Faith acknowledged. “She must make for a good PR tool. When is she going back into space?”

“I don’t know. She told my mom that she was working on something else, but wouldn’t say what.”

Faith glanced at him. “Who are you looking up?”

“Grandpa Richard and Grandma Maria.” He closed the window. “They’re just as boring as everyone else. Aunt Lynn looks like the coolest one in the family.”
“What about your Aunt Jessica?”

“All I got was videos of her performances.” He sighed. “Apparently most of the Marsh side is boring as hell.”

Faith perked up. “Wait. What about your mom?”

“I know all that’s gonna be is stuff about her and my Grandpa Derek’s work.”

“Not Vic, Kate.”

Kevin frowned. “I looked her up already.”

“No, you looked up Kate Chase,” Faith reminded him. “Her maiden name is Marsh, remember? Maybe she’s got her own arrest record.”

He scoffed. “You’re MET my mom, right?”

“Hey man, you never know.”

“... true,” he admitted, typing in a new search. “Kate Marsh. Probably just her being boring before she met my other mom.”

“Well, we’re already being nosy, might as well go all out.” Faith looked back at her own laptop. “Man, if it wasn’t so much work, I’d almost want to be an astronaut too. I bet I could come up with some killer practical jokes in zero-gravity.”

“Yea, but it’s a ton of school, and you could die,” Kevin reminded her. “Besides, you and I both know that... what the hell?”

Faith looked over at him. “What?”

“There’s a court case in here.” Kevin leaned in closer to the screen. “Someone tried to sue my mom.”

“For real?” Faith stood, making her way behind Kevin. “Who? Did she expel a kid with rich parents or something?”

“I don’t think so. It’s, like, right after I was born.” Kevin read through the screen. “Someone sued her for... visitation?”

“Defendant, Kate Beverly Marsh, Plaintiff...” Faith frowned. “Margret Beverly Marsh? Who the hell’s that?”

“I don’t know.” Kevin traded glances with her. “I’ve never heard of a Margret Marsh.”

They read silently for several seconds. “Holy shit, it’s you,” Faith finally said, as she got to the bottom of the screen. “Right there, Kevin Marsh. This Margret woman was suing your mom to see you.”

“That’s not my last name, though.”

“There anyone else named Kevin in your family?”

“Not that I know of. But that’s never been my name. It says Kevin Chase on my birth certificate.”

“Google her,” Faith suggested. “See what comes up.”
Kevin nodded as her opened a new browser window, typing the name rapidly into the search bar. The screen filled with results a few seconds later, and he clicked on the first one.

“... holy shit.”

“Woman sentenced to life in prison for attempted murder?” Faith did a double-take. “What the fuck?”

“Margret Marsh’s sentence was upheld by the Los Angeles Superior Court this morning,” Kevin read. “Marsh was convicted on two counts of attempted murder, as well as charges of assault, mayhem, and stalking, when she used her car to try and kill her daughter’s wife earlier this year. Her plan was foiled when the car she rammed was, tragically, being driven by her own daughter and a friend.”

“Whoa,” Faith breathed.

“... her daughter, Kate, and the friend were both admitted to UCLA Medical Center for several days for their injuries,” Kevin added quietly, a shocked look on his face. “Margret Marsh is... my grandmother? Not Grandma Maria?”

Faith looked at him. “And you didn’t know about any of this?”

“I told you, I’ve never even heard her name.” Kevin dragged his hands down her face. “Christ. My grandmother’s an attempted murderer.”

“The two women were treated for multiple broken bones, and each spent several days under sedatives before waking,” Faith continued to read. “Man, I thought my family did some fucked-up shit.”

Kevin hit the back button, bringing up the next link. A booking photo of an angry woman with dirty-blonde hair looked back at them with mean eyes; they both physically recoiled from the computer. “Jesus, she’s scary,” Faith muttered. “Wait. Does it say what happened with the lawsuit?”

“I don’t look.” Kevin hit the back button several times, returning to the first page. He scrolled all the way to the bottom. “Suit was dismissed due to lack of representation, it says.”

Faith snorted. “More like Aunt Vic stepped in and bitch-slapped your grandmother back to the stone age.”

“Probably,” Kevin agreed. “Crap. I can’t believe I’ve never heard any of this.”

“I know.” Faith sat back down. “I mean, I know Max hasn’t told me a bunch of stuff about... back then. Before I was born. But I didn’t know someone tried to kill Aunt Kate.”

Kevin didn’t reply, as he stared blankly at the laptop and kept reading.
“You don’t look so good, Vicky.”

Victoria grunted, as she sipped her coffee slowly the next morning. “I don’t think that shrimp agreed with me,” she muttered. “I still don’t feel well.”

Kate nodded sympathetically. “Do you want me to get the Pepto from the bathroom?”

“No, I’ll be fine.” Victoria rubbed her forehead. “I might just go take a nap or something.”

“Mm.” Kate had another bite of her toast, before looking at Kevin; he’d spent most of the meal picking absently at his plate of eggs. “Are you okay, kiddo?”

“Yea,” he sighed. “Didn’t sleep well.”

“Maybe there’s something going around.” Kate shook her head. “Do you still want to go to practice?”

He shrugged. “Maybe.”

“Well, we’ll see how everyone feels later this-”

“Can I ask a question?”

Kate paused. “Of course.”

“Where’s my grandmother?”

His mother furrowed her brow, confused. “Which one? Grandma Maria is in San Diego, and I’m pretty sure Grandma Mary is in Seattle.”

Victoria shook her head, as she swallowed a mouthful of coffee. “She left for Germany with my dad this morning,” she corrected her. “They come back day after tomorrow.”

“Germany it is, then.” Kate nodded. “Why do you ask?”

“What about Margret?”

His mothers both shifted in their chairs, looking at him in stunned silence. After several seconds, Victoria slowly set down her coffee mug. “Where did you hear that name?” she asked in a flat voice.

Kevin squirmed, as both of his parents stared at him. “I, uh... Faith and I were Googling everyone, while we were watching Will and Jen,” he replied, glancing at Kate. “We looked up your old name and saw that you were sued for visitation.”

Kate looked at Victoria, who pinched the bridge of her nose. “I thought you had the lawyers seal everything.”

“Christ,” Victoria muttered. “The filing record is still public at the county clerk’s office.”

Exhaling slowly, Kate turned back to Kevin. “So... you saw the lawsuit?”

Kevin nodded. “And the article they wrote,” he added. “I, uh, Googled her name, too.”
Kate took a deep breath. “You weren’t supposed to see any of that,” she replied just as quietly. “I’m sorry, Kevin.”

“Did she really try to kill you?”

“No,” Victoria answered, lowering her hand before Kate could reply. “She was trying to kill me. Your mother was driving my car when that bitch hit her.”

“Vicky,” Kate said cautiously.

“I know. I’m sorry.” Victoria turned back to Kevin. “Sweetie, that woman is not your grandmother. That woman is a cancerous tumor that caused us nothing but grief and heartache before she was arrested. She made your Aunt Lynn run away from home, caused your Aunt Jessica to suffer from an anxiety disorder for her entire childhood, and almost destroyed your Grandpa Richard’s relationship with his children.”

Kevin was taken aback. “What did she do?”

Kate scooted closer, leaning both her arms onto the table. “Do you remember that talk we had, Kevin, a few years ago? About how some people will hate your parents just because we didn’t fall in love with boys?”

He nodded.

“My mother is one of those people,” she explained. “She tormented us for years. And your Aunt Max was in the car with me, when she crashed into us.”

Kevin blinked. “She was?”

“Yes. She almost killed the both of us, because she was so full of hatred that she couldn’t see straight.” Kate shook her head. “My mother being sent to prison is one of the best things that ever happened to this family.”

He nodded, looking at his plate. “So... where is she?”

“In a women’s prison just north of Fresno,” Victoria answered. “Where she’s been for fifteen years, and will be staying for the rest of her life.”

“She’s never getting out?”

__________________________________________________________________________

“Not if your Aunt Victoria has anything to say about it.”

Faith sat on the couch next to Max, Chloe opposite the two of them on the coffee table. “Your Aunt Vic and her lawyers make sure that bitch never qualifies for parole,” Chloe added.

Max shot her a look. “Swear jar.”

“The twins are in the backyard. I can swear in front of Faith.”

“Says who?”

“Says me.”

“How?” Faith interrupted. “I mean, I know Aunt Vic is loaded. Can she really make sure Kevin’s grandmother never leaves prison?”
Chloe smirked. “I think that you’ll find that Aunt Vic’s level of money makes it difficult to find things that she can’t do.”

“In any event, that woman is not a concern of yours, or Kevin’s,” Max said. “Neither of you will ever meet her.”

Faith nodded. “... Kevin said you were in the car, with Aunt Kate?”

Max sighed. “I need to call and thank her for that,” she muttered. “Yes. I was in the passenger seat.”

“How bad was it?”

She held out her left arm. “Do you see that scar, right there?”

Her sister had to peer closely to see the white line, which had faded with time. “Barely.”

“The surgeon had to go in and pin my arm back together.” Max lowered her hand. “It’s fine now, I just had to wear a cast for a little while. Aunt Kate didn’t leave the hospital for three weeks, and was in a leg brace for about eight months.”

“Shit.”

“Swear jar,” Chloe told her.

Faith folded her arms. “I thought the twins were outside.”

“I’m an adult. You’re not.”

“So you have insurance on your car now?”

Chloe frowned. “Excuse me?”

“You have a license now too, right?” Faith smirked. “And you don’t pull fire alarms anymore? Or litter?”

“... you little shit,” Chloe sighed. “Found my old arrest records, did you?”

“I’m gonna print out your mugshot and hang it on my wall.”

Chloe looked at Max. “You know, she’s not too old to give back to Rachel.”

Max rolled her eyes. “Stop it.”

“I’m serious. We can drop your sister on her and Steph’s doorstep, and tell them that it just wasn’t working out.” Chloe smiled widely. “I’m sure they wouldn’t mind having a live-in babysitter for Melissa. Even if she is a pain in the ass.”

“Nevertheless.” Max looked back at Faith. “Do you have any questions?”

“Not really.” Faith shrugged. “Kate has cut her mom out completely?”

“Yep. So have her sisters,” Max confirmed with a nod. “None of them have ever been to visit her in jail. Even Kevin’s grandfather, Richard, only went to see her the once before he filed for divorce.”

“So... like our dad?”

Max shifted, nodding slowly. “Pretty much,” she admitted.
“Mm.” Faith fell silent, as she looked back at her lap.

“Have you thought more, about whether or not you were going to write him?” Max asked. “The warden at his prison says that his condition is worsening.”

Her sister met her gaze. “Are you going to?”

“That’s not what I asked, Faith.”

“I know. I’m asking you.”

Max hesitated, then shook her head. “I don’t have anything to say to our father,” she explained. “I’ve only sent him pictures of you because he was decent enough to sign away his parental rights, so Chloe and I could adopt you. But that doesn’t change who he is, or what he did.”

Faith exhaled slowly, before looking back at Max. “I don’t even know him,” she muttered. “If I did write him... I guess all I’d ask is why he tricked my mother into killing yours.” She swallowed. “And why he let the church kill so many people, and why he stole their money.”

“Faith...” Max wrapped her arm around her sister’s shoulder, squeezing gently. “I’m not saying that he doesn’t deserve to be where he is, or that he’s a good person. But he’s still your father. It’s okay if you want to write him a letter, too. You don’t have to refuse because of me.”

“I’m not.” Faith shook her head. “I’m refusing to write him because it’s his fault that my mom is in prison. And... because of what he did to you.”

Max and Chloe exchanged glances, before they both nodded. Chloe shifted from her seat on the coffee table to the couch, snaking her arm around Faith’s back before kissing her temple. “For all the shit you put us through,” she started, “I’m pretty glad that we decided to take you in.”

Faith smirked. “Yea?”

“Yea.” Chloe rubbed her shoulder. “You’re a good kid.”

“Thanks.” Faith nodded. “Can I ask a question?”

Chloe sighed. “Is it about my arrest record?”

“I really just want to know about the littering charge.” Faith grinned. “I mean, with everything else on there...”

“Fine.” Chloe rolled her eyes. “When I was twenty, I tossed an empty cigarette pack out the window of my truck, and didn’t see the cop behind me. He wrote the ticket, and I paid the fine. End of story.”

Faith blinked. “That’s it? Seriously?!”

“What, exactly, were you expecting?”

“I don’t know, but with everything else, a little more than that!”

Chloe smirked. “Sorry to disappoint, kiddo. My hooligan days were behind me at that point.”

“What about the rest of it?” Faith pressed. “Driving without a license? Vandalism?”

“Tell you what; you keep your record clean until you graduate, and I’ll tell you every sordid story,” Chloe promised. “Including how I got expelled from high school.”
Faith raised her eyebrows. “And you get to give me crap about smoking... how, exactly?”

“I’m the adult, you’re the child, and mostly because I can.”

Max: I just had an interesting conversation with Faith.

Kate: ... oops.

Max: Heads-up would’ve been nice.

Kate: You’re right. I’m so sorry. It was such a surprise this morning that I didn’t think about it.

Max: I bet. How’s Kevin doing?

Kate: Okay, I guess. He didn’t have a lot of questions after Vicky and I explained everything.

Max: Yea, neither did Faith. She was more interested in bugging Chloe about her arrest records.

Kate: I heard about them. Kevin was nice enough to show me and Vicky.

Kate: How did she disturb the peace?

Max: Based on what I’ve gotten from her and her mother, the entirety of her teenage years was one giant violation.

Victoria: Why were you driving without a license?

Chloe: Christ, not you too.

Victoria: I’m just curious. I heard you were a baby thug, but I was never interested in looking it up.

Chloe: Baby thug? I was a badass, thank you very much.

Victoria: Sure thing. License?

Chloe: My mother wouldn’t take me to get one until my grades improved.

Victoria: Insurance?

Chloe: Can’t get it without a license.

Victoria: Petty theft?

Chloe: You’re gonna have to be more specific. I don’t remember which one they actually booked me on.

Victoria: Hey, you know that you can get all of this stuff taken down, right? If you pay the fee, that web site will get rid of your information.

Chloe: I know. Before, I just never cared to. It didn’t really affect me.

Victoria: And now?
**Chloe:** My wife has made it very clear that she does not want our children reading about their Mama’s childhood rebellion, and the disastrous impact it had on my academic record.

**Chloe:** It’ll come down in the next couple of days, once they process the transaction.

**Victoria:** But then how will your kids know that you used to rule the mean streets of San Francisco?

**Chloe:** I DIDN’T CHOOSE THE THUG LIFE. THE THUG LIFE CHOSE ME.

**Victoria:** Whatever, litterbug.
Victoria: Are you still at the PTA meeting?

Kate: For another twenty minutes or so.

Victoria: I’m about to head home. You should be there, when I get back, to save your son’s life.

Kate: What? Why?

Victoria: Because he messed with the autocorrect on my work phone! And I can’t figure out how to change it back!

Kate: Oh no. What did he change?

Victoria: I don’t know because I’m a big stupidhead!

Kate: Huh?

Victoria: HE’S DEAD

Victoria: I DIDN’T TYPE THAT SECOND PART

Victoria: HE’S SO DEAD

Kate: Okay, take a breath. It could not have been that bad.

Victoria: DO YOU KNOW WHAT I TEXTED TO ANOTHER DIRECTOR WHEN ASKED IF I WAS GOING TO JAPAN NEXT WEEK????

Kate: ... dare I ask?

Victoria: Hell yea! Put some bomb ass beats up in that mutherfucka!!

Victoria: THAT’S SUPPOSED TO BE Hell yea! Put some bomb ass beats up in that mutherfucka!!

Victoria: GODDAMN IT

Victoria: N O

Kate: Oh my.

Victoria: The masta of disasta!! IS SO FUCKING GROUNDED

Kate: ???

Victoria: THAT LITTLE SHIT CHANGED HIS NAME TOO!!

Kate: Vicky, take a breath and calm down. He was trying to play a funny prank. He probably didn’t realize he did it to your work phone.
Victoria: I don’t care! It’s been doing this all day! Our son is going to DIE tonight, Tiny blonde who doesn’t let her amazing kid do anything fun!

Kate: ... okay, NOW he’s in trouble.

Victoria: YOU THINK????

Rachel: Did your laptop have a backup?

Steph: Which one? And why?

Rachel: Your personal one.

Steph: Yea, it backs up daily. And you haven’t said why yet.

Rachel: <laptop.jpg>

Steph: IS THAT CHOCOLATE MILK ALL OVER MY MACBOOK?!?!?

Rachel: Yea.

Steph: WHY IS THERE CHOCOLATE MILK ALL OVER MY MACBOOK?!?!?

Rachel: Melissa wanted to see your drawings. It was an accident.

Steph: WHAT THE SHIT

Rachel: Look, take a breath, okay? We’ll bring it to the store and see if they can fix it.

Steph: Why was she drinking chocolate milk at my laptop?!

Rachel: I made some for her.

Steph: Why did you let her use my computer?!

Rachel: I didn’t know she was using it until after the fact.

Steph: GOD DAMN IT

Rachel: It was an ACCIDENT, Steph. She feels really bad.

Rachel: She’s actually crying because she knows you’ll be angry at her.

Steph: ... shit.

Steph: I am feeling both extremely mad and extremely compassionate at the same time.

Rachel: Can we at least try to get it fixed before you start yelling?

Steph: Yea, okay.

Faith: I just kissed Harry Winslow!! In your FACE!!
Chloe: Good for you.

Faith: ... crap.

Chloe: Trying to text Chelsea, were we?

Faith: I was kidding.

Chloe: Sure you were. Isn’t Harry the wide receiver on the football team?

Faith: Can we, like, never speak of this again?

Chloe: Oh, no, kiddo. It is SO too late for that.

Faith: I’d really love it if you did.

Chloe: BUT MY BABY SISTER JUST HAD HER FIRST KISS!!!!!

Faith: It wasn’t my first kiss!!

Chloe: I WANT TO MEET YOUR NEW BOYFRIEND!!!

Faith: HARRY IS NOT MY BOYFRIEND!!!

Chloe: I CAN’T WAIT TO CALL HIS MOTHER AND TELL HER ABOUT HOW YOU’RE GONNA BE HER NEW DAUGHTER-IN-LAW!!

Faith: ... you took it too far. I’m calling your bluff.

Chloe: Yea, I had a feeling.

Chloe: Wait. This WASN’T your first kiss?

Faith: Oh, look, fifth period is about to start. Gotta go!

Sam: Did you tell Marcus that he could play football?!

Charles: ... was I not supposed to?

Sam: No!!

Charles: Why not?

Sam: Because I don’t want our son to get brain damage!

Charles: I played football all through high school! I’m fine!

Sam: There are plenty of players who aren’t!

Charles: Babe, he’ll be fine. It’s a Pop Warner league. They have very strict rules about how hard and where the kids can hit each other, and helmets are much better than they used to be.

Sam: And what happens if he gets a concussion??
Charles: Then he goes straight to the hospital. There are EMTs at every game.

Sam: I do NOT like this!!

Charles: He wants to play, babe.

Sam: He also wanted to jump off the roof last year to test his bedsheet parachute!!

Charles: THAT was just reckless.

Sam: But running full-speed into a wall of armored children, that’s fine.

Charles: He’ll have his own armor.

Sam: That doesn’t make it okay!

Charles: You’ve seen how he towers over the kids in his grade, right? I’m more worried about him hurting them.

Sam: That doesn’t make it okay either!

Charles: You want to tell him that he can’t play? After he was so excited to sign up?

Sam: ... curse you and my desire to not be the bad guy.

Charles: Sam...

Sam: Fine. But if he EVER comes off the field wondering what year it is, we are SO done.

Brooke: I need to schedule some time off.

Rachel: When?

Brooke: I don’t know the exact dates. But it’ll be from sometime in the beginning of February to the end of March, maybe early April.

Rachel: Um... wow. Okay, that’s almost six months out, which is pretty early.

Brooke: I know.

Rachel: Hang on, you don’t have that many vacation days saved up.

Rachel: And even if you did, you can’t take it all at once, remember? You’re only allowed three weeks at a time.

Brooke: I know there are exceptions.

Rachel: The ONLY exception is maternity leave.

Brooke: How about that?

Rachel: ARE YOU PREGNANT?!?!?!
Brooke: Gestating as we speak!

Rachel: Holy crap! I didn’t know you and Dave were trying!

Brooke: We weren’t. Total accident. Though not an unhappy one.

Rachel: Really?

Brooke: I mean, we figured we’d have one eventually. But not now.

Rachel: So what happened to that plan?

Brooke: Well, I’ll save you the details. But it involved a formal event on the cruise, two bottles of champagne, and a mix-up regarding the day of the week.

Rachel: What an enchanting tale.

Max: You want to explain the letter I just got from Principal Hackman?

Chloe: ... not really.

Max: What did you say to Marks?

Chloe: My answer is going to depend on what Hackman’s letter says.

Max: That they want me to be the point of contact on future issues regarding our children.

Max: And that William has been released from his in-school suspension.

Chloe: Good.

Max: What did you do?

Chloe: I told Marks that I’d be a son of a bitch if our kid was gonna get punished for defending Jennifer from a pair of bullies. Among other things.

Max: They’re trying to teach him that fighting is wrong, Chloe!

Chloe: Bullshit. It was self-defense.

Max: No it wasn’t!

Chloe: Fine. It was sister-defense.

Chloe: Besides, there’s nothing wrong with fighting for the right reason.

Max: He’s seven!

Chloe: And he can apparently throw a mean punch.

Max: I really don’t like that you’re not more upset about this.

Chloe: I seem to recall someone not being that upset that I could beat up a certain asshole at that bar,
when we first started dating.

Max: He was assaulting me!

Chloe: Pot? Kettle?

Max: ... he’s still grounded from the Nintendo for two weeks.

Chloe: If it’ll make you feel better.

Dana: Head’s up, Sophie’s mad at you.

Juliet: What did I do?!

Dana: Who’s her favorite singer?

Juliet: ... it’s not Amy Swan.

Dana: Be a lot more convenient if it wasn’t.

Juliet: I didn’t do anything but report the story. That girl was the one who was filmed beating the crap out of her housekeeper.

Dana: You were pretty ruthless.

Juliet: I stated the facts. It’s not my fault that they make her out to be a scumbag.

Dana: Explain it to Sophie.

Juliet: Happily. Can’t promise that she’ll like what I have to say.

Dana: Jules...

Juliet: I’m not sugarcoating it for her. I’m sorry that I made her idol out to be a bad girl, but she almost clawed out that woman’s eyes out because she was flying high on cocaine. And I might not have reported it, but we have it from a good source that it wasn’t the first time.

Dana: Really?

Juliet: As many as four other woman have apparently signed non-disclosures in exchange for settlement money. Cops are tracking them down to interview as we speak.

Dana: Okay, I get it. But you’ve seen the posters Sophie has in her room. And I don’t actually know if she has any other artists in her playlists. We got her tickets to the concert for Christmas, remember?

Juliet: We should probably return those. Sponsors are already pulling out, so I doubt there’ll be a concert for her to go to.

Dana: Already sent an email to Ticketmaster.

Juliet: Look, I’ll talk to her when I get home, okay?

Dana: You’ll be nice?
**Juliet:** I’m always nice!

**Dana:** Fine. You’ll be empathetic?

**Juliet:** ... I will try.

**Emily:** Hey, what are you two doing right now?

**Brooke:** Watching TV.

**Regina:** Same.

**Emily:** Good, you’re both sitting.

**Regina:** ... why?

**Emily:** Guess who’s PREGNANT?!?!!?

**Brooke:** How the fuck did you know?!

**Emily:** The hell does that mean?! I’m pretty sure I would know!!

**Brooke:** How?! I haven’t told anyone but Rachel!!

**Emily:** What?! Why the fuck would you tell Miss Amber?!

**Brooke:** Because I need to get time off from work!!

**Emily:** How would you know to get time off?!

**Brooke:** Because I need maternity leave!!

**Emily:** ... so do I.

**Regina:** ARE YOU TWO KIDDING ME?!

**Brooke:** WHAT THE FUCK?!

**Emily:** HOLY SHIT!!

**Regina:** OH MY GOD OH MY GOD OH MY GOD

**Regina:** SOMEBODY HAD BETTER MAKE ME A DAMN GODMOTHER!!

**Brooke:** ... really? That’s where we’re going first?

**Emily:** I mean, I had planned on it.

**Brooke:** Hey! I want to be a godmother!

**Emily:** We’re already godmothers!

**Brooke:** Oh. Right.
Regina: Yea, thanks for forgetting about my kid.

Brooke: He’ll get over it. When are you due, Emily?

Emily: End of January. You?

Brooke: Sometime in the first two weeks of February.

Regina: Okay, we’re doing a joint baby shower.

Emily: Why?!

Regina: Because I’m hosting, and I’m not planning multiple parties.

Brooke: ... fair enough.

Rachel: Where did this come from? And why is it in our closet?

Rachel: <ipad.jpg>

Steph: It's Melissa’s birthday present.

Rachel: I thought we agreed on a budget!

Steph: I got it for almost nothing.

Rachel: Oh, God, did you steal it from work?!

Steph: No!

Steph: Well, not really.

Rachel: What does THAT mean?

Steph: Our IT guy cannibalizes the broken iPads to make serviceable ones. They’re out of warranty, so we basically use them as emergency backups in case we run out.

Steph: They’re off the books, so they don’t technically exist in our system. And they never, ever get used; they mostly just take up space. I bartered a case of beer for the best one he had.

Rachel: Okay... relieved as I am to hear that it was dirt-cheap, why did you get it?

Steph: I figured she could have her own tablet, since she likes using mine to draw so much. I also felt a little bad, about how upset she was after the chocolate milk thing.

Rachel: Ah. You know, we might want to invest in a case for it, too.

Steph: Agreed. Something nice and waterproof.

Max: Say it.

Victoria: No.
Max: Say it.

Victoria: I can’t. My balls are too big.

Max: Say it, or I’ll stop telling Faith to quit calling you Aunt Vic.

Victoria: ... ugh.

Victoria: You were right. I’m sorry I thought otherwise.

Max: Ha! I’m gonna print this conversation out and hang it on my wall.

Victoria: Oh, shut the hell up.

Max: Am I not allowed to have a small celebration? After a deal like THAT?

Victoria: Well, yea, but you don’t have to be smug about it.

Max: What did your dad say when he found out?

Victoria: “Good work.”

Max: That’s it? Really? QuantumCloud just signed a three-hundred-million-dollar deal with Apple, and that’s all he’s got?

Victoria: I’m literally sitting right next to him. I asked him if he had anything to say to you, and he said “Tell Max I said good work.”

Max: ... okay then.

Victoria: You were expecting more?

Max: A little, honestly.

Max: I mean, this is just the start. I know Lockheed-Martin and Google are interested, too. And we’re meeting with the CTO of Motorola next month.

Victoria: Well, he’s kind of preoccupied at the moment. He’ll have more to say later, I’m sure.

... 

Max: WHAT THE FUCK

Victoria: Got a delivery, did you?

Max: WHAT IS IN MY PARKING SPOT

Victoria: I told you my dad would have more to say.

Max: THIS ISN’T A STATEMENT!! THIS IS A CAR!!

Victoria: My father is an eccentric man.

Victoria: What did he give you?
Max: The new Lexus! I thought these weren’t out yet! The commercial said they’d arrive next month!

Victoria: Yea, my dad decided he really liked them, so he swiped the first couple that come into the country.

Max: Aren’t these things selling for $70K?!

Victoria: You just made him a shitload of money. He felt that using a small percentage as a gift was justified.

Victoria: Especially when I told him that you were driving to see clients in a Kia Soul.

Max: Speaking of, where the hell is the car I drove to work?!

Victoria: He says the tow truck should have brought it back to your house.

Victoria: And he says people that make him that much money drive nice cars, not... whatever the hell you’d call that thing.

Max: Some of his people have kids, you know.

Victoria: Eh. Drive them to school in the Lexus.

Max: FUCK no, are you kidding me?

Max: Jennifer spilled orange juice inside my Soul the week after I drove off the lot. Faith put a dent in the side of it with a soccer ball. And William let a crayon melt into the back seat. Those little gremlins aren’t getting anywhere NEAR this car.

Victoria: Aww, spoken like a true executive.
“How’s that?”

Steph looked over at the iPad in Melissa’s hands, as she struggled into her blazer. “That looks great,” she assured her. “You’re getting much better with the shading.”

“Thanks.” Melissa set it back down as she scribbled some more with the stylus. “Am I still going to see Doctor Winter today?”

“I don’t know, kiddo.” Steph shrugged her top into place before she sat next to Melissa. “We’re gonna try, I promise. But we might have to re-schedule.”

“Mm.”

Steph looked over the child carefully. Melissa seemed to respond well to Doctor Winter, but she never really talked about her sessions. And neither her nor Rachel sat in on them, so they had to rely on progress reports from the therapist. “Are you sleeping better since this weekend?”

“... a little,” Melissa admitted quietly.

“Hey.” Steph touched her shoulder. “You remember that you can come get me or Rachel whenever you need us, right? You don’t have to wait until we wake up.”

Melissa sighed. “Okay.”

“Do you need anything?”

The child met Steph’s gaze. “Are you guys coming home with my little sister today?”

Steph smirked. “No, sweetie. We’re going to meet the woman who’s carrying her.”

“When are you bringing her home?”

“When she’s born, hopefully.” Steph nodded. “But that won’t be for several days. Maybe a week or two.”

“... oh.” Melissa bit her lip. “So... is her Mom going to jail, too?”

Steph’s heart sank. Her and Rachel were never really sure how much Melissa remembered of what had happened to her, and the girl would occasionally surprise them with what she understood. And they never seemed ready for it. “No, sweetie,” she answered. “She’s just not in a place to care for her daughter right now. That’s why Rachel and I are volunteering to do it.”

“Why?”

“Because we can,” Steph answered. “And because her mother doesn’t have anyone who can do it for her, so we will.”

“Like you did with me?”
“Exactly.” Steph smiled. “But we knew we would take you home. We still have to meet with the woman. So she’s not your little sister yet.”

Melissa hummed, and turned back to her tablet. Steph watched her for a few moments, remembering the talk her and Rachel had about not wanting to make Melissa feel like they were going to ignore her for the new baby they were trying to adopt. “Hey, kiddo, I have an idea.”

“What?”

“How about this weekend, we do whatever you want?” Steph offered. “If we get to bring a new baby home, we’ll all be really busy taking care of it. So this weekend, we can focus on having fun. How does that sound?”

Melissa perked up. “Can we get ice cream?”

“We sure can.”

“And go see Grandma Rose and Grandpa James?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“What about Voodoo Donuts?”

Steph paused. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “That’s pretty far away, sweetie.”

Melissa raised her eyebrows. “You said whatever I wanted.”

Walked right into that pillar.

“Rachel and I will talk about it,” Steph said evasively. “I won’t make any promises. But we’ll try.”

Her wife picked that moment to walk into the kitchen, straightening her own blouse. “We’ll try to what now?” she asked distractedly.

Melissa turned to look at her. “Can we go to Voodoo Donuts this weekend?”

“Uh...” Rachel glanced at Steph, who winced. “... maybe? Why?”

“Because I thought it would be a good idea to spend some time together this weekend having fun before her baby sister comes.” Steph spoke quickly, regretting not clearing the idea with Rachel first. “So far we’ve got ice cream and grandparents.”

“Ah ha.” Rachel paused. “I don’t know. We’ll have to see what happens today. But I bet we can do it.”

“Sounds good.” Steph rustled Melissa’s hair. “Go grab your jacket, kiddo. We gotta get you to your Aunt Brooke’s.”

Melissa slid out of her chair and ran back to her bedroom. Rachel waited until she was out of earshot before turning back to Steph. “Really?”

“Hey, it’s not a bad idea,” Steph replied quietly. “Besides, we don’t know when we’ll be able to do it again. And I kinda want some Voodoo Donuts, too.”

“I didn’t say that it wasn’t. But I was going to go to the office this Saturday. We’ve got two new social workers who are still learning the ropes, and I was going to take them to meet a couple of kids
“Make Brooke do it.”

“Yea, I’m not making the woman who’s seven months pregnant drive into work on the weekend.” Rachel sighed. “Whatever. I’ll do it later.”

“See how easy that was?”

“Oh, shut up.” Rachel beckoned. “Come on, we gotta get going.”

Melissa came back, and they quickly straightened her coat before they got her in the car. Steph pulled out of the driveway while Rachel fiddled with the radio, Melissa drawing on her tablet in the back seat.

They’d been driving for about ten minutes before Rachel’s phone rang, and she took the call. “Hello?”

Silence. Her eyes slowly widened.

“... are you kidding?”

Steph glanced at her. Rachel didn’t make eye contact as she stared straight ahead, listening to the voice on the other end.

“I thought that she was—” She stopped, listening some more. “... oh my God.”

“Babe?” Steph asked carefully, starting to get worried. Melissa looked up from the backseat, sensing the tension. “What’s wrong?”

“Just...” Rachel closed her eyes. “Where is she?”

She listened carefully as she pulled out a pen, scribbling on her hand. “Got it,” she finally said quietly. “We’ll be there as soon as we can.”

Steph watched Rachel hang up the phone and exhaled slowly. “What happened? Is everything okay?”

“It’s... no. It’s not okay.” Rachel dialed a new number, waiting for the call to connect. “Brooke? It’s Rachel. Listen, I know I said you’d only have to watch Melissa for a couple of hours, but... would it be okay if she was there until dinner or so?”

“How long was she there before they found her?”

The adoption agency worker, Kim, shook her head as she stood across from Steph and Rachel in the hospital. “A few hours, according to the nurse,” she replied quietly. “Once the police did find her, they got her here in twenty minutes.”

Rachel glanced to the side, looking through the glass window at the nineteen-year-old girl laying in the hospital bed. Several IVs were stuck in her arms, and an oxygen mask was over her face. A fetal monitor was strapped around her belly as well, everything hooked up to monitors. “This isn’t my area, but that seems way too long.”

“I know.” Kim looked sick, as she glanced through the window. “When she missed the preliminary meeting this morning, we called to ask where she was, and the ER workers answered. She wasn’t in
good shape, but she is doing better.”

“And the baby?” Steph asked.

“The specialist said everything looks promising on the monitors.” Kim paused. “But they have some concerns.”

Rachel looked back at the woman. “I thought Tanya said she’d kicked the habit,” she muttered. “She told us she’d been clean for almost a year.”

“She told us that, too.” Kim shook her head. “I’m so sorry, but the doctor says the blood work disproves that. There are levels in her system that mirror those of a habitual user. And they found a measurable blood-alcohol level, which after five hours...” her voice trailed off. “I’m so sorry.”

“Will she be okay?” Rachel asked.

“The doctor says she’ll be fine. But they’re not sure about the baby.” Kim shrugged. “Like I said, they won’t know until after the birth. And even then, it-”

“Why is she handcuffed to the bed?”

Kim paused, as her and Rachel turned to look at Steph. The brunette was peering through the window at the restraints on the girl’s wrists. “Is she under arrest?”

“They passed a law a couple of years ago, that using drugs during pregnancy constitutes criminal child abuse,” Rachel informed her. “Once they baby is born, they’ll probably bring her to prison.”


Kim sighed. “Look, guys, I don’t want to sound crass... but you two should know that using drugs while pregnant violates a number of clauses in her contract. It essentially terminates any obligations that you two have.”

Rachel furrowed her brow. “What are you saying?”

“That this baby, when he’s born, might have a number of health issues,” Kim elaborated. “The doctors have already noted that his weight is below average. There’s also a large risk for developmental problems, and-”

“I’m sorry, his?” Steph piped up. “We thought it was a girl.”

Kim shook her head. “The doctor said that it’s very clear on the ultrasound, that it’s a boy. Which... quite frankly, gives us doubts that she even had a proper ultrasound to begin with.”

Steph glanced back through the window. “Wonderful.”

“As I was saying.” Kim coughed. “The agreement you two signed is essentially null and void. If neither of you feel comfortable adopting this child... then you don’t have to.”

Rachel bit her lip. “But... we still could, right?”

“If you wanted? Yes.” Kim shifted. “Do you two need some privacy, to talk about-”

“No.” Steph turned, glancing at Rachel. “I already know my answer.”

Rachel inhaled slowly. “... yea. I do, too.”
The baby was born in the middle of the night, several days later.

By the time Steph and Rachel were able to drop Melissa off at her grandparents’ house and get to the hospital, the boy was in the NICU, hooked up to almost as many IVs as his mother had been. And he was incredibly underweight, even smaller than some of the stuffed animals Melissa had in her room.

Complicating matters even further, the doctors found that the boy had a condition called gastroschisis; he’d been born with his intestines outside his body, not an uncommon defect suffered by babies of drug abusers, they explained. He’d been delivered very carefully, and scans were done almost immediately.

They spent the entire first day in the NICU wearing sterile yellow gowns, not leaving. Rachel was still awake in the middle of the night, sitting backwards on a chair as she watched him, while Steph slept in the corner of the room. She sat with her arms folded on the back of the chair, resting her chin as she looked at him silently, her gaze moving between the IVs and the bandage wrapped around his stomach.

The nurse eventually came to check his medication and vitals around two in the morning. “How is he?” Rachel asked quietly.

“So far, so good.” The nurse fiddled with the IV, adjusting the flow of medicine. “He’s still going through withdrawals, though. Probably will be for the next couple of days.”

Rachel looked up to meet her gaze. “Have you seen this before?”

“A few times.” She nodded. “More than I’d like to admit. He’s not the first baby we’ve had who was born addicted to methamphetamine. But he is responding to the medication.”

“Do you think he’ll... make it?” Rachel asked carefully.

“Yes, I do.” The nurse paused. “But... we can’t say what his quality of life will be. Have you spoken to the pediatrician yet?”

Rachel rested her chin back on her arms. “He said they’re waiting for him to get better, before they take him into surgery,” she replied morosely. “They’re bringing in a doctor from Seattle to fix him.”

“Is it Doctor Clark?”

“Yea.”

“Good.” The nurse smiled. “She’s one of the best pediatric surgeons in the country. And his condition is very survivable. He’s in good hands.”

“... okay.” Rachel reached one finger out, resting it on the plastic of the incubator. “... how often do kids like him have... you know.”

“Cognitive deficiencies?” The nurse sighed. “It’s... not uncommon. But it’s not certain, either. There’s really no way to know until he gets older.” She hesitated. “You and your wife are adopting him, right?”
Rachel nodded.

“Have you thought about what you’re going to name him?”

She furrowed her brow. “I thought his mother named him.”

The nurse picked up her tablet and scanned the baby’s chart. “Not according to this. He’s still Baby John Doe.”

Rachel glanced at the masking tape on the front of the incubator. “So... she didn’t name him Leonidas?”

“Oh. Sorry, no.” The nurse smiled. “We have a tradition here, that we give warrior nicknames to the infants. We take turns giving them out, and... well, I was just helping my son with a history report on the battle of Thermopylae.” She shrugged. “I figured he could do worse than the king of Sparta.”

Rachel smiled, the first she’d cracked in days. “Does it, you know, work?”

“It doesn’t hurt.” She tucked her tablet back under her arm. “You and your wife should go home and get some rest. Nothing’s going to change for the next couple of days.”

Rachel shook her head, as she rested her chin back on her arms. “We’re fine.”

The hand on her shoulder startled her awake hours later

“Sorry, sweetie.” She glanced up and saw her father, wearing a matching yellow gown over his shirt. “I didn’t realize you were sleeping.”

“Neither did I.” Rachel looked back at the incubator as she sat upright, rubbing the back of her neck. “Ouch.”

“Yea, that doesn’t look comfortable.”

“It’s not.” Rachel looked behind her and noticed the empty chair. “Where’s Steph?”

James thumbed over his shoulder. “Using the bathroom. I passed her on my way in.”


“With your mother.”

“She has an appointment with Doctor Winter at two.”

“I’ll let her know.” James reached behind him and pulled a chair over, sitting next to Rachel. “Have you eaten since he was born?”

Rachel shrugged, and James reached into his pocket and retrieved his cell phone. “What are you doing?”

“Calling your mother. We’ll bring you and Steph some McDonalds or something.”

“Mom’s watching Melissa. She doesn’t need to come down here.”

“Melissa’s worried about you, too. And her brother.” James nodded at the incubator. “She knows he was born yesterday. She wants to meet him.”
Rachel hesitated. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“Dad…” Rachel looked back at the incubator. “The doctors and nurses say he’ll pull through. But… what if he doesn’t?”

“Sweetie, we raised you with more optimism than that.” James placed a hand on Rachel’s back, squeezing her shoulder. “He’ll be fine.”

“He might not, Dad. I read about his condition, and it’s got a pretty high survival rate, but there are still babies who don’t make it. And we won’t know if he has any other problems until he gets older; he could—”

“Do you think he’ll be okay?”

Rachel paused at the interruption, slowly turning back to the incubator. “Yea,” she admitted. “But… that’s because I’m not sure I’ll be able to handle it if I’m wrong.”

James rubbed her back, as he looked around. “You know, when you were born, you spent three days in a room like this.”

Rachel’s eyebrows shot up. “I did?”

“You did.” James nodded. “Your mother had a problem with your delivery. There was a brief period where you didn’t get enough oxygen, or…” he paused. “Honestly, I don’t remember exactly what happened. It was a while ago, and most of the medical terminology was over my head. They used something like a bassinet to keep your body temperature low.”

“I didn’t know that.” She frowned. “You and Mom never said anything.”

“It isn’t something we like to remember. She sat by you the whole time, and refused to eat until you got better. And we spent years, terrified that you were going to have brain damage.” He smiled. “You have no idea how grateful we both are, that you turned out okay.”

Rachel didn’t reply, as she watched her dad scratch his nose. “Your mother refused to believe that you would turn out anything less than perfect, despite me trying to be realistic. And I’m not unconvinced that her sheer stubbornness isn’t why you came out healthy.”

“Mm.” Rachel turned back to the incubator. “Mom is pretty stubborn.”

“Agreed.” James smirked. “And you take after her very much in that regard. Little…” He looked at the incubator and frowned. “Leonidas? That’s what you named him?”

“We haven’t named him yet.” Rachel and James both turned to see Steph behind them. The brunette moved to stand beside Rachel. “The nurses were telling me that they give out tough-guy nicknames to all the kids here.”

“Yea, they told me too, last night.” Rachel smirked. “The nurse picked it, not us.”

“Mm.” James looked back at the baby. “It’s a good name. Kind of a mouthful, though.”

“Agreed.”

“It went very well. Textbook, really.”
Steph exhaled heavily, as she looked at the baby through the plastic. “So... he’s fine?”

“Well, he’s still very underweight.” Doctor Clark checked the chart on her tablet. “But I expect that he’ll start putting on weight over the next few days. And there don’t seem to be any problems with his lungs or heart.”

“And...” Steph bit her lip. “What about his brain? My wife and I have been reading about the effects drugs can have on babies.”

“That, I’m afraid, you won’t know until he’s older. But there’s no reason to believe that he won’t grow up as healthy as the next person.”

“Really?” Steph asked hopefully. “I mean, we’ve read all about-”

“Miss Gingrich, I was born addicted to opiates.” Clark smiled. “I spent much longer in the hospital NICU that little Leonidas here will, and I turned out fine. There’s no reason for you and your wife to get concerned until signs start to appear, and that may not be for years.”

“Oh.” Steph felt her face turn red. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. You and your wife have every right to worry.” Clark lowered the tablet. “As far as everything else, I see no reason why you can’t take him home in a couple of weeks.”

Steph exhaled slowly. “Thank you,” she whispered, as she looked at the baby. “I... we’ve spent the last few days terrified out of our minds. I don’t think either of us has gotten a good night’s sleep since he was born.”

“I imagine not. The nurses said that one of you has been here ever since.” Clark glanced around. “Where is your wife? Rachel, was it?”

“She went to go get our daughter from her parents’ house.” Steph looked back at Clark. “His sister’s been begging to see him since he was born. But... we didn’t want to scare her, before the surgery.” She paused. “When will he come out of the incubator?”

“We’ll want to keep him in there for a few more days, before he moves to a regular bassinet.” Clark looked over him quickly. “But if you want, we can bring him out for a little bit, so you and your family can hold him.”

Steph blinked. “That won’t hurt him, will it?”

“No. He’s just in there to make sure he stays warm.” Clark nodded towards the chair. “Here, take a seat.”

Steph did as she was told, while Clark had a nurse help her open the incubator and check the IV. Then they gently wrapped a blanket around him, lifting him carefully before depositing him in Steph’s arms. She gripped him tightly, trying not to nudge the tubes as she held him in her lap.

That was how Rachel and Melissa found her, when they walked in twenty minutes later. Rachel stopped as soon as she saw her. “They finally took him out?”

“For a few minutes.” Steph looked at Melissa and smiled. “Hey, kid. Want to see your baby brother?”

Melissa walked forward, bending over him as he shifted slowly under the blanket. “Is he okay?” she asked, worry evident in her voice.
“He will be.” Rachel bent down next to her, arm around Melissa’s shoulders. “He’s just a little sick, is all.”

“What’s that?” Melissa pointed at the IV.

“It’s how they’re giving him his medicine.” Steph carefully adjusted the blanket around him. “Do you want to hold him?”

Melissa nodded and held out her arms. Steph very slowly turned the baby around, placing him delicately in Melissa’s arms while Rachel helped support the extra weight. “There you go,” Steph said reassuringly. “What do you think?”

“He looks like my doll.” Melissa looked up anxiously. “How long until he’s better?”

“The doctors said a couple of weeks,” Steph answered. “We’ll be able to take him home when he recovers.”

“What about his mom?”

Rachel hesitated as Steph looked to her. “Remember what Steph told you before, about his mother not being able to take care of him?”

Melissa nodded.

“She’s getting the help she needs, too.” Rachel shifted her arms to hold more of the baby’s weight. “We’re his family now.”

“Oh.” Melissa curled her arms as she held him closer. “What’s his name?”

“Shoot.” Steph smirked, as she looked at Rachel. “We should probably deal with that. Unless we want to keep Leonidas.”

“Leonidas?” Melissa frowned. “What’s that?”

“That’s the nickname the nurses gave him,” Rachel told her. “It was the name of a famous king, back in ancient times.”

“I’m not sure how much I like it.” Steph paused. “Then again, it did work for him. Doctor Clark said he pulled through like a champ.”

Rachel hummed. “I don’t know about it either. I agree with my dad, that it’s kind of a mouthful. But we never thought about a boy’s name, and I’m kind of drawing a blank.”

“Me too.” Steph turned back to the baby as she chewed on the inside of her cheek in thought.

A few seconds later, the baby started squirming. “Uh oh,” Rachel said cautiously. “Melissa, be careful, we don’t want to move his IV.”

Their daughter gripped him tighter, and responded by rocking him slowly back and forth. “Shh,” she murmured. “Go back to sleep, Leo. It’s okay.”

He wiggled for a few more seconds, before he finally stopped and settled down. Steph looked at her and raised an eyebrow. “Leo?”

Melissa looked up and slowly shrugged. “... it was really long.”
“A little.” Steph glanced at Rachel. “I... kind of like it. If we keep Leonidas, I could get behind Leo as a nickname.”

“He.” Rachel adjusted her grip on Melissa’s arms. “I like it, too. I think it’s catchy.”

“She.” Steph rubbed Melissa’s arm. “Good job, kid.”

Melissa beamed with pride, as she continued rocking her brother.

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**Brooke:** Tanya signed the paperwork without a fuss.

**Rachel:** Really? Not even an argument?

**Brooke:** Nope. I’ll email you copies, but she agreed to a closed adoption.

**Rachel:** Thanks. I honestly don’t think I would have been able to face her without throwing a punch.

**Brooke:** Yea, remaining calm took a lot of willpower. I can’t even imagine what you’d have to be thinking, to do what she did.

**Rachel:** Parental instincts kicking in already?

**Brooke:** There is so MUCH kicking it’s not even funny.

**Rachel:** Yea, one of the reasons Steph and I weren’t big into the idea of IVF. Easier for someone else to do the work for us.

**Brooke:** Cheaper to do it yourself, though.

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**Amanda:** Okay, what do you think of these?

**Amanda:** <hats.jpg> <onesie.jpg>

**Steph:** Oh my GOD those are adorable! Where did you get them?

**Amanda:** The wife of the club Treasurer is big into sewing and embroidery. A few of the other wives/girlfriends asked about child-sized hats and shirts with the club logo, so she has a little side business making them.

**Steph:** I love them! Leo is going to look SO cute when we put that onesie and hat on him.

**Amanda:** Your dad also wants to know if he can take pictures of him and Melissa wearing them, for the club’s Facebook page.

**Steph:** Let me talk to Rachel. We’re not really excited about pictures of them on Facebook when they’re so young.

**Amanda:** I get it, and it’s totally fine if the answer’s no. We’re just excited to be grandparents again.

**Steph:** I’m sure. When are you guys coming up?
Amanda: The 28th. Are we still good to stay until the 9th?

Steph: Totally. And that works out perfect, too. Max is coming up with her family right before you, and they’re leaving on the 25th.

Amanda: Oh, how is she doing? How old are her kids now?

Steph: Well, Faith is sixteen. The twins are only a few months older than Melissa.

Amanda: God, time really does fly the older you get.

Steph: No kidding.

Amanda: Oh, shut the hell up.

Max: Chloe wants to know if she can give him a sword.

Rachel: ... is that a trick question?

Max: As a decoration, not as a toy. She found a movie replica of Leonidas’ sword from 300 that comes with a wall mount.

Rachel: Okay, you can see how I would have believed that she’d buy a real sword for our three-week-old baby, right?

Max: I asked for clarification too.

Rachel: Good. It is kind of cool, and I do like the idea. But we’d probably put it in the attic or something when he starts walking. I’ve seen stuff fall off of walls before.

Max: I was really hoping you’d say that.

Rachel: She already brought it, didn’t she?

Max: AND it’s non-refundable.

Rachel: Tell me the truth. Are you glad I said yes because she already purchased it? Or because if I said no, you’d have to live with your wife having easy access to a sword?

Max: Both. Oh my God, both.
“Help Desk, this is Cheryl.”

Chloe turned half an ear to the conversation one of her underlings started, not paying a lot of attention as she fidgeted with the device in her hands. She sat at her desk in the back of the room, on a slightly-elevated platform that let her look over the whole IT office area.

Three of her underlings were currently at work. One was roaming around the building on a service call. Another was at the workbench that ran the length of the wall, trying to fix a broken laptop. The third was engaged in her own quiet call, as Cheryl listened to the user on the other end of her phone.

“Okay, I can help with that. When did the problem start?”

Chloe cursed under her breath as she continued to fiddle with the wireless mouse. She’d knocked it off her desk and had accidentally kicked it across the room. She was still trying to put it back together. After several seconds, and with a final ‘ha!’ under her breath, she made the stubborn piece snap back into place.

“Have you tried to log out and then back in, ma’am?”

A little more force, and she had the final piece into place. She turned the mouse back on and set it down, relieved to see the cursor on her screen move as she gave the mouse a wiggle.

“Right. Okay, then would you do me a favor and reset your computer?”

Chloe was just sitting back up as her tech from the bench carried the laptop over. “Now the hard drive isn’t responding at all,” he informed her. “Pretty sure it’s shot.”

“Of course it is,” Chloe sighed. “You ran all the diagnostics?”

“Yes. And I tried to slave it into the good machine. I can’t even get to the BIOS screen.”

“Put it in the bin, then. Let’s get a new drive in there.”

“User says they’ve got stuff in here they need.”

Chloe scoffed. “They’ve all got stuff they need. Their laptop should’ve backed itself up to the cloud last night.”

“Might be stuff they started this morning.”

“Then they can start again. It’s only ten o’clock.”

“Ma’am, I’m sure you have, but I’d like you to try again,” Cheryl said in the background. “It’s the next step in the troubleshooting procedures.”

Chloe and the other tech ignored her. “User was really insistent,” he pressed.

“Who’s the user?”
“A Suit from Sales.”

She rolled her eyes. “They’re all fuckin, crybabies up there,” she reminded him. “Doesn’t matter anyway, we can’t get it back. Just do what you can.”

He sighed. “Sure thing.”

“Ma’am, I can’t press on until you reset your computer,” Cheryl started, as the tech turned back to the bench. “I’m not- Ma’am, it’ll only take a few minutes... yes, Ma’am, it will, I promise.”

Fuckin’ Suits, Chloe thought to herself as she glanced at the clock; still too long until lunch for her liking. “Tech Support, fix my shit. Tech Support, reset my password. Tech Support, recover my data that I lost when I dropped my laptop down a flight of stairs.” Guess what, buddy, instead of another ThinkPad? I’m gonna see if we can find a six-pound Toughbook for you.

“Ma’am, please stop yelling. I can help you if you’d just reset your computer.”

That got Chloe’s attention. She frowned as she sat upright and retrieved her headset, sliding it over her ears to listen in.

“- SIX FUCKING TIMES!!” The user, an angry-sounding woman, was yelling. “I’m FUCKING tired of resetting my FUCKING computer! Just move onto the next goddamn step already!!”

Chloe brought up the call record that Cheryl had been typing and read the notes; an executive named Molly Henderson had an email program that refused to open. She typed rapidly to bring up more information, including the woman’s office and exact location, as well as all the details about the computer in question.

“Ma’am, please don’t swear at-”

“SHUT THE HELL UP AND FIX MY GODDAMN EMAIL!!”

“I’m trying, Ma’am, I just need you to-”

“If you tell me to reset my fucking computer one more goddamn time, I’ll have your job!”

“That’s what you think,” Chloe muttered as she brought up a messaging window.

Chloe: Tell her you’re transferring to the next level of Tech Support. I got this.

“Ma’am, I...” Cheryl paused as she read the message. “Okay, Ma’am, I’m gonna go ahead and transfer you to a higher tier of tech support. They’ll be able to help you fix this.”

“About fucking time!!”

Cheryl muted the call before she stood, looking over at Chloe. “That woman’s a bitch,” she commented.

“Cheryl, what have I told you about disrespecting Chase Enterprise executives?”

“To mute the phone first.”

“Good.” Chloe smirked as she looked over her screen. “Did you look up her computer yet?”

“No, I hadn’t gotten there.”
“Okay. Go take a break or something.”

Cheryl walked off as Chloe flipped the microphone in front of her lips, taking an extra few seconds to review her screen before she connected. “Tier Two Support, this is Chloe.”

“Thank God, someone who can actually help.”

Chloe rolled her eyes. “What seems to be the problem, ma’am?”

“My damn email won’t open. I’ve got an important document that I have to send, and I can’t make it work.”

 Okay.” Chloe nodded as she braced herself. “Have you tried resetting your computer?”

“Jesus Ch- YES!” Molly exclaimed. “Several times!”

Chloe smirked. “No, you haven’t.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m looking at your computer on the network right now. The uptime is sitting at seventeen hours.” She paused. “You have read the emails we’ve sent out, right? About resetting your computer every morning, to make sure it any of the previous night’s updates are applied?”

“I don’t have time for this! I just need you people to fix my fucking email!”

“Whatever it takes?”

“YES!!”

“Okay.” Chloe typed a short command into her computer and waited for several seconds.

“What the fuck?! What just happened?!”

“I remotely-restarted your computer.”

“I had open work on my desktop!!”

“Bummer.” Chloe leaned back in her seat. “Your email wasn’t working because we implemented a server upgrade overnight. Once your computer turns back on, it’ll be fine.”

“I SPENT HOURS WORKING ON THAT DOCUMENT!!”

Chloe shrugged. “Probably should’ve saved it.”

“What’s your name?! I’m telling my boss about this!! You’re gonna be clearing your desk out by the end of the day!!”

“It’s Chloe Price.” She double-checked the computer information. “But if you are gonna talk to your boss, could you do me a favor?”

“WHAT?!”

“Remind my wife that she needs to email the permission slip for our son’s field trip to his teacher by the end of the day.” Chloe smiled. “Thank you for calling the Help Desk.”

The silence that answered her as she terminated the call was very sweet.
“Yea, I sent it in yesterday.” Max frowned. “Why do you ask?”

“Just curious.” Chloe shrugged as she took a bite of her sandwich. “How’s everything else on the forty-fifth floor?”

“Business as usual.” Max picked at her salad as the two of them ate lunch in the lobby cafeteria. “We’re looking into another tech start-up. And two more hedge funds that might be worth turning into Chase subsidiaries.”

“Sounds boring.”

“Mm.” Max shrugged as she ate another forkful of her salad.

Chloe frowned. “Is everything okay?”

“Huh?”

“You look a little mopey.” She leaned forward. “You still hearing those rumors?”

Max looked around, making sure nobody was listening to them before nodding quietly. “From more and more people,” she said quietly. “A lot of credible sources are saying that a re-org is coming, and soon. But nobody seems to know when, or what kind of changes they’ll make.”

“Ah ha.” Chloe nodded. “You’re not in danger of losing your job, right?”

“I doubt it. Not after all the money I’ve made these guys.” Max paused. “But they could transfer us somewhere else.”

“Somewhere else?” Chloe raised her eyebrows. “Like where?”

“Those rumors are flying, too. New York, Washington D.C., Montreal, I even heard someone say that they’re looking at corporate offices in London.”

“... oh.” Chloe bit her lip. “I’ll be honest, Max... I really don’t want to leave Los Angeles.”

“Neither do I.” Max shook her head. “Our whole life is here. And the kids’. Their friends, classmates, Faith is graduating next year...”

“Yea.” Chloe sighed. “So, what? You’re worried that they’ll transfer you?”

“Maybe.” Max leaned back, as she looked up in thought. “Pete has enough seniority that he can swing staying here. I’m pretty much next in line behind him. They could offer the transfer to me, with a promotion to sweeten the deal. The Director of Executive Operations in New York, or something.”

Chloe raised her eyebrows. “You think so?”

“It’s what I’d do.”

“God, this is stupid.” Chloe tilted her head. “Why don’t we just call Vic? She’s in Seattle right now, we could get some answers in five minutes.”

Max was already shaking her head. “Aside from the fact that would be incredibly inappropriate, I doubt she’d tell me. It’s not my concern.”
“She’s one of our best friends.”

“And if you think for a second that she’ll let that influence a business decision, then I’m checking you for a fever.”

“... fair enough.”

“When’s Mom coming home?”

“Later tonight, sweetie.” Chloe continued stirring a pot of spaghetti as she glanced over her shoulder, checking on the three kids sitting at the kitchen island. “How’s your homework?”

“Almost done.” William paused, as he looked up from a History textbook. “Did she sign my permission slip?”

“Yes, she did. It’s in your teacher’s mailbox right now.”

“What about the one for my roller derby?” Jennifer piped up from her set next to him, as she wrote on her own math paper.

Chloe sighed. “We don’t know yet, kiddo.”

“You said you would.”

“No, I said we’d TALK about it,” Chloe reminded her. “Roller Derby is dangerous, Jennifer. Your mom and I still need to meet with the coach and ask questions.”

“But Mama!!”

“No ‘buts’.” Chloe fixed her with a look. “We will tell you when we make our decision, not before.”

Jennifer pouted. “... fine.”

Beside her, Faith sighed heavily as she finally stopped typing and closed her laptop. “Finished,” she muttered.

“Your paper’s done?”

“Yea. I just have to spell-check it.” Faith stood, stretching her arms. “What’s taking Max so long?”

“I don’t know. She just texted and said that she’d be late coming home.” Chloe tried not to think about the rumors Max had mentioned as she gestured towards the cabinet. “Grab some bowls, will you?”

Faith nodded as she brushed her hair out of her eyes. The teenager had taken to dyeing and highlighting it a new color every couple of weeks, sometimes combining colors. At the moment, it was a stark platinum blonde with faded pink highlights.

_I miss my blue hair_, Chloe mused as she checked her reflection in the window. She’d stopped dying it the previous year, letting it return to it’s natural brown color. She knew Max missed it, too; her wife had made enough comments about it. But Chloe figured that they were in their forties now, and it was time to act like it.

Though she did occasionally feel a pang of jealousy, whenever her sister-in-law’s hair changed colors.
The two of them dished out bowls of pasta, setting them at the table as the twins grabbed silverware. Chloe was retrieving the jug of milk from the fridge when she saw headlights sweeping over the front of the house, as her wife’s car pulled into the driveway. “Mom’s home,” she called out as she retrieved a fifth bowl from the cabinet. By the time Max opened the door, she had her own place set at the table.

Her wife looked ragged. And tired. She rubbed her eyes as she set her purse on the counter. “Hey, guys,” she greeted weakly.

The twins greeted her with smiles, as she walked around the table and kissed the tops of their heads. Faith frowned as Max sat down. “Are you okay?”

“Why?”

“Because you kinda look like somebody ran over your puppy.”

Max snorted. “Least it wasn’t a lawn gnome.”

Faith narrowed her eyes. “Not cool.”


Max sighed. “The directors pulled a bunch of the senior execs into the boardroom, so we could sit in on a conference call,” she said. “Between them and Victoria.”

“Vic? Is she still in Seattle?”

“Not for long. She’s coming back late tonight.” Max paused. “And her father’s coming with her.”

Chloe did a double-take. “Her dad? He’s coming here?”

“Yep.”

“How long has it been since he’s made the trip down to LA?”

“Two or three years, I think.” Max shrugged. “But announcing a company-wide re-org is important enough to make the flight.”

Chloe blinked. “… so the re-org is happening.”

“They’re announcing it tomorrow.” Max nodded. “Not just for us. They’ve been planning a big corporate shake-up between all the major offices, moving people to where they’re most needed. Los Angeles, Seattle, New York, D.C., a lot of things are going to be changing.”

Faith raised her eyebrows. “Does... that mean we’re moving?”

The question made William and Jennifer looked up from their dinner, as everyone at the table focused on Max.

“... I don’t know,” she admitted. “They might ask us to.”

Jennifer folded her arms. “I don’t want to move.”

William mirrored her. “Me either.”

“We don’t know anything yet,” Max assured them. “We might not. It’ll depend on what they say
tomorrow.”

“Would we move?” Faith asked. “If they asked you to?”

Chloe fully expected her wife to respond negatively. She was very surprised to see Max hesitate. “I don’t know,” she replied. “Maybe.”

“There’s no point worrying about it,” Chloe interjected. “We’re not moving yet. Let’s just focus on dinner.”

“I thought we agreed that we didn’t want to move.”

Max squirmed as the two of them sat in bed later that night. “I don’t.”

“Then what was with what you said? When Faith asked if we’d move? It sounded like you might be on board?”

“... I don’t know.” Max sighed. “I meant what I said at lunch. Our whole lives are here. Plus, I know Faith has her sights set on UCLA. I don’t want to uproot everything.”

“But...” Chloe prompted.

“I got a text from Victoria, after the conference call.” Max looked at her. “She was acting cagey, but she told me that I needed to prepare myself for big news tomorrow.”

Chloe’s brow furrowed. “Big news? Like what?”

“She didn’t say. And ignored me when I asked.”

“Damn.” Chloe paused. “You think it might be a promotion? Like what you were talking about?”

“Like I said, it’s what I’d do.” Max nodded. “Best way to convince someone to transfer is to sweeten the deal.”

“And you think you’d take it?”

“... I kind of want to,” Max admitted. “The idea of being a Director is pretty appealing. Besides, I know how much Pete makes.”

Chloe nodded. “So we are moving?”

“I...” Max paused. “I don’t know.”

“What’s the other option?”

“That we stay here.” Max inhaled slowly. “But there might not be a place for me if I don’t take the transfer. I don’t know how the re-org is going to work. If I don’t take the job...”

“Then you might get fired,” Chloe finished.

“With all the money I’ve made the company, I’d probably be allowed to resign,” Max corrected. “But yea, I wouldn’t work for Chase Enterprises anymore.”

“... shit,” Chloe muttered. “I don’t like that plan.”

“Me either.” Max let out a slow breath. “Like you said, though we don’t know anything yet. There’s
They were interrupted by a soft knock on the door. Max and Chloe turned as it cracked open, revealing Faith in the shirt and sweatpants she slept in. “... hey,” she muttered.

“What’s up, kiddo?” Chloe asked. “You alright?”

“Yea. I just...” Faith hesitated, glancing at Max. “You said that when my mom got released, you might bring her down here.”

Max nodded. “I remember.”

“What happens if we move?” Faith bit her lip. “Is that still something that we can...”

They traded glances. “It’s not out of the realm of possibilities,” Chloe replied.

“That’s not an answer.”

Max sighed. “Faith, I can’t predict the future,” she reminded her sister. “If I could, I’d be making a lot more money. We haven’t even decided whether or not it’s something we could do while we’re living here.”

Faith dropped her gaze while she wrung her hands. “... I know.”

“Your mother will be okay no matter what, Faith.”

“No, she won’t.” Faith looked back up. “She doesn’t have anyone in Oregon. Literally everyone in her family but me is dead. Where is she gonna go when she gets out of prison?”

Chloe leaned forward. “We have three years to figure that out, Faith.”

“It doesn’t feel like it.”

Max sighed as she turned, putting her feet on the floor. “Is this something that’s really bothering you right now?”

Faith nodded.

“Okay.” Max stood. “Like I said, Faith, I don’t know what will happen. But we will not leave your mother high and dry. We will figure something out, whether we bring her to us, or we find a way to help her in Oregon.”

“... you promise?” Faith asked hopefully.

Max nodded. “I promise.”

Faith let out a low breath, glancing back at the ground. “Thank you,” she muttered.

“You’re welcome.” Max gave her a quick hug, rubbing her back. “Now go to sleep, you have school tomorrow.”

Max didn’t even get a chance to get to her desk before her day got interesting. She was intercepted as she got off the elevator on her floor.

“Miss Caulfield?” A man asked as she left the car.
She turned and frowned, not recognizing him. “... who are you?”

“Brad Turner, ma’am. Mister Chase asked me to find you when you came in.”

Max blinked. “Mister Chase is here?”

“Yes, ma’am. We came in early this morning.” He motioned towards her bag. “I can put that at your desk. But Mister Chase wanted to see you in the fifty-fifth floor offices as soon as you got here.”

“... ah ha.” Max handed him her bag. “Thanks.”

She got back in the elevator and pressed the button for the top floor of the building, the one reserved for the high-level executives at their office. She’d only been there a few times herself; even Victoria didn’t work up there, though she was a lot closer to the top than Max was. She tried not to let her apprehension show on her face as the car ascended.

The elevator opened to a quiet floor. Only a few people were in the spacious lobby, mostly having quiet conversations on their phones. A young woman approached her as she left the elevator. “Miss Caulfield?”

“Yes?”

“They’re waiting for you in the conference room.” She gestured behind her. “Please follow me.”

Max did so, walking down a short hallway until the glass-walled conference room came into view. There were only a couple of people there, both of whom she recognized.

She couldn’t help but smirk as she walked into the room. “This feels familiar,” she remarked.

Victoria looked up and returned the smirk. “I guess it does, doesn’t it?” she agreed, looking at her dad. “Sorry, Max, but we don’t have a huge check with your name on it this time.”

“Though I suppose it wouldn’t be entirely undeserved,” Derek mentioned as Max took a seat. “How large was the deal Microsoft offered to QuantumCloud? Four hundred million?”

“Four hundred and fifty,” Max corrected. “Over the next five years, for their new line of microcomputers.”

“Fifteen percent of which is net profit,” Victoria added. “A little over sixty-seven million.”

“Nothing to sneeze at.” Derek nodded. “I’m sure you’re not tired of hearing it, Max, but QuantumCloud was a good get. They’ve guaranteed us solid quarterly earnings reports for the next few years.”

Max shrugged. “I do my best.”

“Indeed. Even when plenty of other executives were against the purchase.” Derek chuckled. “More than a few told me that it was a waste of money.”

“I appreciate your faith in me.”

“As I said, it’s not undeserved.” Derek flipped open a report in front of him. “How long have you worked for me now, Max?”

She glanced up in thought. “It’ll be... God, almost fifteen years now.”
“Five of which you’ve spent as one of our senior Acquisitions Executives.” Derek perused the report. “Do you know how much net revenue we reported over the past five years?”

“Not off the top of my head.”

“I think a more important question would be; do you know how much of it you’re responsible for?” Max blinked. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “I’ve never added it all up.”

“We did.” Derek tapped the paper. “Seventeen percent.”

“... that seems high.”

“I agree, but you can’t argue with the numbers.” Derek closed the report. “QuantumCloud really boosted that figure, especially after the deals with Apple and Google. Now with Microsoft making bids, I think we can say with confidence that it’ll be some time before we’re in danger of reporting a quarterly loss.” He met her gaze. “I might have been nudged towards hiring you by your former employers and my daughter, but I think you’ve proven yourself to be a valuable asset to this company.”

Max flushed slightly with the praise. “Thank you.”

“Are you aware that we’re about to undergo a major corporate restructuring?” She glanced at Victoria. “I was in the conference room last night.”

“I wondered who else might’ve been there.” Victoria nodded. “The directors like bringing in senior people to those calls, to help with rumor control.”

“You didn’t say what kind of restructuring was going on, though.”

“No, I didn’t.” Victoria looked at her dad. “Do you want to...” He shrugged. “You planned most of it. You can tell her.”

“Okay.” She turned back to Max. “Most of it is changing job titles and responsibilities. We’re eliminating larger departments and compartmentalizing everything into smaller offices, to allow for more oversight and greater control.”

“So... there’ll be more Director positions?”

“There won’t be ANY Director positions,” Victoria corrected her. “We’re reverting to a traditional corporate structure. Instead of four Directors being led by an Executive Director, we’ll have multiple c-level executives in charge of their own divisions, reporting to a CEO.”

Max frowned, glancing at Derek. “I thought you were the Chase CEO.”

“I still will be,” he assured her. “Victoria will be the CEO of West Coast Operations.”

“Ah.” Max looked back at her friend. “Sounds like you’re done with legal work.”

She rolled her eyes. “I haven’t done any legal work for years, so it’s not really much of a shock. Harriet Jackson will be taking over as the Chief Legal Officer.”

“She always did say she was a better lawyer than you.”
“And she’s entitled to her wrong opinions.”

Max smirked, though it faded. “Well, this sounds pretty cool,” she admitted. “Though I can’t help but wonder what my role in this is.” She paused. “Making the grand assumption that I still have one, of course.”

“If you really think you’re in danger of being fired, then you haven’t being paying attention,” Derek said, amused. “We’re offering you a new job, Max.”

“As?”

“Well, as I’ve said, your work in Acquisitions was directly and indirectly responsible for seventeen percent of our reported revenue,” he reminded her. “Our returns in your investment decisions have consistently been in the triple-digits. Victoria has convinced me that a dedicated Acquisitions office, operating under it’s own purview, is a good idea.”

He paused. “And I can’t think of a better executive to run it.”

Max blinked several times. “... me?”

“Chief Acquisitions Officer,” Victoria answered. “Not a common c-level title, but given the responsibility that would come with it, one worth creating.”

“I... wait, what about Peter?”

“We asked your former boss to transfer to London, to run the offices in Europe,” Derek replied. “He doesn’t have an acquisitions background anyway. You’re the most qualified person in the building.”

“Of course, the job doesn’t just come with a pay bump and a fancy new title,” Victoria added. “We’re buying out six more floors of this building, to make room for new people. We’ll be expanding all the departments. Including yours.”

“Expanding from where?”

“That’s up to you.” Victoria shrugged. “You’ll be the one hiring them.”

“There will be a larger meeting with all the new c-level executives, to go over their respective responsibilities and our expectations,” Derek told her. “But what we’d really like to hear, Max, is that we can count on you being there.”

“... shit.”

Max smirked as she sat next to Chloe at her wife’s desk. “Does that mean you’re okay with me taking the job?”

“I don’t know why the fuck I wouldn’t be.” Chloe smirked. “You know you’re a real sugar-momma now, right?”

“Like I wasn’t before?”

“You weren’t pulling in THAT much more than me.”

“Well, I am now.” Max grinned. “We’re not gonna have to stress about the twins’ college tuitions. Or Faith’s.”
“That, I think, makes me happier than anything else.” Chloe nodded. “Faith will be thrilled that we’re not moving, too.”

“I think all five of us will be.”

Chloe leaned forward. “So, how many people are gonna be working for you?”

“Probably about forty people.” Max glanced up in thought. “Maybe fifty. It’ll definitely be a smaller department. Most of my work will be supervising.”

“You keeping everyone working for you now?”

“Yea, I think so.” Max nodded. “I’ll pick a few of them to be senior executives, to oversee most of the work being done by the others.”

Chloe pursed her lips. “There a Molly Henderson in that group?”

“She’s one of our junior execs. Just came on board a few months ago.” Max tilted her head. “How do you know her?”

“She told me that she was gonna have you fire me yesterday.”

Max raised her eyebrows. “Why? What did you do?”

“Uh, excuse me.” Chloe put her hand over her chest. “Why do you automatically assume that it was my fault?”

“Call it marital intuition.”

“Hey, she called down here and started insulting my tech.” Chloe shrugged. “I fixed her problem by remotely-restarting her computer. Apparently she lost some work.”

“Mm.” Max leaned back. “I did get a late report from her yesterday that she blamed on computer issues.”

“So, am I fired?”

Max smirked. “I don’t know. We might have to bring you up on disciplinary measures.”

“Well, maybe not here in front of everyone, sweetheart,” Chloe replied in a low voice. “But if you wanna go get some equipment or something...”

“Oh, God, please shut up.”

Chloe: We’re not moving.

Faith: Whew.

Faith: So Max is keeping her job?

Chloe: She got a promotion, but we’re staying here.

Faith: Cool!

Chloe: Yep. When Jennifer and William get home, you need to have them do their homework
quickly, so we can go out for dinner to celebrate.

**Faith:** Where are we going?

**Chloe:** Maria’s Kitchen.

**Faith:** Again? You guys know there are other restaurants in Los Angeles, right?

**Chloe:** We like that one. And I know you do too, I’ve seen how fast you inhale their chimichangas.

**Faith:** Yea, but we go there all the time! How about a burger place? Or pizza?

**Chloe:** When you get a huge promotion at work, you can pick the restaurant. But it’s Max’s night, and she picked Maria’s, so that’s where we’re going.

**Faith:** How big of a promotion?

**Chloe:** Why? You already working on your Christmas wish list?

**Faith:** Aunt Vic and Aunt Kate got Kevin a car for his birthday. Just saying.
Brooke looked over the gym teacher in front of her. The young man appeared to be in his late twenties, thirty at the most, and was very fit; even through his hoodie, she could see the definition of his muscles. He was also anxious, and had been shifting from foot to foot ever since he’d seen her.

I make him nervous.

Understandable, given the situation.

“I believe you, Mister Reynolds.” Brooke nodded. “What happened?”

“Her shirt came up when she fell, while the kids were playing kickball.” Reynolds was still sweating profusely. “I saw it when I helped her get back up. I swear, there was nothing inappropriate.”

Brooke glanced at the vice principal standing next to him. “Are there cameras in the gym?”

“There are.” The older woman nodded. “You can review the footage with me, if you want. But Mister Reynolds was not inappropriate with Jasmine.”

“Okay.” Brooke looked back at the gym teacher. “Mister Reynolds, I am not here for your job. Or to pass judgement on your actions. Please just tell me what happened.”

“Well, like I said, she fell and I saw the black marks,” he explained. “And when she got back up, she was holding her side, and I could see that she was hurt. So I knelt down to ask if she wanted to go to the nurse, and that was when I saw the blood drops on her shirt.”

Brooke frowned. “You didn’t see them before?”

“There weren’t that many, and they were really faint. I didn’t notice them until I got close.” Reynolds wrung his hands. “I was afraid that she’d cut herself, so...” he paused. “I made a mistake. I should have taken her to the nurse right away, but I lifted the edge of her shirt so I could see. I was worried that she had a really bad cut, and-”

“Seriously, Mister Reynolds, you are not going to get in trouble for trying to administer first aid to a child,” Brooke assured him. “Was that when you saw it?”

He nodded. “I took her straight to the nurse once I realized what it was,” he said. “I didn’t ask her what happened, or question her, or anything. I got Jasmine to the nurse, and called Miss Watanabe.”

Brooke nodded and looked back at the vice principal. “Have you been to visit her?”

“No.” Watanabe shook her head. “I didn’t want to make her feel like she was in trouble. Aside from Mister Reynolds, the only one who’s seen what happened is Nurse Hagan.”

“Okay, then.” Brooke nodded. “I’d like to see her.”

“This way.”
She followed the two of them down the hallway, as they led her to the nurse’s office. “Should we wait out here?” Watanabe asked.

“Yes, please.” Brooke glanced at Reynolds. “If you have someplace else to be, then you can leave. I’ll find you later if I need you.”

He seemed relieved as he walked back towards the gym. Brooke took a second to gather herself before she stepped into the office.

The older nurse looked up as she closed the door. “Good morning, Miss Scott.”

“Morning, Judith.” Brooke smiled. “How have you been?”

“I’m good, thank you.” She looked back at the young girl sitting on the bed. “Are you here to speak with Jasmine?”

“I am.” Brooke walked closer as the girl turned around to see her.

She wore an oversized paper gown as a shirt; Brooke could see her jeans sticking out from beneath it. And she could see the girl’s shirt on the bed beside her, turned inside out, the blood stains very obvious.

“Hello, Jasmine.” Brooke kept the smile on her face as she sat on the rolling stool. “How are you?”

The girl shrugged, staying silent.

“My name is Miss Scott. Your principle asked me if I’d talk to you.” She paused. “Are you feeling okay?”

Still no response.

“Are you nervous, Jasmine?” she asked. “Do you think you’re in trouble?”

She finally responded, slowly nodding her head.

“Well.” Brooke leaned forward. “I promise you, Jasmine, it’s okay to talk. You’re not in trouble.”

Jasmine squirmed. “I’m not?” she asked quietly.

“No.” Brooke shook her head. “What grade are you in?”

“Second.”


Jasmine nodded again.

“Good.” Brooke paused. “How does your side feel?

“... it hurts,” she admitted quietly, one hand lightly grasping her stomach.

“I’m sorry, kiddo.” Brooke nodded. “Can you show me?”

The girl hesitated again, looking warily at Brooke.

“Jasmine, I swear, you are not in any trouble,” Brooke assured her. “I just want to make sure that you’re okay. You didn’t do anything wrong.”
“... pinky promise?”

Brooke smiled, holding up an outstretched little finger. “Pinky promise.”

The girl hooked her little finger around Brooke’s, and they shook as the nurse came around the bed. Judith gently laid Jasmine down on her side, then the child helped her lift the paper shirt.

Three black letters on the girl’s side, right above her hip, quickly became visible. The poorly-done tattoo of her initials was lopsided and crude; even under the plastic wrap and lotion, Brooke could see that it was infected. She looked over it carefully, before nodding to the nurse. “Will you tell me how you got that?”

Jasmine looked down at her lap as she sat back up. “She told me not to tell.”

Brooke and the nurse exchanged glances. “Who did, sweetie?”

“... Mom.”

“Unfortunately, I’m not surprised.”

Brooke frowned as she looked at Watanabe. She was in the vice principal’s office with the nurse and a police officer. “Why not?”

“Jasmine’s mother is... well, she’s not exactly a contender for Mother Of The Year.” Watanabe drummed her fingers on the manila folder in front of her. “Crystal gave birth to Jasmine when she was fifteen years old. And while we don’t hold that against her, she has not exactly stepped into her role as a parent smoothly.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well.” Watanabe opened the folder. “First, she’s received several warnings about packing Jasmine proper lunches, with meals that aren’t cold pizza and soda.”

Brooke’s eyebrows shot up. “Seriously?”

“Yes. Rather than put the effort in, Crystal simply signed Jasmine up for the cafeteria’s lunch program. Of which she’s delinquent almost four hundred dollars, but I don’t think that’s relevant to the matter at hand.” Watanabe moved on. “She’s also received warnings not to smoke on school grounds, when she picks up Jasmine in the afternoon. She supposedly threatened a teacher when he tried to get her to stop smoking while Jasmine was in the car.”

The officer behind them, a Lieutenant named Sam, frowned when he heard that. “She threatened a teacher? Why wasn’t a report made?”

“There was no proof, only the teacher’s word. It would have been a ‘he said, she said’ situation. Hence the use of the word ‘supposedly’.” Watanabe shook her head. “The resource officer here took an in-house report, and she was told that if she did it again, we’d ban her from school property. She’s also extremely combative during parent-teacher conferences, and doesn’t take kindly to insinuations that she’s a less than ideal mother.”

“Where’s Jasmine’s father in all this?” Brooke asked.

“My understanding is that it’s unclear who the father is.”

“Then is there any other emergency contact?” Brooke pressed. “A grandparent, an aunt or uncle,
some family member nearby?"

"Jasmine might have grandparents, but Crystal is the only contact we have on file for her." Watanabe closed the folder. "Will she be arrested?"

Brooke glanced at Sam. "Forcing a tattoo onto a minor is definitely child abuse. You think it’s felony level?"

"Maybe." Sam scratched his chin. "It’ll be the DA’s office that decides that. But Jasmine’s statement is enough to bring her mother in. How is she, health-wise?"

Judith cleared her throat. "The tattoo is definitely infected," she stated. "It doesn’t look like any precautionary measures were taken; most tattoo artists will seal new ink with plastic wrap and moisturizer. I’ve applied some antibiotic ointment and wrapped it properly, but she should see a real doctor before the end of the day."

"Christ." Sam shook his head. "Did she say where she got it? I’d like to arrest the artist, too. Tattooing anyone under the age of eighteen is illegal in Oregon."

"Apparently her mother gave it to her." Brooke rubbed her forehead. "She said her mom wanted to try her new tattoo gun, and gave Jasmine her initials as a birthday present."

"Her birthday’s in May," Watanabe said, confused.

"Given my experience, it wouldn’t surprise me of Crystal wasn’t sober when she did it." Brooke shrugged. "What does her mother do for work?"

Watanabe shifted uncomfortably in her chair. "I don’t know for certain, only rumors," she started. "But by my understanding, Jasmine’s mother is an online camera model. One of those women who... you know..."

"She’s a cam girl," Brooke finished.

"Is that the proper term?"

"I don’t know about proper, but it’s what they’re called." She sighed. "I’ve met a couple of them in my line of work."

"So she’s probably home right now," Sam deduced.

Watanabe nodded. "I would think so."

Then I need her address, so we can pick her up."

The principal scribbled on a yellow post-it note. "Are you going to take Jasmine now?" she asked Brooke, as she handed Sam the paper. "Or when school’s over?"

"Now. I’ll bring her to the ER, before we go to the CPS office and see about a short-term placement." Brooke stood. "Although I somehow doubt she’ll be returned anytime soon."

She exhaled slowly, as she turned into her driveway later that evening.

Brooke had brought Jasmine straight to the local hospital, where the staff had been horrified to hear what had happened. The attending physician had noted that Jasmine had the beginnings of a fever, so he immediately put her on medication and admitted her to the pediatric ward. Brooke had spent
the remainder of visiting hours with the child, and continued to assure her that she was not in trouble. She was going to be picking her up in the morning to bring her to a foster house.

At the moment, though, she desperately needed a beer.

She walked inside and dropped her purse on a table before kicking her shoes off. “Babe?” Dave called from the kitchen. “Is that you?”

“No, it’s the axe murderer,” she said dryly. “Here to exact revenge for you not taking the garbage can to the curb yesterday.”

A chuckle made her perk up as she walked into the kitchen. That’s not Dave. Who is that?

Her question was answered when James Amber came into view, as he sat beside her husband at the counter. “I forgot this week, too,” he said. “And after Rose threw away some bad chicken. She wasn’t nearly as forgiving.”

“I imagine not. You’ll regret that once it starts to smell.”

“It’s been three days. Trust me, I regret it.”

Brooke smirked as she retrieved a beer from her fridge. “I didn’t realize you were coming by,” she said carefully. “Actually, I didn’t realize you knew where I lived.”

“I didn’t. I had Rachel give me your address.” James paused. “I’m sorry, I know that was an invasion of privacy. But I wanted to speak with you in person, away from our offices, and it’s pretty important.”

“What ab-”

“Mommy?”

The three of them turned to see Sara walk around the corner in her PJs, the four-year-old rubbing her eye as she dragged her stuffed bear behind her. “Hey, Peanut,” Dave greeted as he stood. “You’re supposed to be in bed.”

“I couldn’t sleep.” Sara looked at Brooke. “Will you read me a story?”

Brooke raised an eyebrow. “Did your Daddy read you one?”

“I want you.”

She glanced at Dave, and he shrugged. “Apparently, I’m not good at it.”

“... fine.” Brooke turned her gaze to James. “Can this thing wait for ten minutes?”

“It certainly can.”

“Okay.” Brooke took Sara’s shoulder, ushering her back towards her bedroom. “Come on, Sara. One quick story, and then straight to bed.”

“You can’t be serious.”

Brooke sighed. The three of them had moved into the living room, and she sat on the couch next to her husband while James took the recliner. “I wish I was kidding. For Jasmine’s sake, if nothing
“That poor girl.” James shook his head. “I know getting a tattoo is painful. To willingly do that to such a young child... God, I’m getting chills. I can’t imagine a mother thinking something like that was okay.”

“Oh, she didn’t.” Brooke assured him. “She told Jasmine not to say anything to anybody, or else she’d be in trouble.”

“That’s terrible. How is she?”

“The doctor admitted her overnight, so they could keep her under observation.” Brooke nodded. “They’re giving her IV antibiotics, to keep the infection under control.”

James hummed. “What about having it removed?”

“It was explained to me that the tattoo was so poorly done, it’ll probably go away on its own in a few months.”

“Really?”

Dave cleared his throat, as he gestured to his heavily-tattooed arms. “If you don’t know what you’re doing, it’s easy to screw up a tattoo,” he explained. “The needles need to reach below the dermis, to properly inject the ink. Otherwise, it’ll fade away as the body absorbs it.”

“If it doesn’t, then I’ll get our insurance to cover a few sessions with a specialist,” Brooke added. “But we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

“Aha.” James sighed. “Well, good. That girl shouldn’t have to live with her mother’s poor decision.”

“Agreed.” Brooke cocked her head. “So... what did you want to talk about?”

James stroked his chin as he shifted, getting comfortable. “Well... I heard you got your MPA a couple of years ago. Is that right?”

Brooke nodded as she sipped her beer. “Haven’t done anything with it yet, though.”

“Still. Most people don’t bother with any more graduate classes than they have to, so a second Master’s is nothing to sneeze at.” James tilted his head. “Did you write another thesis, or were you able to get out of it?”

“No, I wrote one.” Brooke sagged into the couch as she grimaced. “I would’ve had to take two more classes to get out of it, and graduate semester hours are expensive.”

“I bet. What was it about?”

“The cost-effectiveness of combating homelessness and poverty aggressively, rather than ignoring the problem.” Brooke smirked. “The school gave me decent enough marks for it, though a few people commented that it wasn’t very realistic.”

“Well, they said the same thing about the Wright brothers’ flying machine, in the beginning.” James smiled. “What did you see yourself doing with it?”

She hesitated, looking at Dave. “I... honestly didn’t give it as much thought as I should have,” she admitted. “I figured at the very least, it would look good when I try to take Rachel’s job. I know
She’s the front-runner for Stacy’s old office.”

“Well, it would certainly guarantee you the position.” James nodded. “Though I have a better idea, if you’ll hear me out.”

Brooke raised her eyebrows. “Is something opening up?”

“Yes, there is. Very quietly. In fact, you and your husband will be the third and fourth people to hear about it. And you’ll definitely be able to use your MPA to help a lot of people.”

“Wow.” Brooke leaned forward. “What’s the job?”

“Mayor.”

James said the word simply, without any additional input. Brooke blinked several times as she stared at him. “... huh?”

“Mayor.”

“As in... THE Mayor?” she couldn’t take her eyes off of him. “Like, what, of Arcadia Bay?”

“Correct.”

“Um... how does Mayor Britton feel about that?”

James smiled. “Well, he’s retiring, so he doesn’t mind.”

“He...” Brooke finally shook her head. “Wait, seriously? This isn’t a joke?”

“No, it’s not. Mayor Britton has decided that he doesn’t want to run for another term.” James crossed his legs as he leaned back into the chair. “We had a long discussion about it yesterday, regarding who would be a good contender to replace him. Your name came up several times, between your history and your dedication to public service; we both think you would be an ideal candidate to run for his office.”

Brooke dragged her hand over her face as she absorbed what she’d just heard. “I don’t even know what to say,” she muttered. “This... yea. It was kind of cool to imagine, but running for public office wasn’t ever really something I seriously entertained.”

“Well, it might be time to change that.” James nodded. “Listen, you don’t have to answer right now, and quite frankly, you shouldn’t. Sleep on it, take a few days to decide, and go see the Mayor when you get a chance.”

“... okay, then,” Brooke exhaled. “I, uh... I guess I’ll get back to you guys.”

She didn’t sleep much that night.

Or the night after.

She made an effort to rest over the weekend, but she spent a lot of time on her computer, doing research. And she took several walks around the neighborhood, lost in thought.

“What’s your biggest hang-up?” Dave finally asked her late one night.

Dave frowned. “You really think they’ll be upset about it?”

Brooke scoffed. “Are you kidding? Mayor Britton basically had a live-and-let-live approach with First Light; the police and the DA’s office did most of the dirty work. I ran away from them at fifteen and then proceeded to rock their world by telling all their dirty little secrets to the FBI. Elder Maxson and Elder Jefferson will probably go into conniptions when they find out what I’m doing.”

“Are you actually worried about that?” Dave crossed his arms. “How many parishioners are there now?”

“... about eight hundred.”

“That’s nothing, compared to what it was back in the day. And correct me if I’m wrong, but most of their congregation are over the age of forty.”

Brooke smirked. “I’m pretty sure they all are, really,” she admitted. “I don’t think CPS has been called to a First Light house in years.”

“Exactly. They’re on their way out, and the only ones who can’t see it are them.” Dave nodded. “Worrying about them shouldn’t stop you from doing this.”

“So... you think I should run?”

“Absolutely.” Dave paused. “Would I get a title if you win? Like, Mister Mayor, or something?”

Brooke rolled her eyes. “I doubt it.”

“Too bad. That would’ve looked cool on a business card.”

Rachel: So, I heard that I might have to hire a new social worker.

Brooke: ... your dad’s got a big mouth.

Rachel: Are you going to do it?

Brooke: Yea. I decided to go for it last night.

Rachel: Congrats. Well, you’ve got mine and Steph’s votes.

Brooke: Sweet. Only thousands more to go.

Rachel: Have you spoken to Britton yet?

Brooke: I’m meeting with him tomorrow. How does running for office work, when I already have a government job?

Rachel: Well, you work for the state, not Arcadia Bay. So unfortunately, you’d have to resign.

Brooke: And... what if I lose?

Rachel: Then you re-apply for your job back.

Brooke: And you’ll hire me again?
Rachel: Depends on how well you interview.

Brooke: Seriously?

Rachel: Of course I’d hire you back, don’t be dumb.

Rachel: Did my dad give you any tips? He’s no stranger to elections, you know.

Brooke: A few. Mostly about not posting dumb shit on Facebook.
MAYOR BRITTON ANNOUNCES RETIREMENT, POSSIBLE REPLACEMENT

Story by J.R. Perolla

Mayor Daniel Britton made a startling, though not entirely unexpected, announcement after forty-three years of leading Arcadia Bay: the eighty-two-year-old grandfather of five isn’t interested in running for a twelfth term in his office. Citing a desire to spend more time with family, Mayor Britton has confirmed that he will be stepping down from his position at the end of his current term.

“It’s been an absolute pleasure to serve as the Mayor of this grand city,” he told the Arcadia Bay Reader. “But it’s time to hand the reigns over to someone from the current generation.”

He spoke while referring to the woman standing beside him, thirty-eight-year-old Brooke Scott. Mayor Britton informed the Reader that Brooke would be running under the DNC banner to replace him, with his full support.

Brooke took the opportunity to laud Mayor Britton’s years of service. “They’re incredibly big shoes to fill,” she stated. “I hope I can become a Mayor worthy of his confidence, and it would be a pleasure to serve as the elected leader of Arcadia Bay.

Brooke Scott is an Arcadia Bay native, though her past is somewhat sordid. She was born into the First Light of Christ community as the granddaughter of now-deceased Elder James Scott, who was arrested and sentenced to life in prison for his role in the much-publicized financial fraud. Aside from growing up in a heavily repressive household, Brooke narrowly escaped an arranged marriage by running away from home at the age of fifteen.

After being taken in by the state’s Department of Social Work, Brooke was credited with giving valuable information to the FBI, which lead to the arrest and imprisonment of the entirety of First Light’s leadership. The move, while praised by many as courageous, put a target on her back that forced her to be placed far away from Arcadia Bay for her own safety.

Free from First Light, Brooke had the opportunity to pursue the education which would have been denied to her. She has since earned two Master’s degrees, and has spent the past fifteen years working as a social worker for Child Protective Services.

Brooke is married to her husband, Dave, with whom she has one child, a four-year-old girl named Sara. While not working, she enjoys spending time with friends and family, cooking, and reading mystery novels.

Regina: You read mystery novels?

Brooke: I do now.

Regina: You can’t just pick up a random a hobby to make yourself look good!

Brooke: I kind-of panicked. They asked me about my hobbies, and I liked reading Nancy Drew books when I was a kid, so...

Regina: And what would you have said if the reporter had asked for your favorite author?
Brooke: One problem at a time. Any suggestions?

Regina: I prefer crime thrillers.

Brooke: What about Greg?

Regina: He doesn’t really read novels.

Brooke: Aaron? Haley?

Regina: Sci-Fi and Fantasy. Why don’t you just pick up a few best-sellers from Amazon?

Brooke: I guess I don’t have a choice.

NEW CONTENDER IN ARCADIA BAY MAYORAL RACE

Story by J.R. Perolla

What looked like an easy victory for Democratic candidate Brooke Scott has now become an actual competition. Local religious leader Eric Jefferson announced yesterday that he had filed paperwork with the city clerk’s office, kicking off his own campaign as he runs under the Republican party.

Eric Jefferson is most notable for his position as an Elder in the First Light of Christ Church, a local religious group that has operated in Arcadia Bay for almost eighty years. The movement was started by his great-uncle, Mark Jefferson, in the late sixties, and in it’s prime had swelled to over five thousand parishioners.

First Light, of course, has since fallen on hard times. Eric Jefferson’s church now counts less than a thousand worshippers, and membership has been steadily declining in the years following the much-publicized raid by the FBI in December 2020, which resulted in the arrest and imprisonment of Eric’s father, Richard. Legal problems have plagued the church ever since; most recently, six people were arrested for fraud relating to the church’s car dealership business.

Jefferson has told the Arcadia Bay Reader that he plans to run on a traditional Republican platform, rooted in conservative values, with sweeping tax reform that would greatly benefit local businesses. He stated that his plan would lower taxes, as opposed to Brooke Scott’s, and that he wants to revitalize the local community.

When asked for a comment, Brooke Scott told the Reader that she welcomed the opportunity for open debate, as well as the chance to see democracy in action.

Brooke: That motherfucker must be off his medication.

James: I agree that this seems like a fruitless endeavor.

Brooke: I have nothing to worry about, right? This guy made the papers last year for leading a protest in Seattle against Pride Month.

James: I doubt it. Oregon doesn’t usually suffer homophobic members of the GOP lightly.

James: But Arcadia Bay is split fairly evenly down the middle, when it comes to political parties. You might have to campaign a little harder for the red votes.
Brooke: Wonderful. Any suggestions?

James: Making yourself seem more down-to-earth is always a good idea. People like the idea of an average American running for office.

Brooke: I’m married with a kid, I have a mortgage, and I get a tax refund every year. I don’t think I could possibly be more average.

James: Don’t bring your past with First Light into the mix. You’ll get accused of being anti-religion.

Brooke: I AM anti-religion.

James: I wouldn’t say so where the wrong people could hear you.


Max: You’re running for Mayor?!

Brooke: Yea. Rachel’s dad convinced me to go for it.

Max: Wow! Congrats!

Brooke: Thanks!

Max: Can I donate to your campaign? Do you have a web site? Or an office to mail them too?

Brooke: No web site. And my campaign office is my living room. But checks are always appreciated :)

Max: Chloe and I will contribute, then. Especially if you’re running against Eric Jefferson.

Brooke: God, I still can’t believe he has the stones.

Max: Right? Who in their right mind is going to vote for him?

Brooke: Well, he’s got at least eight hundred and twenty-nine votes.

Max: That’s a pretty exact number.

Brooke: It’s the current parishioner count for First Light.

Max: Man, they’ve really dropped in the last twenty years. Remember when it was in the thousands?

Brooke: And they had their own school, and summer camp, and they used to beat the shit out of gay people for sport.

Max: Yea, definitely don’t miss that.

Brooke: ... sorry.

Max: Long time ago. How’s the race going so far?

Brooke: Good. I’ve met a few people who said that I’ve definitely got their votes.
Brooke: And a guy who called me a hippie snowflake.

Max: Hippie? Is that even still an insult in Oregon?

Emily: What do you think?

Emily: <sticker.jpg>

Brooke: ... how long have we known each other?

Emily: Why?

Brooke: It’s been about two decades, hasn’t it?

Emily: What are you getting at?

Brooke: That you’ve known someone an awfully long time to SPELL THEIR NAME WRONG

Emily: What?!

Brooke: My last name isn’t “Scottt”!!

Emily: Shit.

Brooke: Yea, thanks. Better have it fixed for the main delivery.

Emily: ... it was the main delivery.

Brooke: No.

Emily: <box.jpg>

Brooke: You ordered a box of five thousand stickers with my LAST NAME SPELLED WRONG?!?

Emily: I’ll send it back! We’ll get a refund!

Brooke: Will they refund a custom order?

Emily: Hang on. I’ll call them and find out.

...

Emily: So... no.

Brooke: Wonderful.

Emily: They will send me a box of the corrected stickers for half-price, though.

Brooke: Fine. Let’s do it.

Emily: What do you want me to do with this box? Should I throw it out?

Brooke: Bury it DEEP in your closet. I don’t want someone fishing those out of a dumpster.
Emily: There’s a possibility that Javier stole a few of them. He says that he’s gonna slap them on Dave’s toolbox at work.

Brooke: Dave says that if Javier touches his toolbox, he’s gonna castrate him with an acetylene torch.

Emily: Oof.

MAYORAL RACE TURNS NEGATIVE

Story by J.R. Perolla

Residents of Arcadia Bay who checked their mailboxes yesterday morning probably noticed the flyer inside. If you were a parent with small children at home, you likely removed it before they could see it.

The flyer, which was paid for and distributed by the Friends of First Light, depicted a caricature of mayoral candidate Brooke Scott that is best described as “unflattering”. One of the most prominent features (second only to Brooke’s ill-fitting and inappropriate outfit) was the large set of devil’s horns.

The reverse side listed several negative aspects of Brooke’s campaign promises and personal life. Chief among the statements is that Brooke plans to increase taxes, lower property values, slash education funding in favor of an expanded police force, and sabotage local businesses by offering economics incentives to large chain retailers. The flyer also insinuates that Brooke’s husband isn’t the father of her child, and that Brooke has used her past employment as a social worker to suppress the religious views of hard-working single mothers.

When asked, Eric Jefferson told the Arcadia Bay Reader that he had no hand in delivering the flyers, though he didn’t disagree with the content.

Yesterday afternoon, the Reader got a chance to meet with Brooke and her husband, Dave, at their house for an interview. During the conversation, they discussed the claims made by the flyer, as well as their counter-claims against all of them.

“I have no plans to raise any of the taxes currently being levied against residents or business in Arcadia Bay,” Brooke explained. “While I do plan to make improvements to the city in terms of welfare and infrastructure modernization, I also have plans on how to do so without placing the burden on taxpayers. Improvements that, by the way, will likely increase property values while aiding local businesses.”

Cutting educational funding? “Absolutely not,” Brooke answered. “Local law enforcement does a phenomenal job keeping the city safe as it is. We don’t need to sacrifice our children’s upbringing to help them.”

As far as the paternity of their daughter, Brooke’s husband thought the accusations were amusing. Dave informed us that him and Sara both have a rare food allergy that is usually passed from parent to child, and that Sara’s paternity is not in doubt.

Dave: So, random thought. Do you actually have this outfit?

Brooke: What do YOU think?
Dave: That I could get used to seeing you in a shirt with that deep of a neckline.

Brooke: The horns and pitchfork aren’t a turn-off?

Dave: With boobs that big? I can get over them.

Brooke: Men are pigs.

Dave: I prefer the term “simple”.

Brooke: James said we did good in the interview. And he thinks that Eric’s stunt isn’t going to get him any brownie points. He says most people will find it childish.

Dave: The guys at the shop think it’s funny. One of your flyers is actually hanging in the break room. And they all agree that it’s a pretty pathetic stunt.

Dave: Javier wants to know if you’ll autograph his for him.

Brooke: ... know what? Yes. I will.

Dave: Really?

Brooke: Yep. Jefferson wants to play bitch games, he’s gonna win bitch prizes. I’ll keep people talking about how pathetic and childish he is for as long as I can.

Dave: Hmm. You might actually be getting the hang of this.

Steph: <poster.jpg>

Brooke: ROFLMAO

Steph: You like it?

Brooke: I love it. But for the love of GOD, don’t post that online.

Steph: I wasn’t going to. Rachel said you’re taking the high road on this one.

Brooke: The view’s nicer. Plus, I look like a better person.

Steph: The low road would be more satisfying, though.

Brooke: It sure would. Maybe next time we’ll counter with an embarrassing poster of my opponent.

Steph: You are gonna win, right?

Brooke: I hope so. I really don’t want to move.

Steph: Will you? If he wins, I mean.

Brooke: Maybe. I don’t know. I’m sure he’d find a way to make my life difficult if I didn’t.

Brooke: I’m trying to stay positive. Like, this is the guy who genuinely, not ironically, believes that the earth is only six thousand years old. People CAN’T hate me so much that they’d actually vote for
Steph: I’m sure they won’t. They’re absolutely trashing this guy on social media.

Brooke: They are?

Steph: Are you not on the Arcadia Bay Facebook page?

Brooke: I didn’t know there was an Arcadia Bay Facebook page.

Steph: You should check it out. You’d be surprised how many supporters you actually have.

Brooke: April? It’s Brooke.

April: Hey! How are you?

Brooke: Good! Though a little surprised by your message, honestly.

April: I’m sure. Like I said, though, I’d love to help however I can.

Brooke: I don’t think your father will be very happy with you.

April: I’m already disowned, so that wouldn’t be much of a shock.

Brooke: Why is that? I’ll be honest, I didn’t even know Eric had a fourth kid.

April: I imagine he doesn’t like to think about the daughter who ran away in the middle of the night.

Brooke: You did? Why?

April: I wanted to go to college. My boyfriend helped me apply, and they sent the acceptance letter to his house.

Brooke: You were allowed to date?

April: Pfft. No. But Dad didn’t exactly follow me around high school, so what he didn’t know didn’t hurt him.

April: My boyfriend was awesome. He waited outside my house at two in the morning, the day after my eighteenth birthday, for me to jump in the car and peel out.

Brooke: Hope you married him.

April: I hope so, too. Still waiting on a ring :)

April: Anyway, I’d love to make a statement to the press or something. If I can knock the old man down a peg, it’ll make my day.

Brooke: That would be awesome if you did. He’s taken enough swings at me.

April: And it really speaks to your character that you haven’t swung back, by the way.

Brooke: At this point, I’m committed to the moral high ground.
CLEAR WINNER AT MAYORAL DEBATE

Story by J.R. Perolla

In previous elections, the debate between mayoral candidates at the town hall is generally a token affair, only attended by reporters and the few interested parties.

Last night, however, was a far cry from normal. Eric Jefferson’s negative campaign and Brooke Scott’s history with First Light of Christ drew a crowd for the expected drama. It was standing room only when the moderator announced the beginning of the debate.

The debate lasted for ninety minutes, with a ten-minute break in the middle. A total of thirty questions were asked, and each candidate had sixty seconds to respond before their microphones were shut off. The topics included their political beliefs, ideas for improving the city, moral views, and personal questions. The Arcadia Bay Reader has cataloged their responses and performance, and assigned a non-biased grade to each.

Adherence to time allotted for responses:

Brooke: A

Eric: B-

Brooke was quick with her answers, clearly having practiced for the debate; she only lost to the microphone once, when she was discussing her plan to use federal grants to pay for infrastructure repairs. Eric had his microphone shut off nine times, and twice tried to continue talking over the moderator.

Quality of responses

Brooke: A+

Eric: C

Though the candidates were not informed of the questions prior to the debate, Brooke had a sufficient range of understanding when it came to city affairs; she had a good answer to every question (it’s worth noting that Brooke has a Master’s of Public Administration from Oregon State University). Eric, on the other hand, was lacking in knowledge when it came to city workings. Several of his answers were not feasible, and in one case, illegal.

Crowd response to candidate

Brooke: A

Eric: D
Brooke’s performance and responses earned her multiple rounds of applause. She had plenty of supporters in attendance, including District Attorney James Amber and incumbent Mayor Daniel Britton. This didn’t sit well with Eric, nor did the sight of his estranged daughter, April, who was attending in support of Brooke. Her appearance elicited several inappropriate responses near the end of the evening, which caused the den mothers of Cub Scout Troop 19 to remove the children early.

**Candidate’s behavior towards opponents**

**Brooke:** B+

**Eric:** C-

The one area where Brooke fell short was due to an incident that was widely lauded by the residents in attendance, and induced heckling towards Eric; hence the low mark. The incident was in response to the moderator’s question regarding the local religious community First Light, where Eric stated (for the second time that night) that his church was dedicated to providing a peaceful place of worship. Brooke’s response was to read aloud the death threats she’s received from First Light since she announced her candidacy, as well as playing a pair of voicemails.

**Overall grade**

**Brooke:** A

**Eric:** C

**Rachel:** That might have been the most entertaining debate I’ve ever been to.

**Brooke:** It kind of felt like I was beating up a small child.

**Rachel:** I know. That MUST have been satisfying.

**Brooke:** More than a little.

**Rachel:** Have you been reporting those death threats?

**Brooke:** From those geriatric assholes? No.

**Rachel:** You probably should.

**Brooke:** After the race is over. You think I’ll get elected now?

**Rachel:** Dude, nobody there is going to vote for him after he called his own daughter a “misguided, over-educated snowflake”.

**Brooke:** Yea, how exactly is “over-educated” an insult?

**Rachel:** It’s not, unless you’re a small-minded bigot who barely finished high school.

**Rachel:** I’d love to know what makes him think he’s qualified to run a city.
Brooke: I think it’s less about him being in charge and more about me NOT being in charge.

Rachel: A fair, though depressing, point.

James: Congratulations. The Arcadia Bay Reader is endorsing you as their ideal candidate.

Brooke: I would be more flattered if it wasn’t between me and Jefferson. It couldn’t have been a difficult choice.

James: True, I doubt they spent much time debating. But they didn’t have to endorse either of you.

Brooke: Fair enough. Though this is going to feed Jefferson’s bitchfest about the media being biased against him.

James: He’s still fired up online?

Brooke: I checked their Facebook this morning. Apparently, I’m an apostate who will destroy the city and everyone in it with my wickedness.

James: If you avoided doing that, it would be nice. I like people here.

Brooke: Also, I got another death threat yesterday.

James: A new number? Or another repeat?

Brooke: A new one. Some old lady screaming that I wouldn’t live through my first week.

James: Send Elizabeth the voicemail. She’ll add it to the collection.

Rachel: I was just at the polling place.

Brooke: Yea? Who’d you vote for?

Rachel: Not the homophobic asshole, that’s for sure :)

Brooke: Thanks. Still much appreciated.

Rachel: Well, I also thought that you’d like to know that they’re running out of Brooke Scott stickers.

Brooke: Really?

Rachel: Jefferson’s have barely been touched. I don’t think you’re going to be re-applying for your old job after tonight.

Brooke: Wow.

Rachel: You okay?

Brooke: Honestly, it almost doesn’t feel real. Like, holy shit, I’m actually going to have to run a city.

Rachel: You’re more than qualified to do it. Certainly a better choice than Jeffershit.
Brooke: ... okay, I like the name.

Rachel: Just came to me.
“You know, this is a pretty nice view,” Brooke mentioned as she looked out her new window.

Behind her, Dave nodded. “I like how it overlooks the park,” he agreed. “And most of main street. Makes the city feel a lot smaller than it really is.”

“Mayor Britton certainly enjoyed that view.” James Amber reclined on a leather chair in Brooke’s new office. “He often said that it was the best part of the job.”

Brooke smiled, as she glanced over her shoulder. “Not serving the community? Being the leader of such an incredible city?”

“The man was the Mayor for forty-something years,” James reminded her. “He was in this office for the worst parts of First Light. He might have had a hands-off approach, but that doesn’t mean he didn’t suffer any sleepless nights because of them.”

“Fair enough.” Brooke walked back to her desk, slowly sitting down in the chair. “He did seem pretty happy, when he handed over the keys to the city yesterday.”

“Speaking as someone who’s getting pretty close to retirement age himself, I’m sure he was looking forward to it very much.” James crossed his legs, steepling his fingers in front of him. “So. Have you decided what you’re going to do first?”

“I... honestly, I’m not really sure,” Brooke admitted as she spun her chair around. “Is my first act as Mayor really such a big deal?”

“No, not really.” James shook his head. “But a lot of people will remember it. You won’t get a second chance to make a first impression.”

“Can I banish certain cults from the city limits?”

James smirked. “Not unless you want to violate a few constitutional amendments.”

“Then I’m out of ideas.” Brooke sighed. “I feel like I should do something that hits them. Especially with the death threats I got during the race.”

James raised an eyebrow. “Were you really worried about it?”

“Not especially. It’s more of the principle of the matter.” Brooke shook her head. “I still can’t believe they tried to field a candidate to beat me. Or that they picked such a terrible representative.”

“Desperate times,” James said casually. “Though I agree that Eric Jefferson was far from an ideal choice.”

Brooke glanced back at the window. “Does it say something about this city, that nineteen percent of the vote actually went to him?”

“Yes.” James nodded. “It says that despite the fact that he ran as a Republican, over half the registered Republicans that live here voted against him.”
“I guess I’ll take what I can get.” Brooke shook her head. “Seriously, though, I still have no idea what I should do first. I’ve got a few ideas, but nothing that really feels... I don’t know. Right, I guess.”

“Mm.” James pursed his lips. “What do you WANT to do?”

Brooke frowned. “How do you mean?”

“You ran as a champion for the lower class. Pledged to do what you could to help the less fortunate.” He paused. “What’s the biggest thing you wanted to tackle?”

Brooke slowly exhaled, as she looked back at the window. Dave and James watched her silently, leaving her to her thoughts.

“What’s the process for claiming eminent domain?”

James blinked, clearly not expecting the question. “I’m sorry?”

Brooke turned back to him. “Eminent domain. You know, where a government appropriates private property for its own use. Is that something your office would handle?”

“Not us specifically, but you would need lawyers involved nonetheless. Why?”

“Do you remember Yolanda’s Fine Dining?”

“The restaurant First Light operates? A few miles up the road from the Two Whales?”

“Operated,” Brooke corrected him. “Past tense. The health department shut them down years ago. I actually drove past it on my way in this morning; the building is still shuttered, all the windows are smashed, and the whole area is overgrown. It’s starting to look like a set in a post-apocalyptic movie.”

James nodded. “Right, I’d forgotten they were closed. But you can’t just swoop in and claim it for yourself, Brooke. First Light might not use it anymore, but they still own it; you’d have to make a legitimate offer to buy it from them.”

Dave snorted. “Somehow, I doubt they’d be willing to sell, especially to you.”

“And even if they were, they’d almost certainly charge you an exorbitant-”

“Have they been paying property taxes?” Brooke interrupted.

James tilted his head. “Property taxes?”

Brooke leaned forward. “My grandfather was their accountant, remember? The only real estate they ever made payments on were residential houses; First Light owns all their commercial properties outright. Which means they have to pay taxes on the land that Yolanda’s sits on. Have they been doing so?”

“... I wouldn’t know. That’s not my area.” A smile slowly came over James’ face. “But given their lack of cash flow, it wouldn’t surprise me if they weren’t.”

Brooke grinned maliciously as she picked up her phone.

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Three weeks later
“This is COMPLETELY unacceptable, Miss Scott!”

Brooke looked at the two men standing across from her desk, an indifferent expression on her face. “How is that, Mister Maxson?”

His face flushed. “It’s ELDER Maxson,” he said coldly.

“Not to me, it isn’t.” Brooke leaned back in her seat. “And if we were going by titles, it would be ‘Madam Mayor’, so you can save your self-righteousness for someone who will buy into it.”

“You CANNOT just take our restaurant away!”

“I can. Actually, I already have, which I believe is why the two of you stormed in here.” Brooke gestured at the paperwork on the desk in front of her. “Yolanda’s sat on two acres of commercially-zoned real estate, for which you haven’t paid anything in the past fifteen years. Between back taxes and penalties, you owe the city of Arcadia Bay quite a lot of money.”

“Even if you COULD do this, you have to pay us for it!”

Brooke tilted her head. “Did you miss what I just said? Or was it not clear? In lieu of the large sum of money you owe this city, we’re taking your property.” She paused. “Actually, the way the land was appraised, you still owe us a little more than forty thousand dollars. But we’re willing to waive that, so long as the seizure isn’t contested in court.”

The slightly-younger man beside Maxson took a step forward. “We can settle the balance we owe this city, Miss Scott,” he told her. “If we were given due notice, we could have avoided all of this drama and—”

“You were given due notice, Mister Jefferson. Your organization has been served no less than nineteen times over the past ten years with notices that you were delinquent, each one receiving a signature to acknowledge receipt. Eight of which have YOUR signature, by the way.” Brooke folded her arms. “If you’d read the fine print, you would have seen that property seizure was listed as a potential consequence of failing to make payments.”

Jefferson inhaled slowly. “We had an understanding with Mayor Britton that we would begin making payments as soon as we had the funds available.”

“Do you have a written copy of this agreement?”

“It was verbal. And it would be a sign of this office’s integrity if it were honored nonetheless.”

“It would only be a threat to our integrity if the promise was in writing.” Brooke smirked. “And before you try to produce anything, you should know that I’ve already spoken to my predecessor about Yolanda’s. I know that there was no agreement for any sort of payment plan, verbal or otherwise.”

Jefferson drew himself upright. “I don’t care for the insinuation that we would forge documentation of any kind.”

Brooke narrowed her eyes. “I think I’m the LAST person, Mister Jefferson, that you should scold about giving your church grief for forging legal paperwork.”

“So this is personal, then,” Maxson snapped. “You’re seizing our property because you still have it
“Mister Maxson, I’m seizing your property because you owe this city three-quarters of a million dollars. The fact that I still have it out for your church is irrelevant to the matter at hand.” Brooke stood. “Now, gentlemen, unless you have anything further to discuss, I would appreciate it if you left my office. I have a meeting I can’t be late for.”

“What?” Maxson jumped in. “You have more religious freedoms to violate?”

“No. I’m meeting with the Treasurer and the Urban Planning Director to discuss funding for the homeless shelter we’re going to build where Yolanda’s is currently sitting.” Brooke waved her hand towards the door. “If you don’t mind.”

Maxson folded his arms. “We DO mind. Were not done talking about this.”

Brooke reached towards her phone and hit the button. “Kiera, send them in, please.”

The door to her office opened a second later. Maxson and Jefferson turned to see three cops walk inside.

“Thank you so much for coming, officers.” Brooke nodded towards her guests. “Would you gentlemen mind escorting these two out of the building? I’m afraid they’ve overStayed their welcome.”
Brooke: "That f*cking c*nt."

Christ, I could use a beer right now.

Brooke pinched the bridge of her nose as she read the budget paperwork in front of her. She had a meeting with several people tomorrow, where a lot of decisions had to be made about their funding, and she was seconds away from faking an illness. Meetings about money had become the bane of her existence during the eight months she’d been in the office.

... you know, I bet I could get away with it. She glanced at the mini-fridge by her desk, where she usually kept bottled water and her lunch. I would hardly be the first person in charge of a city to sneak the occasional alcoholic beverage while I work.

Hell, if I switched to scotch and put it in a crystal decanter, I wouldn’t even have to hide it. She smirked. I could leave it right in the open, on an end table, for all to see. ‘Yea I’m a female mayor who sips the odd single-malt to get through the day, what of it?’

Maybe I should ask James. After all the crap he had to put up with because of First Light? I bet he could recommend a good one.

Her phone buzzed, bringing her back to reality. “Madam Mayor?” her secretary’s voice warbled out.

She sighed, though she was grateful for the distraction as she hit the button to reply. “Yes?”

“There’s a young man here to see you, ma’am. But he doesn’t have an appointment.”

Brooke frowned. “Who is he?”

“He just said that you still owe him fifty bucks?” She paused. “And that... you need to rename a park after him?”

“Oh. Right.” Brooke slowly smiled. “Send him in.”

She stood as the door opened, and a young man with black hair walked in. A grin was spread across his face. “So, does that mean you’re gonna do it?”

“Not a chance in hell.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Does the city know that you don’t follow through on your bets?” he asked. “Maybe I should publish a tell-all book, about how the town’s new mayor won’t keep a promise.”

“When I tell them that it was a bet made with my nephew over a game that the Beavers should have won, I don’t think I’ll lose too many votes.” She walked around the desk, giving him a tight hug that he returned. “Good to see you too, Aaron.”

“You too, Aunt Brooke.” He glanced at her desk as they separated. “I’m, uh, not interrupting anything am I?”

“Mm.” Brooke shrugged. “I’m just reviewing budget stuff for a meeting tomorrow.”
“Should I come back?”

“Hell no. I need a break, these numbers are just sliding around the page at this point.” She gestured to the couch. “How’s your mother?”

“Good.” Aaron nodded as he sat. “Her and Greg are still in Vancouver until tomorrow.”

“And Haley?” Brooke asked, as she sat next to him.

He shrugged. “Enjoying West Point. But she comes back next week for Christmas break.”

“She’s… what? A sophomore now?”

“They don’t do the grades like that, but yea.” He grinned. “She got pissed when I called her that. Apparently, she’s a Cadet, Third Class.”

Brooke frowned. “Sophomore sounds more dignified than anything, third class.”

“Well, the Army does love their rank structure.”

“Fair enough. What about you? How’s school?”

“Pretty good. Still rocking that three-point-eight GPA.” He nodded. “I’ve got some business classes starting next year, looking forward to that. And my Student Advisor gave me a bunch of stuff to read about law school.”

Brooke raised her eyebrows. “You’re gonna go for it? Like Greg?”

“I might. He said if it was something I was really interested in, he’d get me a summer job at his firm.”

“Ooh, that would be fun.” Brooke nodded. “Either way, it’s great to see you. Though I didn’t think I would until next week.” She paused. “Actually, are you back already? Can you even get in the house with your mom away?”

“No.” Aaron squirmed in his seat. “I, uh, just drove up for the day.”

“Why? What for?”

He took a deep breath. “I… have some questions,” he said. “And I’d rather ask you, because I don’t think my mom will tell me the truth.”

Worry started to gnaw away at Brooke, as she focused on her nephew. “Questions about what?”

“Well…” he hesitated. “My dad.”

… shit.

Shit, shit, shit.

Brooke recalled the discussion she’d had with Regina and Emily, years prior, about what they would do if Aaron had ever asked about his father. They’d all settled on a story, that he’d died in a car accident before he was born, in case Aaron had ever wondered about it.

But they’d had that talk when Aaron was a toddler. He was now an adult. His father hadn’t been a subject of conversation for more than a decade, and Brooke wasn’t sure if she was supposed to keep up the charade.
“What about your father?” she asked neutrally. “Didn’t your mother tell you what happened when you were younger?”

“Yea, car accident.” He nodded. “I remember asking her when I was a kid.”

“So... what, then?”

Aaron exhaled slowly, as he reached into his jacket pocket and produced an envelope. He opened it, sliding out a letter. “I got this in the mail last week,” he explained. “And... I don’t know.” He held it out to her. “Maybe you should read it.”

Brooke accepted the letter. She didn’t get further then the first sentence, when the writer introduced themselves by name, before she stopped and stared.

“... that fucking cunt.”

Aaron blinked, clearly taken aback. “You know her?”

Brooke didn’t answer, as she read the rest of the letter. She finally folded it back up, handing it to him without a word as she leaned back in her seat, staring into space.

“Aunt Brooke?”

She slowly stood, then made her way behind her desk and took her coat from the rack. “Come on.”

Aaron stood as she slipped the coat on. “Um... what are you-”

“You’re twenty-one, right?”

“Yea. Why?”

“Because now I definitely need a drink.”

Brooke lifted her glass, swallowing her drink all at once. The bartender watched, amused, as she set it back down. “Another, Madam Mayor?”

“Please.”

“What about you, sir?”

“Um... just a water,” Aaron replied. “I have to drive.”

“You got it.” The man poured Brooke another drink, then made up a glass of ice water for Aaron. He left as soon as he was finished.

“That woman is full of shit.”

Aaron looked sideways at Brooke, as she stared at her drink. “Huh?”

“That whole letter is a load of hot garbage.” Brooke glanced at him. “I need to know you understand that.”

“I was taking it with a grain of salt,” he assured her. “But... I looked up some of it, to see if anything was true.”

Brooke nodded. “And?”
“Well, I know Mom was in foster care when I was born,” Aaron answered. “I found a thing for the court case, where she had to fight to keep custody of me. But... it also says that she lost.” He scratched his head. “I don’t know. I mean, my mom is too nice to do anything illegal, but I don’t understand how that woman could have gotten shared custody without me remembering her. So the claim that I was stolen...” he let the sentence hang.

“Mm.” Brooke took a sip of her drink. “That’s fair, I suppose. Though it’s incredibly misleading.”

Aaron took his own drink of water. “Then what’s the truth?”

Brooke took a deep breath. “Aaron, this is really something you should ask your mom.”

“Maybe. But I know she’ll give me the runaround.” He looked at her. “You always told the truth, when I was growing up. Hell, you were the only one who told me that Santa wasn’t real.”

“Damn right.” Brooke smirked. “Your mom, Aunt Emily, and I worked our asses off for those gifts. I wanted my share of credit.”

Aaron chuckled softly, before sighing. “Look... at least promise me that this woman really is full of shit.”

Brooke took another drink, before she set the glass down and turned to face Aaron. “That woman signed away her rights after she won the court case, but before she could take partial custody of you.”

“She did?”

“Well.” Brooke nodded. “That woman has absolutely no relationship with you, despite what she wrote in that letter.”

Aaron frowned. “She went to court to get partial custody of me, then dropped it after she won? I don’t get it.”

“She didn’t drop it willingly, Aaron.” Brooke stared at him. “I promise you that.”

He stared back. “What does that mean?”

“That means that to this day, your mother and I owe someone a very large favor.” Brooke turned back to her glass. “I’ll leave it at that.”

“... shit.”

“Your father was not a good person, Aaron.” Brooke shook her head. “Him being dead is the best thing for everyone.”

Aaron tilted his head. “So... he really is dead?”

“Yes, he is.” Brooke nodded, taking another drink. “And I hope they’re slowly skinning him alive while he burns in the hottest level of hell.”

“Mm.” he drummed his finger on the bar as he stared into his glass of water. “Okay.”


“Aunt Brooke, I’m not stupid.” He sighed. “I can infer as to why nobody wants to talk about my father. Or why my mom was put into foster care when she was pregnant. And... I know what
happened to a lot of girls who used to be in First Light.”

Brooke felt a cold spot develop in the pit of her stomach. “... you were never supposed to know any of that,” she said quietly.

“Yea, well, the internet’s a bitch.” He shook his head, then met Brooke’s gaze. “Did my mom regret having me?”

“NO,” Brooke replied, immediately and forcefully. “Absolutely not.”

“Aunt Brooke—”

“Aaron, I was there when you were born,” she continued. “The circumstances that lead to you may not have been ideal. But your mother...” Brooke paused. “You brought her out of a very dark place, and gave her something to live for. She has loved you from the second she pushed you out, and never once said anything to the contrary.”

Her nephew took a slow breath, letting it out. “Sorry.”

Brooke tilted her head. “For what?”

“Thinking otherwise.”

“This stuff digs at bad shit, Aaron.” Brooke laid a hand on his shoulder. “That woman wrote this letter specifically to drive you to visit her. And to put a wedge between you and your mother.”

He shook his head. “I had no intention of going to see her. I don’t want to know what kind of weird shit she wants to tell me.”

“Good.” Brooke nodded. “Now, order something stronger.”

“I have to—”

“Do you have classes tomorrow?”

“... no.”

“Then you can crash on my couch.” Brooke waved for the bartender. “And then you can talk to your mother, when she gets home.”

“I’m going to strangle that miserable cunt.”

Brooke gave Regina a look. “That’s not why I asked you to join me.”

Her friend fumed in the passenger seat of the car. “I don’t care. That bitch has some fucking balls, sending my son that goddamn letter. I’m going to tear them off and make her eat them, while I shove toothpicks into her eyes.”

“Relax.” Brooke spun the wheel, taking a turn. “Come on, deep breath.”

Regina obeyed, blowing air out her nose. “... it’s not working.”

“Yea, I know.” Brooke took another turn, parking her car along the side of the road. “That’s why we’re here.”
“We’re...” Regina frowned, as she glanced around the residential neighborhood. “Wait, where are we?”

“In a front row seat.” Brooke checked her phone. “Little early, though. How was your conversation with Aaron?”

“Well, enough, I guess.” Regina glanced at her lap. “We talked for an hour, about what was in that letter. And I told him the truth about the court case, and what happened after my parents forced me to marry that guy.”

Brooke tilted her head. “All of it?”

“No, of course not all of it. But... like he said, he’s not stupid.” Regina slouched in her seat. “Christ. I would give anything for him not to know some of what he does.”

“... what did you say about his father?”

“That he’s dead.” Regina looked back at Brooke. “That is what you said too, right?”

She nodded. “The only lie I’ll never feel guilty for telling him.”

“Same.” Regina sighed. “I looked him up, just for shits and giggles. He’s still in the special holding unit at Sheridan.”

“Really?” Brooke raised her eyebrows. “It’s been twenty years. Figured they would have gotten tired of his ass and moved him to Gen Pop, so someone could slide a shiv between his ribs.”

“I don’t think they’re allowed. Guess it’s a little bit of a liability issue.” Regina shrugged. “They probably don’t want his wife to sue, though she hasn’t visited him since he went in.”

“How do you know?”

“I spoke to a deputy warden. The only visitors he’s had were his lawyer, when he first got there, and his son, ten years ago. His wife’s never been to see him.”

“What a shame.” Brooke checked her phone again. “Almost.”

“Are we waiting for something?”

“Yes, we are. Other than me and Emily, do you keep in touch with anyone from our foster care days?”

Regina shook her head. “Not really, no.”

“I do.” Brooke nodded. “You should too. Everyone’s doing pretty well for themselves. And a lot of them still ask about you, and how you’re doing.”

“They do?” Regina raised her eyebrows. “Really?”

“Of course. We were all trying to help you, remember? Hell, a few of us committed crimes on your behalf.”

“... yea, that’s true.” Regina sighed. “Maybe I should reach out. Now I feel bad.”

“You really should. Some of them would love to hear from you.” Brooke smiled. “You know Celia’s an Air Force pilot?”
Regina nodded. “I heard. And Tyler’s some hot-shot lawyer in D.C.”

“He works for a Senator’s office,” Brooke corrected. “And Lisa, the girl Sienna was talking to after the raid? She’s a nurse now, at a hospital in Portland.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Oh, and you remember Andrew and Christine, the ones who were forced to marry each other?”

“God, I’d forgotten about those two.” Regina shook her head. “How are they? Not still together, I presume?”

“No. Christine actually got married, and lives in Seattle now.” Brooke nodded. “Her and her wife are both chefs. Dave and I went to see her last year, at the restaurant they work at; their food is phenomenal.”

Regina smiled. “Wow. What about Andrew?”

“Oh, he’s done really good, too.” Brooke cocked her head, listening. Regina realized that she could hear something, too; police sirens, faint, but getting louder. After a few seconds, she watched three police cars stream around the corner, pulling up in front of the house just down the road.

Seven or eight cops got out of their cruisers. A few of them went around the house, while a couple went straight for the front door. The one in the lead beat his fist forcefully on the wood.

“That’s him, right there.” Brooke pointed. “He’s a detective with a Vice unit in the Oregon State Police.”

Regina stared silently, as the door opened and Andrew forced his way inside. The other officers followed him. “... whose house is that?”

Brooke smirked. “Did you know that there’s been a recent surge in prescription drug abuse around the state?”

“There is?”

“Yep. Dealers have developed a new tactic to get ahold of the pills; they get senior citizens to play up their symptoms to a doctor, who writes them scripts to meds that their insurance will pay for. Then they turn around and sell drugs they don’t need to the dealer for a neat little profit.” She paused. “Sometimes, when they get comfortable, they don’t bother taking them out of the prescription bottle first.”

“The bottles with their names on them?”

“Exactly.” Brooke gestured towards the house. “And since First Light isn’t bringing in the kind of money that they used to, a lot of their senior citizens have turned to other, more illicit means of acquiring cash.”

Regina blinked. “... you never said whose house that is.”

“Oh, right. It’s Cuntface’s.” Brooke smiled widely. “Andrew said her name popped up on a few pill bottles. They were going to hold off on a visit until they were ready to wrap things up, but... well, like I said, people still ask how you’re doing.”
“She’s...” Regina looked back. “That’s her house?”

“It is.”

Regina stared through the windshield silently. Even as far away as they were, she could see through the windows as the cops started tearing the place apart.

A ripping sound distracted her. She turned to see Brooke with an open bag of chips. “Want some?” she asked casually, holding it towards her.

“... yea.”

They sat and watched for about half an hour in silence, eating chips and sipping at the bottles of water Brooke had brought with her.

The phone in the cup holder finally buzzed, and Brooke checked the message. “Andrew says they found sixteen pill bottles from five different doctors’ offices,” she reported. “All hidden in a shoebox buried in the closet.”

“Damn.”

The phone buzzed again. “Percocet, Xanax, Valium, Codeine, OxyContin, and Vicodin,” she continued. “Worth about ten grand on the streets, he says. And the dates are going back weeks, but not a single pill is missing. They’ve got everything they need to charge her with the intent to distribute.”

She picked up her head. “And he says they’ll be bringing her out in a couple of minutes.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Come on.”

The both got out of the car and stood by the side of the road just as Andrew walked back out with another officer, both of them gripping the elderly woman by the elbows. They were too far away to hear what she was saying, but the tone of her voice made it clear that it wasn’t anything kind. The officers paid her no mind as they stuck her in the back of the squad car, then got in to start driving away.

Andrew was in the driver’s seat. As he started to get closer, he made eye contact and nodded, slowing the car. The woman in the back seat stopped her tirade, her face becoming a frozen mask of shock as she recognized Regina.

Who, slowly but deliberately, flipped her a middle finger.

As the squad car returned to full speed, they could hear the angry screaming through the windows as the elderly woman began to have a full-scale meltdown.

“Well, that was therapeutic.” Brooke glanced back at Regina. “Have you and Greg made dinner plans yet? Because I could do with having the guys meet us at a restaurant.”

Regina looked back at her. “... we have been meaning to try that new Greek place on Fourth.”

“Sounds good to me.”
“WITH THE THIRD PICK IN THE DRAFT, THE CINCINNATTI BENGALS WILL SELECT... TYRONE PARKER, QUARTERBACK, TEXAS A&M!!”

“Shoot.” Kate folded her arms. “I’m sorry, sweetie.”

Next to her, Kevin rolled his eyes as he straightened his suit jacket. “Mom, I wasn’t going to get picked third. Cincinnati doesn’t need a running back.”

“Then when ARE you going to get picked?” Kate asked. “And is it wrong, that I want my son to get picked sooner?”

“I AM going to get picked sooner.” Her son smirked. “Literally every analyst says that I’m going to be the first running back drafted. And that if the Rams don’t take me in the fifth pick, the Giants will take me in the seventh.”

On his other side, Victoria leaned forward. “Let’s hope for the Rams,” she said. “We would miss you too much if you had to go to New York.”

Kevin gave her a look. “You know that I’ll be on the road for half the year no matter what, right?”

“Of course I do. That doesn’t change the fact that we would miss you more if you were chosen by a team from out-of-state.”

He shrugged, as he reached forward and picked up a chip from the bowl in the middle of the table. The three of them were seated backstage with twenty other players and their families, the ones deemed most likely to be selected for the first round of the 2042 NFL Draft. All of them were anxiously waiting, their cell phones on the tables in front of them, as cameras moved through the crowd to capture the moment.

Kate’s phone vibrated in front of her. “It’s your Aunt Chloe,” she said, reading the text. “They’re talking about you on TV. She said they think the Raiders might snatch you up with this next pick.”

“They’re not.” Kevin rolled his eyes again. “They didn’t talk to me during the combine, and I haven’t spoken to any of their reps. It’s gonna be either the Rams or the Giants, Mom.”

Victoria hummed. “Which one do you want more?”

“I... honestly don’t know,” he admitted. “The Giants just picked up an offensive coordinator from Philly who’s supposed to be really good. But if I went to the Rams, I could practice with the running back they got in Free Agency, who was in the Super Bowl last year. It’s a tough choice, and...” he trailed off, craning his neck. “Figured.”

“What?” Kate and Victoria both turned. “What are you looking at?”

“The camera guys.” Kevin pointed. “They’re going over to Mitch Connelly, to tape the phone call he’s about to get from the Raiders. Their offense is pretty lacking, but they’ve got two solid running backs, so that seems about right.”
Kate glanced back at him. “How do they know?”

“I’m not sure. Someone in the Raider’s office is probably telling them.” Kevin shrugged, watching Mitch answer his phone. The other player was all smiles as he spoke for a few moments, then hung up and kissed the girl next to him. “Yep. Looks like he’s in.”

A tone played over the speakers, as Mitch stood and made his way to the stage. He was followed by the camera crew, as the loudspeakers came to life.

“WITH THE FOURTH PICK IN THE DRAFT, THE PORTLAND RAIDERS WILL SELECT... MITCHELL CONNELLY, WIDE RECEIVER, OHIO STATE!!”

“Ooh, you might be next!” Kate squealed excitedly. “My baby’s about to go professional!”

“Try not to get too excited, Mom,” he said dryly.

“Kevin, I will get as excited as I want,” Kate scolded. “I am allowed to be thrilled for my son.”

“And just wait until the cameras get here.” Victoria grinned. “We’ll gonna turn on the waterworks for the TV viewers, and wail on and on about how our baby is all grown up and is gonna go play big boy football.”

Kevin sighed. “Do you guys know how many girls would’ve KILLED to be where you two are tonight?” he asked. “I seriously had to fend them off by the armful, when I declared for the draft. Women were fighting just to get near me.”

Victoria smirked. “And did we remember our lessons?”

“How to spot a gold-digger?” Kevin smirked back. “Yes, Mom, I remember my bedtime stories.”

“Excuse me, excuse me...” they all turned as several guys carrying cameras started surrounding the table. “Mister Chase?”

Kevin sat up. “Yes?”

“We need you to turn a little to the left, please.” The lead cameraman settled into place as Kevin adjusted himself, Kate and Victoria unconsciously giving him room. “And who are you two?” the cameraman asked.

Victoria frowned. “Why?”

“The commentators are going to mention who he’s sitting with.” The cameraman adjusted a knob. “Just first names, please.”

“We're his mothers, Victoria and Kate,” she answered, indicating each of them. “Do... we need to do anything?”

“Just sit there, and try not to get too loud.” He pressed into his earpiece, turning away as he spoke into his microphone. “They’re his mothers, Victoria and Kate... uh-huh. Yes. Okay, we’re ready.”

Everyone turned to Kevin’s phone just as it rang. He couldn’t keep the grin from his face as he answered it. “Hello?”

He listened.

“Yes sir, I would very much like to.”
Kate and Victoria traded excited smiles as their son nodded into his phone. “I’m looking forward to it, Coach,” he said. “I can’t wait to get out there and start practicing.”

He hung up after a few more words. “Well?!” Kate asked, practically vibrating with excitement.

Kevin looked at her and grinned. “I’m gonna be a Los Angeles Ram.”

Kate and Victoria squealed in excitement, as they both wrapped him in a tight hug. “My baby’s gonna play for the Rams!!” Kate yelled, bouncing up and down in her seat as the camera guys laughed.

“Oh, Mister Chase, we’re gonna need you on stage.” The cameras parted, and the man gestured. “This way, please.”

He stood, buttoning his jacket. “Be back in a second,” he said with a smile.

Victoria watched him walk away, before turning back to Kate. “Wasn’t he in diapers five minutes ago?”

“He really was.” Kate shook her head as she fiddled with her cane; as she’d gotten older, her left leg had become more and more of a problem, and she found herself having a difficult time walking without it. “Remember when he threw a football and broke your father’s really old vase?”

Victoria shook her head. “It was a 15th-century Ming Dynasty antique. And if he hadn’t been my father’s only grandson, Kevin would be dead right now.” She smiled at her wife. “Do you think he even remembers that?”

Kate snorted. “If nothing else, he probably remembers the yelling.” She returned the smile. “... we did good, right?”

“He’s gonna go play professional football,” Victoria reminded her. “I don’t think we fucked up.”

The draft tones distracted them, and they turned to the large screen just as the commissioner stepped to the podium. “WITH THE FIFTH PICK IN THE DRAFT, THE LOS ANGELES RAMS SELECT... KEVIN CHASE, RUNNING BACK, UCLA!!”

Both of them cheered, though they were drowned out almost completely by the applause from the other side of the stage.

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**Faith:** I’M NOT YOUR F***ING SECRETARY

**Kevin:** ... I know?

**Faith:** Then put that on Facebook!

**Kevin:** Girls are still coming to you?

**Faith:** So MANY f***ing girls, dude. Thanks for putting that photo of us online.

**Kevin:** I took it down!

**Faith:** Then put up a thing to make these bitches stop trying to get to you through me!!

**Kevin:** I can’t. I’m not allowed to go on my Facebook right now.
Faith: ... fucking what?

Kevin: Yea, my manager grounded me.

Faith: You’re an adult. How does your manager ground you from Facebook?

Kevin: It’s all social media. And it’s only until he can sit me down with someone who can teach me what not to do online.

Faith: Like what?

Kevin: Get in Twitter fights, post nudes, mouth off, stuff like that.

Faith: That all seems like common sense.

Kevin: And yet, players do it anyway, at an alarming frequency.

Faith: We’re missing the point. I’m not your goddamn secretary. Make these bitches stop coming to me.

Kevin: Would you tell me if any of them are worth it?

Faith: Depends on where you want them to fall on the Crazy/Hot chart.

Kevin: Below the Crazy line, preferably.

Faith: Then I’ve got a perfect one for you.

Faith: <photo.jpg>

Kevin: Ha fucking ha.

Faith: His name is Mike, and he thinks you’re really cute.

Chloe: How many points do you think you’ll put up for your first season?

Kevin: Are you already looking at me for your fantasy team?

Chloe: I CANNOT let Steph beat me again this year. Now, answer the question.

Kevin: I really don’t know. Hopefully a lot, but the coach has already told me that he wants me to focus on practicing and improving, before I start.

Chloe: ... fine. What about your quarterback? Got any inside scoop on his leg?

Kevin: You know it’s actually in my contract not to discuss fantasy football with people from outside the team?

Chloe: Really?

Kevin: Something about sports betting, I think. So you’re gonna have to get your scoop elsewhere.

Chloe: I’ll split the winnings with you.
Kevin: Isn’t the prize for your stupid league a hundred bucks?

Chloe: It is NOT stupid!

Chloe: And it’s two hundred bucks.

Kevin: Have you Googled what my starting salary is?

Chloe: ... shit.

Kevin: I know, right?

Chloe: Okay, fine. Can I at least get an autographed jersey or something?

Kevin: Only if you promise not to sell it.

Chloe: Of course not!!

Kevin: And I’m not signing anything in 49er colors.

Chloe: GOD DAMN IT, I DESERVE SOMETHING TODAY

Kate: Kevin Chase, what is this?

Kate: <tmz.com>

Kevin: I can explain.

Kate: Which part? The drunken partying, or the video of the blonde trying to remove your tonsils with her tongue?

Kevin: Some of the guys took me out! I was being welcomed to the team!

Kate: And the blonde, that the article says is a prostitute?

Kevin: I had NO idea she was a prostitute. She certainly wasn’t paid by me for her services.

Kate: So, what? You’re going around letting strange women stick their tongues down your throat?

Kevin: ... of all the conversations we’ve ever had, this might be the worst.

Kate: I could swear that we raised you better than this.

Kevin: Look, Mom, I wasn’t sober. I had a pretty girl on my lap who wanted to make out. I’ve already caught six different kinds of heat from my manager, my agent, and the assistant coach for that video, so if I could avoid getting it from my mother? That would be awesome.

Kate: I know, sweetie. I just wanted to give you a little bit of a hard time. You’re allowed to have some fun :)

Kevin: Gee, thanks.

Kate: You’re not in a lot of trouble, are you?
Kevin: Not really. Mostly wrist-slaps. Lot of people telling me not to do that anymore.

Kate: They’re not wrong. Please don’t let blonde women of questionable ethics take advantage of you.

Kevin: Sure thing, Mom.

Kate: Although with those magazines you used to hide in your bedroom, I thought you would’ve gravitated to redheads.

Kevin: ... I changed my mind. This IS the worst conversation we’ve ever had.

Victoria: Hey, dumbass.

Kevin: Oh, Christ. Not you, too.

Victoria: What did I teach you about dealing with hookers?

Kevin: Not to.

Victoria: And?

Kevin: If I do, buy high-quality and don’t get caught. You realize I DIDN’T KNOW, right?

Victoria: I do. Your mother and I talk. I want to have fun, too.

Kevin: Oh, good. Everyone can line up to take shots.

Victoria: Hey, it could be worse.

Kevin: My mothers are giving me shit for being seen with a prostitute. It literally cannot get worse.

Faith: What’s up, John?

Kevin: Huh? Who the hell is John?

Faith: Isn’t that what call girls refer to their customers as?

Kevin: YOU’RE GOING TO DIE ALONE SURROUNDED BY CATS

Faith: Sounds like someone needs to schedule another appointment with Blondie McBigTits.

Kevin: I’m putting that picture back up. And telling the world that you’re my cousin.

Faith: DON’T YOU FUCKING DARE
“Are you done yet?”

“Almost.” Rachel continued typing on her computer, not meeting Steph’s look. “And I still have three minutes regardless.”

The man sitting in the chair across from her checked his watch. “Two and a half,” he mentioned. “Cutting it down to the wire.”

“Yes, she is.” Steph crossed her arms irately. “You could’ve done this sooner, babe.”

“I really couldn’t. I was busy all day, helping Reggie get the lay of the land.” Rachel hit a few more buttons, finally stopping. “There.”

“All done?”

The printer behind her came to life and started spitting out paper. “I still have to sign it,” Rachel remarked, as she retrieved it. “But then yes, I’ll be finished, and we can go.”

“Good.” Reggie stood, buttoning his suit jacket. “Not that I’m eager to kick you out of your office, Rachel. But the others who came down are eager to hear you speak.” He paused. “Though it’s hardly a retirement ceremony.”

“I don’t want one.” Rachel placed the paper in a file. “And it’s your office in two minutes.”

“You put in twenty-six years with this department,” Reggie admonished. “You made a lot of friends while working here.”

Rachel smirked “Are they here now?”

“Most of them, yes.”

“Then let’s not keep them waiting.”

She walked past the two of them, leading the way out of her office. She opened the door and strolled past the sign that identified her as the Oregon Deputy Director of Social Work, the job she’d inherited from Stacy. Unlike her old boss, however, Rachel wasn’t interested in accepting the Director position; after twenty-six years, and maxing out her retirement benefits, she was ready to move on.

“When do you start at OSU?” Reggie asked as they walked.

“In two months. We’re still looking for a house down in Corvallis, and we won’t move until the school year is over.”

“Teaching the future generation of social workers.” Reggie smiled as they took a turn. “How hard
was it for the dean to convince you to take the position?"

Steph snorted. "Please. She didn’t even let him finish speaking."

Rachel shrugged. "It’s a lot of money, with guaranteed tenure in two years. I’d be an idiot not to take it."

“Well, I think I speak for the rest of the department when I say you’ll be sorely missed," Reggie mentioned.

“Not by the Governor, I won’t.” Rachel smiled over her shoulder. “Don’t be afraid to go toe-to-toe with that dickhead, by the way. Stacy and I put in a lot of work to make sure he didn’t cut our funding too much.”

Reggie raised his eyebrows. “I thought you didn’t approve of speaking ill of the Governor.”

“I’m retired. That little weasel can blow me.”

Him and Steph both chuckled as Rachel stopped in front of the last door. She took a short breath, before pushing it open into the main lobby of the building.

Almost three dozen people waited for them, and burst into applause as soon as they saw her. Rachel took her position in front of them, looking through the crowd as they slowly stopped clapping. She cleared her throat before she began speaking.

“I didn’t take this job just because I wanted to help people,” she started, to the tune of some chuckling. “I also did it for the same reason I know a few of you did. When I was a teenager, a friend of mine was in trouble, and when she got hurt... nobody was around to help her.”

She glanced around the crowd. “I spent years thinking that she was dead,” she continued. “And I swore that I... well, that I was going to do something.” She swallowed. “I was going to make sure I did everything I could, so no child would ever get hurt like she did again.”

Rachel opened the folder. “I started my career at CPS, helping children. And I intend to finish it by helping one last kid.” She glanced at the paper in front of her. “Jessica Davis is a five-year-old girl, whose mother left her in a car so she could meet her boyfriend who didn’t like children. Jessica was trapped in the car for three days because she couldn’t figure out how to undo the locks; she survived by drinking from a water bottle she found under the seat, and eating moldy food from a week-old bag of Burger King.”

She looked back up. “After the police found her, the Salem CPS office took her in while her mother was placed under arrest. The drug test came back positive for methamphetamines and opiates, and she was sentenced to eight years for child abuse and neglect. The recommendation from the local social worker is to have her parental rights involuntarily terminated, and allow Jessica’s foster family to begin the process to adopt her.”

Rachel produced a pen from her pocket. “Some decisions we make are difficult. But a lot of them are easy. And this may be one of the easiest decisions I’ve ever made.” She scribbled a signature, closing the folder. “My last act as a social worker will be to make sure that Jessica is going to grow up with a loving family.”

Everyone started clapping again as she passed the folder to Reggie, who tucked it under his arm.

“It was a good speech.”
Rachel smiled at her wife, as she sat in the passenger seat of Steph’s car. “You think so?”

“I do.” Steph smiled back. “And I’ll bet Jessica will be happy to know what you did for her.”

“Jessica will probably never know I was involved.” Rachel shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. It’s all behind me now.”

“Twenty-five years,” Steph remarked quietly. “So. What are you going to do at seven o’clock in the morning on Monday, when that alarm doesn’t go off?”

Rachel snorted. “Sleep.”

Steph snickered, as she took a turn. “Are— wait, where are you going?” Rachel frowned, as she looked out her window. “Do I have to remind you how to get home now?”

“No, of course not.” Steph shot her wife a look. “Melissa’s basketball game is tonight, remember?”

“Oh, right.” Rachel sat back in her seat. “Jesus, I can’t believe I forgot.”

“Didn’t you set a reminder in your phone?”

“It’s on silent.”

Steph smirked. “Well, good thing I’m here to drive you.”

“Wait, what about Leo?”

“Your mom picked him up from school this afternoon.” Steph raised an eyebrow. “Do we need to have YOUR memory checked?”

“... shut up.”

They arrived at the community center ten minutes later, Steph parking near the entrance. Rachel looked around as they got out, noting that nobody else was in the lot. “Are we late?”

“I don’t think so?” Steph lead the way into the building, pushing through the front doors. “I hope not. Come on.”

Rachel followed her, glancing around the empty hallways with a frown. “Where is everyone else? There’s usually a bunch of people walking around before a basketball game.”

Steph shrugged. “They must already be seated.”

Realization slowly came over Rachel, as they got to the doors of the gym. “Wait, Steph, what—”

Too late. Steph opened the door and pushed Rachel inside. As soon as she walked into the room a wave of sound hit her, and she blinked, looking around at the dozens of people cheering for her.

A wave of heat came over her face, as she glared at her wife. “You have got to be kidding me!”

Steph shrugged.

Rachel turned back to the crowd as Brooke came forward, applauding with a smile on her face. “Congratulations on your retirement!” she exclaimed loudly.

“No, I—” Rachel grappled with her frustration, as she alternated her glare between her former protégé-
turned-Mayor and her wife. “God damn it, I didn’t WANT a big-”

“Tough shit,” Steph interrupted, as the applause died down. “Just because you didn’t want a retirement ceremony doesn’t mean everyone else didn’t, either.”

“Is Melissa even here?!?”

Their daughter came out from behind Brooke, the teenager holding up her phone and clearly recording a video. “Nice one,” she noted. “Your face is gonna look great on YouTube.”

Rachel turned her glare to Melissa. “You, young lady, are SO grounded.”

“Rachel,” Brooke started. “We know you didn’t want this. But we are not letting you just leave your job without showing our appreciation for what you spent twenty-six years doing.”

“I didn’t-” Rachel stood upright, as she took a breath and tried to control her anger. “I didn’t want a big thing, Brooke. I’m not interested in getting back-patted by colleagues while accepting some plaque; I did not put in more than two decades of work to be reduced to a few sentences over a couple of hours.”

Brooke tilted her head. “… you haven’t noticed who actually came out tonight, have you?”

Rachel frowned as she looked past Brooke, into the crowd of people. And slowly realized that they were not her colleagues, or other social workers. Some she barely recognized, but others were faces she could hardly forget.

The first one she saw was Sadie, standing next to her wife and son. Next to her was Lisa, with her daughter. Then it was Andrew, and Isabelle, and Sienna, and Emily, and so many other kids she barely recognized as adults with their families, wearing everything from suits to scrubs. That’s Celia, she realized, noticing the woman in an Air Force uniform with pilot’s wings glinting on her chest. And Tyler, and Kinsey, and Linda, and Patricia, and Regina, and oh my GOD that man next to her cannot be Aaron-

“Holy shit,” she whispered. “Is... this isn’t-”

“It’s not everyone,” Brooke said. “There were a few people who couldn’t make it. But most of us did.” She smiled. “We figured it was worth it.”

“But... how did you...”

“Being the Mayor has a few perks.” Brooke grinned. “And if you thought we were just going to let you retire quietly, after what you did for everyone here, then you’re off your rocker.”

Rachel covered her mouth, as she looked through the crowd and recognized more people. Not everyone was from First Light; she noticed others, that she had removed from abusive homes since the church had essentially shuttered. She estimated the number to be in the hundreds.

“I...” She sniffled, trying to stop the tears from coming to her eyes. “I forgot there were so many...”

“Hundreds,” Steph said behind her. “But like Brooke said, there are a bunch who left town and couldn’t get back.”

“Jesus.” She wiped her nose on her sleeve, trying to keep her emotions in check. “I had no idea.”

Brooke grinned. “Well, a lot of people came in from out-of-state. How about just a hello for
She turned to the crowd, all of them watching her as she tried to come up with words.

“I really don’t know what to say. It’s... I just...” Rachel took a shaky breath. “All I wanted was for you guys to be safe,” she finally got out. “I didn’t want a big thing just... because what everyone else in my department thought didn’t matter to me. You guys were the only ones that mattered.”

She paused. “And you all have no idea how happy I am to see you all again.”

“Aww.” Emily grinned, amused. “You’re breakin’ our hearts, Miss Amber.”

Rachel rolled her eyes as people laughed. “Emily, you always were my favorite pain in the ass.”

“Well, hang on,” Brooke protested. “What about me? I thought I was your favorite pain in the ass!”

Rachel wiped her eyes and smirked. “It’s not a competition, kid.”

Simply trying to catch up with everyone took hours. Thankfully, Brooke and Steph had arranged catering and a small bar, so she was able to take her time. “Please tell me you’re not as old as I actually think you are,” she asked Aaron.

“Sorry.” The man in front of her smirked. “Just turned twenty-three.”

Rachel cringed, putting her hand over her heart. “That really, really hurt to hear.”

Regina snorted. “How do you think I feel?”

“Fair point.” She looked Aaron up and down, as he adjusted his suit jacket. “Did you get into law school? I heard you were thinking about it.”

“I started classes last year.” Aaron nodded. “My step-dad got me a job as an assistant at his firm, and I kind of fell in love with the idea.”

“And the cute girl who works as a secretary,” Regina added.

Aaron’s face flushed. “Mom, cut it out.”

“You should see her, she’s adorable.” Regina paused. “Except for her inability to cook.”

“Fatima’s a perfectly fine cook, Mom.” Aaron rolled his eyes. “Just because you’re better than her doesn’t mean she’s not good.”

“I still think you’re settling.” Regina threw a wink at Rachel. “Though with boobs like hers, who could blame you?”

Aaron coughed. “And, on that note, I’m going to get something strong and alcoholic.”

“Elisa wanted to come too, but she couldn’t get away.”

Rachel nodded. “I understand. Where is she?”

“At a dig site near Tel Aviv,” Kinsey explained. “They found... I don’t know, some really old ruins, I guess. She’s spent the past few months working with the Israeli government to get permits, and
they’re only good for so long, so leaving really wasn’t an option for her.” Kinsey winced. “She did ask us to say hello, and that she was sorry she couldn’t be here.”

“Did she get her doctorate?” Rachel asked. “Last I heard, she was still working on it.”

“She did, last year.” Next to Kinsey, her mother Amy nodded. “My daughter is becoming something of an expert in that part of the world, though for the life of me I can never remember what exactly she studies.” Amy sighed. “I don’t know what that says about me as a mother.”

Rachel smirked. “That you raised an incredibly bright and intelligent daughter?”

“... know what? I’m okay with that.”

They all chuckled. “What about you?” Rachel asked Kinsey. “Did you ever open that cupcake shop like you wanted to?”

“No, I gave up on that,” she admitted with a sigh. “I think that was mostly a holdover dream from my childhood.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Rachel said sadly. “So what are you doing now?”

“Stay-at-home mom, mostly.” Kinsey shrugged. “I run a blog that’s semi-popular, and I get a little money from advertisements. But most of my time is spent looking after the house and four kids.”

Rachel raised her eyebrows. “Four? Crap, I can barely do it with two. You must be superwoman.”

Kinsey snorted in amusement. “Would you mind telling that to my husband?”

“If he’s here, absolutely.” Rachel looked at Amy. “What about you? How are you doing?”

“I’m good,” Amy assured her. “I actually got asked to go through manager training, for the Applebee’s I work at.”

“Really? Wow,” Rachel remarked. “I’m so glad to hear it.”

“Thank you. Sorry I’m not as successful as some of the people here.”

“Hey, you sound like you’re doing great to me.” Rachel paused, glancing down. “What about your, uh...”

“My leg’s fine,” Amy assured her, looking at Kinsey. “You... don’t have to talk around it. I told my daughters what happened years ago.”

“Oh.” Rachel glanced at Kinsey, who nodded. “Well... I’m sorry I shot your mom.”

Kinsey shrugged. “If she forgave you, I don’t see why I can’t.”

“Have you or your sister spoken to your father?” Rachel asked. “I know he got out of prison a little after you graduated high school.”

The two women exchanged glances. “We did,” Kinsey admitted. “Once.”

“Was it that bad?”

“He ripped into Elisa pretty good about ten minutes after he came to the house,” Kinsey answered. “He wasn’t thrilled about her having a boyfriend at all, especially when we were supposedly already
married. But when he found out that the boyfriend was Jewish, he hit the roof.”

Rachel frowned. “First Light wasn’t anti-Semitic.”

“Jack was,” Amy said quietly. “He had some very unkind things to say about Judaism, even before he was arrested.”

“And he had some pretty unkind things to say about me when I told him I was in college.” Kinsey shrugged. “It wasn’t my place as a good Christian woman, you see. And when I countered that I was Agnostic, I thought his head was going to explode.”

“When we finally got him out of the house, we all kind of agreed that we never wanted to see him again,” Amy added. “Not that he wants anything to do with us, either. I don’t even know where he is now, but given that he doesn’t have any kind of degree, I can’t imagine he’s doing too well.”

Rachel pressed her lips together. “If I actually was, I would tell you that I’m sorry.”

“We won’t hold it against you if you don’t.”

“The MC-130 Combat Talon, out of Hurlburt Field,” Celia answered in response to Rachel’s question. “I’m with the Special Operations Wing.”

“So... what do all of those ribbons actually mean?” Rachel asked, as she studied the rack on Celia’s jacket. “There’s a lot of colored cloth.”

“Most of them are just freebies,” Celia admitted, as she looked down. “This one’s for length of service, this one’s for deploying overseas, this one’s for marksmanship, that sort of thing.”

“What’s that one, on top?” Rachel asked, pointing to the blue ribbon with white and red accents. “That must be important.”

“That’s my, uh, Distinguished Flying Cross.”

Rachel raised her eyebrows. “That sounds prestigious.”

Celia shrugged. “Sort of.”

“Sort of, my ass.” Tyler rolled his eyes as he stood next to her in his suit. “It’s awarded for combat heroism.”

“Seriously?” Rachel looked back at Celia. “What did you do?”

She squirmed. “I, uh... I went someplace classified to pick up a bunch of people in a country we weren’t supposed to be in. While taking enemy fire on the way in and out.”

Rachel’s eyes went wide. “Jesus. Were you okay?”

“I was fine, and the guys were fine. My plane was not.” Celia sighed. “I mostly just got the medal because a General saw me land in Jordan while my engine was on fire.”

“You flew with an engine on fire?!”

“I didn’t have a choice. Landing where we were wasn’t an option.” Celia shrugged again. “And it wasn’t like I didn’t have three others to work with.”
“Another one of which was in pieces,” Tyler added. “And you’re neglecting to mention the holes they shot in the cockpit.”

Celia shot him a dirty look. “Do you HAVE to be talking right now?”

“How are you doing?” Rachel asked, turning to Tyler. “Are you still working for Senator Hawkins?”

Tyler inhaled. “Technically, yes. But not for long.”

Rachel frowned. “What does that mean?”

“I can’t...” Tyler paused, then sighed. “Eh, it doesn’t matter, it’ll be public in a few days anyway. His doctor diagnosed him with Alzheimer’s. He’s resigning his seat next week.”

Celia looked at him with wide eyes. “Is he really?”

“Yes. And if you two would keep that under your hats, I’d appreciate it.”

“My lips are sealed.” Rachel nodded. “What will you be doing, then?”

“Go back to my real job, most likely,” Tyler replied with a shrug. “I had a law firm offer me a position as a partner; they do a lot of work around the Hill, so they really want my experience.”

“Wow.” Rachel paused. “You know, Regina’s son was just telling me about his own law school classes.”

“I heard.” Tyler nodded. “I’ve actually spoken to him a couple of times. He seems excited about practicing law, but he asked a lot more questions about what I did in the Senate.” He smirked. “I think he wants to run for office, too.”

Rachel raised an eyebrow. “Then shouldn’t he be talking to Brooke?”

Tyler snorted. “Yea, I’m sure the small-town mayor knows all about D.C. politics.”

“I would have dressed up nicer,” Lisa said apologetically. “But I just got off my shift, and I didn’t have time to change.”

“It’s really fine, Lisa.” Rachel smiled as she looked over her former ward’s scrubs. “Are you still a CNA? Or did you get into Nursing school?”

“Got into it, graduated a few years ago.” Lisa held up her badge, tapping the RN next to her name. “I moved from the ER to the NICU.”

“That’s amazing. Do you like it?”

“I love it.” Lisa smiled. “I mean, yea, the babies come in with all kinds of problems, but when you get to tell the parents that they can finally take their kids home, it’s... the look on their faces makes all the shit worth it.”

The child next to her gasped, looking up at her mom. “That’s a bad word!”

“I’ll put a dollar in the jar when we get home.” Lisa rustled her daughter’s hair. “Oh, I’m sorry, Miss Amber. This is my daughter, Andrea.”
“Hi Andrea!” Rachel bent down to the girl’s level. “It’s so nice to meet you!”

“Nice to meet you,” the girl replied quietly.

“How old are you?”

“Seven.”

“Seven? Wow.” Rachel nodded. “Are you gonna grow up to be a nurse like your mom?”

Andrea nodded, smiling brightly. “She already uses my stethoscope to treat her stuffed animals,” Lisa informed her, amused. “She’s not bad for someone who hasn’t been to medical school.”

“Really?” Rachel smiled. “What’s wrong with them, Andrea? Are they sick?”

“Uh huh.” Andrea nodded. “They have erectile dysf-”

“NO!!” Her mother interrupted, putting a hand on her daughter’s shoulder. “No, no, no, Andy, they do not. And we’ve told you to stop saying that.”

Rachel slowly looked up at Lisa. “What was she about to...”

Lisa sighed heavily, as she squeezed Andrea’s shoulder. “Look, I work ten-hour shifts and my husband is away on business for two weekends a month. We can’t censor EVERYTHING she picks up from TV.”

“So, you’re responsible for the speeding ticket I got last month?”

Emily shrugged. “Hey, you don’t want a ticket, don’t speed on the highway. My company’s drones are not to blame for your mistakes.”

“Uh huh.” Rachel crossed her arms. “You know the Governor’s office is still debating if those things are legal, right?”

“Yea, that’s just for show. He’s not gonna ban them.”

Rachel blinked. “How do you know that?”

“Because that’s what he told my boss, after he saw how much money they brought in.” Emily smirked. “The first wave of drones watching the highways secured tickets worth almost three times what it costs to operate them, and we didn’t even cover a quarter of the road.”

“Seriously? Triple?” Rachel cocked her head. “That doesn’t sound right.”

“For the little ones, absolutely.” Emily nodded. “All they are is a lightweight body, the battery and motor, a couple of solar panels, and the CPU with camera and tracking software. For every hour of maintenance, we get thirty-seven hours of flight time.” She smiled. “That makes them the most efficient aerospace vehicle ever built, by the way.”

“And all the arguments against them? That they’re hazards to air traffic, they could crash on the highways, and they violate people’s privacy?”

“In order? Their ceiling is limited to one hundred feet, so they’re not interfering with anything, and they’ve all got anti-collision software in any case. Their programming also keeps them no less than twenty-five feet from the roads, and if they sense that they’re descending too low, they automatically...”
bank away from traffic. And when you’re driving on a public highway, you don’t have any reasonable expectation of privacy.”

“But they-”

“Miss Amber, just admit that you hate them simply because you had to pay the fine.”

Rachel sighed. “Maybe.” She paused. “When you specified the little ones… are there big ones?”

“Not that you see, but yes.” Emily nodded. “They’re automated ground vehicles that recover drones when they’re running low on battery power. They hide out on service roads, so people don’t mess with them, and only drive out to catch the drones that land. Or launch them, when they’re done charging.”

“So… how many are operating right now?”

“Twenty aerial drones, and four of the ground vehicles. We’re probably going to double that by the end of next year.”

Rachel sighed, as she closed her eyes. “Great. We’re living in 1984.”

“Oh, come on.” Emily rolled her eyes. “We’re not spying on people. The cameras on the drones don’t even record, they just snap photos of the offender’s license plate.”

“Still. How’s Jane doing?”

“Oh, she’s great.” Emily nodded, smiling. “Starting first grade next month.”

“And Javier?”

“Got promoted to floor chief.” Emily smirked smugly. “He’s now Dave’s boss.”

Rachel arched her eyebrows. “How does Dave feel about that?”

“Oh, about as well as you’d imagine.”

“If I had known the three of you were going to be here, I would have brought my copy of your book to sign.”

Sienna, Linda, and Isabelle all smiled. “You read it?” Linda asked.

“Of course I did.” Rachel nodded. “Thank you very much for the compliments, by the way.”

“What did you think?” Linda asked. “I know there were some police officers that weren’t happy with us.”

“I thought it was pretty good,” Rachel admitted. “The Arcadia Bay PD might not have appreciated your criticism, but you didn’t embellish anything, and you acknowledged their constraints. I know Chief Watson always regretted that he wasn’t able to do more, before Jennifer and Sara died.”

“We know.” Sienna nodded. “He sent us a letter, after it was published, saying that he thought we were very fair.”

“And that we could count on him to say so when First Light sued us,” Isabelle added. “We were surprised it took two weeks to get served.”
Rachel smirked. “And how long to get it shot down?”

“Three months,” Linda answered. “But we didn’t lose anything, really. We were ready for them, and our lawyer annihilated theirs.”

“Good.” Rachel paused. “Have any of you spoken to anyone, from back then?”

The three of them looked amongst themselves, before Sienna bit her lip. “My sister got ahold of me last year,” she admitted. “She asked for my help with her daughter.”

Rachel frowned. “The sister who sent you a death threat over Facebook, when you were in the eleventh grade?”

“Yep.”

“What did she want?”

“Her kid needed an operation that her and her husband couldn’t afford.” Sienna shrugged. “I was their last option.”

“Ah.” Rachel nodded. “Did she apologize, for what she said?”

“She didn’t even thank me when I paid for the surgery,” she scoffed. “Their kid got the operation, and they went from the hospital right back to their Section 8 apartment.”

“... wow,” Rachel remarked. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not.” Sienna sighed. “I half-expected it, anyway. I did get a chance to speak to my niece, though, which was nice. She didn’t even know I existed; we talked for about an hour, before the doctors said I had to leave.”

Isabelle shook her head. “I still can’t believe the stones on your sister, to come to you hat in hand and not even be grateful.”

“Well, it’s not my niece’s fault that she’s got a shitty mom.” Sienna smirked. “I’ll get the last laugh, though.”

“How?” Rachel asked.

“I put some money in a trust to pay for her college, since my sister and her husband don’t have two pennies to rub together. She’ll get all the details when she graduates high school.” Sienna smiled smugly. “I’m gonna win by being the better person.”

“Nice.” Rachel looked at Isabelle. “What about you?”

Isabelle sighed. “No. My family is still very clear, that they hate my guts.”

“Same,” Linda added. “Especially after that book came out. Eugene even tried to hit me with a civil suit for defamation.”

Rachel raised her eyebrows. “Everything in there was true. On what grounds was his lawsuit?”

“That I was a willing participant to the wedding.” Linda shook her head. “He was such an idiot. The judge actually asked him in what universe he thought a fourteen-year-old girl would legally be able to consent to a marriage with a twenty-one-year-old man. Then banged his gavel and dismissed the suit with prejudice.”
“Hmm.” Isabelle pursed her lips. “Maybe we should look into that next, if all the men in First Light were actually morons. They all seem to make really, really dumb decisions. Especially with their arguments in court.”

“Vice, huh?”

Andrew shrugged as he stood before her in his suit, a gold badge clipped to his lapel. “Wasn’t my first choice. But they needed detectives, and I just got the promotion, so... low man on the totem pole and all.”

“I’m sorry.” Rachel nodded. “Still, I’m sure you’re doing good work.”

“I like to think so. I put handcuffs on a guy who was selling pills to high school students last week.”

Rachel smiled. “I was always jealous of the cops, on account of doing more for the community than I was.”

“Oh, come on.” Andrew rolled his eyes. “You did so much for us, I don’t see how you could actually think that you didn’t make a difference.”

“He’s right.” Sadie nodded next to him as she adjusted her uniform, the SWAT patch displayed prominently on her shoulder. “There are people here who would be dead if it wasn’t for you.”

Rachel bit her lip. “You guys are resourceful. I’m sure some of you–”

“Do you really think I would have survived if I had told my parents the truth, rather than run away?” Sadie asked. “Or Christine, or Kevin, or Morgan, or any of the other gay kids you placed? Or do I have to remind you of the thirty-seven bodies they pulled out of that field?”

“And my family never would have let me become a cop,” Andrew reminded her. “I know that for a fact, because my brother keeps telling Internal Affairs that I’m blackmailing him so I’ll get fired.”

“Are you kidding me?!” Rachel gasped.

Andrew scoffed. “They know my history. Nobody over there takes it seriously. Besides, Arcadia Bay is two hours away from my department.”

“Why don’t they arrest him for filing a false police report?”

“Because they’re just complaints. My brother might be a narcissistic sociopath, but he’s not stupid.” Andrew smirked. “Also, he doesn’t know that my unit makes me carry a phone that has a tracking device. The closest I’ve ever been to one of his complaints is an hour away.”

Rachel exhaled slowly. “You’re not in any serious danger?”

“Not from losing my job, no.”

She wanted to press that line, but Rachel decided to drop it, and turned to Sadie. “By the way, I saw the article the Tribune wrote. You looked pretty good in those pictures.”

Sadie sighed. “You have no idea how much shit I caught for that,” she grumbled. “They were staged; we were just practicing house-breaching. I had no idea the department was going to give those photos to the paper.”

“Why did they?”
“Officially? Because they wanted to showcase the diversity of their SWAT team.” Sadie smirked. “Unofficially, it was three weeks after the training academy superintendent was caught playing hide-the-sausage with female rookies, and the press was out for blood. The department needed something to get them to back off a little.”

Rachel snorted. “And you were, what? The token female?”

“And the token lesbian.”

“You’re... okay with that?”

Sadie shrugged. “My kid got to brag to all his friends that his mom got her picture in the paper. And my wife was proud of me. I’ll call it a wash.”

Rachel shook her head, looking back at Andrew. “Where is Christine, by the way?”

“She couldn’t make it,” he replied. “She asked me to congratulate you. But her and her wife are both stuck in Seattle; their new restaurant was scheduled to open this weekend, before they heard about this, and they just couldn’t get away.”

“Really?” Rachel tilted her head. “My wife and I were thinking about making a trip up there later this year. Where’s her restaurant? Maybe we’ll go see her.”

“You, uh, might have to save up for it,” Andrew cautioned. “I saw their menu. Appetizers start at twenty-two bucks.”

“... maybe we’ll invite them to McDonalds instead.”

“I didn’t realize that. I thought you were still a vet tech.”

“Not for years.” Patricia shook her head. “I opened my own practice as soon as I graduated vet school. And I stole most of my old boss’s clients.”

Rachel raised an eyebrow. “How’d you manage that?”

“By actually giving a shit. The veterinarian I used to work for was terrible. He could misdiagnose parvo for pneumonia, and he marked up some of his meds by a few hundred percent; he wasn’t hard to compete with. Plus, I work on farm animals, too.”

“There are farm animals in Oregon?”

“Where do you think the locally-sourced milk on the grocery shelves comes from?”

“I always assumed it was false advertising.”

Patricia snorted. “Not so much. There aren’t a ton of vets nearby that know their stuff about cows, so there are a few dairy farms near Eugene that pay me good money to drive down every couple of weeks.”

“Wow.” Rachel nodded. “And your husband? I heard you guys were working together.”

“Yea, but he just runs the office. Pays the bills, keeps the lights on, makes sure I’m not running the place into the ground.” Patricia nodded. “Good thing, too, because I didn’t have a clue how much effort actually goes into owning a practice. If it wasn’t for him, we probably would’ve failed right after we started.”
“Well, a good business sense is always helpful.” Rachel smirked. “So, how many pets do you have?”

“... there’s a chance my family and I have a problem,” she admitted. “Right now, we’ve got four cats, two dogs, and a five-foot-long ball python.”

“A five-foot what now?”

“My daughter really, REALLY wanted it.” Patricia sighed. “In my defense, I would’ve said no, if I knew it was going to get so big.”

“You’re a veterinarian. How did you not know?”

“I work on animals with fur, Miss Amber, not scales. And I hate snakes.” She shuddered. “My daughter understands that she keeps it in her room, or she’s grounded.”

“That doesn’t seem like a healthy attitude for a veterinarian to have.”

“Then find a new one.”

Rachel moved constantly throughout the room. At the end of the night, she’d spoken to over a hundred people, and had met an unfathomable number of husbands, wives, and children. A few of whom were even named after her.

Keeping a grip on her emotions was difficult, as the night went on.

Brooke didn’t help, at the end of the party, when Rachel was back at the front of the room. Her parents had arrived by that point, Leo with them; her son stood beside Melissa and Steph, as her family waited silently.

“We heard that you didn’t want a plaque,” Brooke told her, as she produced a cardboard box. “But we wanted you to have something, to show how much we appreciated what you did for all of us.”

Rachel took the box and lifted the lid, exposing a large leather-bound binder. It was embossed with gold writing on the front.

To Miss Amber

2017-2043

“She spoke for those who could not speak for themselves.”

After admiring it for a few seconds, she opened the book to find page after page of letters. Some hand-written, some typed, some with pictures at the bottom. All of them addressed to her, thanking her for what she’d done.

“We had everyone write something,” Brooke told her. “Even the ones who couldn’t be here.”

Rachel blinked as fast as she could, to keep the tears from filling up her eyes as she closed the book. “I, uh...” she sniffled, wiping her face quickly. “God, I have no idea what to say...”

“Something short,” Steph suggested quietly. “Ideally, also something heartwarming.”

Rachel wiped her eyes again, looking back at the others. “... thank you,” she finally got out. “I can’t tell you guys how much it means to see all of you. And to know that you guys didn’t let
“circumstances beat you, and you all went out and did amazing things.”

She sniffled again. “Being a social worker... kinda sucks,” she admitted, and the others chuckled. “The hours were rough, there was never enough time, and there was only so much I could do. There were times when the stress almost made me want to quit.” She paused. “But for you guys, to see how you all turned out... I would do it over again in a heartbeat.”

Even in such a large space, the applause was deafening.

“You need to stop reading that.”

“I can’t.”

“No, babe, seriously,” Steph told her, as they sat in bed later that night. “That’s the only box of tissues we have, and if you resort to paper towels, your face is gonna look like a road map.”

Rachel smirked as she wiped her eyes again, discarding the tissue into the growing pile on the ground beside her. “… fine.”

“Which one are you reading now?”

“It’s from a boy named Parker. I placed him a few years ago, after his mother chained him to his bed and tried to do an exorcism when she caught him reading Harry Potter.”

Steph raised her eyebrows. “An exorcism? That’s still a thing?”

“It is when you’re a schizophrenic who refuses to take her medication.” Rachel shook her head. “He was stuck on the bed for three weeks, before a neighbor heard him calling for help. A family in Eureka adopted him out of foster care a couple of years later.”

“And how is he?”

“Great.” Rachel nodded at the book. “He said that his new dad is helping him joined the military, so he can be a flight medic.”

“Wow.” Steph smiled. “Good for him.”

“Yea. He, uh... he said I saved his life.” Rachel plucked a fresh tissue from the box and wiped her eyes again. “He was miserable in the system, and didn’t think he’d ever have a home. He said he wanted to kill himself, but I was the one who convinced him that there was a family for him.”

Steph reached over and took her wife’s hand. “You did good,” she assured her quietly. “Lot of kids who are still here because of you. You were amazing, and you’re gonna be a great teacher.”

“Professor,” Rachel corrected.

“Same thing.”

“Not really. I’ll make a hell of a lot more.”

“Fair enough.”

Rachel sighed as she finally closed the book, setting it on her bedside table. “… honestly, it doesn’t really feel right.”
Steph frowned. “Why not?”

“Because First Light still exists.”

“Barely,” Steph reminded her. “They’re falling apart like wet cardboard. Especially now that Brooke’s the mayor. That girl might as well take a flamethrower to their church.”

“I know.” Rachel nodded. “But... that was my goal, after Max ran away and we couldn’t find her. I told myself, during one of those nights when I couldn’t sleep, that I was going to make First Light pay for what they did.”

Steph raised an eyebrow. “Are you under the impression that you didn’t?”

“I—”

“You rescued hundreds of kids from those zealots. Testified against dozens of their parishioners. People are STILL in jail because of you.”

“But the church is still around.”

“Not for long, if Brooke has anything to say about it.” Steph smirked. “You did all the hard work. So did your dad. And Max basically lit the stick of dynamite. Somebody else can mop up.”

Rachel sighed. “... okay,” she muttered.

“Good. Now, turn off your light. We’ve got a long drive in the morning.”

Max: That house is GORGEOUS!!

Steph: I know :) as soon as I saw the kitchen, I told Rachel either we were buying it, or I was.

Max: How far away is it from the campus?

Steph: Not very. Twenty minutes or so.

Max: Melissa and Leo excited to move?

Steph: Leo is. We told him that we’d get him a bunk bed, so he could have friends sleep over.

Steph: Melissa is kind-of bummed that it’s a long drive back to her friends.

Max: It’s what, an hour?

Steph: Forty-five minutes or so.

Max: Well, when she starts driving, she can do it herself.

Steph: I do NOT want to think about her on the road. When she was practicing in an empty parking lot, with nothing to distract her, she STILL almost ran into a light pole.

Max: God, they must be magnetic. William almost ran into one too.

Steph: Do him and Jen have their permits yet?
Max: William does. Jennifer’s has been confiscated.

Steph: What for?

Max: She thought it’s be cool to try to do a burnout. She wound up blowing out one of the truck’s tires.

Steph: ... why?

Max: I blame Grand Theft Auto. Chloe almost killed her. I could hear the yelling from the kitchen when they pulled up to the house.

Max: She’s not allowed to drive until she repays us for the cost of the new tire.

Steph: Aren’t boys supposed to be the daredevils?

Max: So I was told.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry again, for the delay. Real life and all. Hopefully the extra-long chapter makes up for it.
As any decent mechanic will tell you, anything that can break, will. On Earth, this isn’t much of a problem; there are specialists available for any problems in life, from the plumber that replaces your broken pipes to the electrician that fixes frayed wiring.

But that’s on a planet with nine billion people. What do you do when those specialists are millions of miles away?

The astronaut who will be third in the chain of command for NASA’s first manned mission to Mars will also be the first woman to set foot on Mars, and the third person off the ladder behind Commander Jack Royston and pilot Marcus Delaney. Lynn Marsh, a three-time veteran of space flight and one of NASA’s most well-known astronauts, will fill the role of Engineering Officer for the Magellan I mission next year. As such, her responsibilities would include the upkeep and repairs of the shuttle bringing the astronauts to Mars, as well as the habitat in which they’ll be spending eight months living in on the surface.

Lynn’s journey to become an astronaut started when she was a teenager, and found herself to be among the eight percent of applicants selected to attend the California Institute of Technology, more affectionately known by the nickname Cal Tech. Even as a young student, she stood out among the rest of her peers as one of the more brilliant minds. She’s one of seven people to ever complete four summers of internship at Pasadena’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory (with only twenty slots available each year, most students are lucky to be accepted once), and received a Master’s degree in mechanical engineering with a nearly-perfect GPA.

Immediately afterwards, she began working at JPL with other scientists to develop and create interstellar landers and rovers. Her name is etched into the plaque on the bottom of the lunar lander Aldrin, along with dozens of others who helped build and launch the module in 2025. She was also singled out as one of the most valued team members during the Mercator program, a joint venture between NASA, CSA, and ESA to map the surface of Venus.

But Lynn never lost sight of her goal to visit space herself. In 2026, she applied to the Astronaut Training Program, and is one of the youngest women to ever have been accepted. During the grueling course, she continued to work with JPL to develop a communication module upgrade for the International Space Station. Her insight proved so vital that, when it came time to install the module onto the station itself, she was the one chosen to oversee the installation on her first spaceflight in 2028.

The first trip was a short one, less than two months. Her second venture into space, in 2031, was a three-month tour aboard the ISS, followed by commanding a four-month tour in 2033. During that time, Lynn cultivated a social media presence to help educate the public on space travel, mirroring
other personable astronauts such as Chris Hadfield and Buzz Aldrin. She devoted much of her free
time to updating her YouTube channel, answering questions that were asked while showcasing life
aboard the space station. Her videos gained notoriety when she started showing the pranks she
played on the other astronauts; her most popular video, in which she hid one hundred ping-pong
balls in another astronaut’s sleeping bag, has been viewed fifty million times.

Since her last space flight a decade ago, Lynn has been heavily involved in the planning and
execution of the Magellan mission. She personally oversaw the planning and construction of the
Mars habitat, and provided insight during the initial design stages of the shuttle bringing the ten
astronauts to the red planet. While her spot on the crew was only announced recently, sources inside
NASA conformed that she was always their first choice as the mission’s engineer.

But she’s not without her controversy. She received harsh criticism from several religious advocacy
groups when she attached an LGBT flag to the outside of the ISS on a spacewalk during Pride
month in 2033. Lynn, who has two gay sisters, is one of NASA’s most outspoken astronauts in
terms of gay and lesbian rights, even speaking at events in San Francisco and Boston.

The topic hits home for the San Diego native; Lynn has spoken several times about being raised in a
household that was extremely intolerant, and how her sisters suffered as a result. Her biological
mother, Margaret Marsh, is currently incarcerated at a maximum security prison in Fresno for
attempting to kill her oldest daughter’s wife.

NASA has maintained their steadfast support of Lynn Marsh. In fact, her public presence was cited
as one of the reasons that she was selected for Magellan I. NASA has stated their intentions to keep
the public engaged during the mission, to include Lynn making regular social media updates
regarding life aboard the shuttle and on the red planet.

When asked by several outlets during a Q&A session, Lynn would neither confirm nor deny that she
had any pranks planned for her fellow astronauts.

While from San Diego, Lynn currently lives in Houston with her husband and fellow Magellan I
astronaut James Hagel. Her family includes her older sister Kate, a school teacher in Los Angeles;
younger sister Jessica, a professional violinist in New York; father Richard, a retired therapist in San
Diego; and step-mother Maria, a retired paralegal. Extended family includes her sister-in-laws
Victoria, a business executive, and Hannah, a cellist.

Victoria: Seriously??

Lynn: What?

Victoria: I’m a deputy Chief Executive Officer in one of the largest corporations in the world!! All I
get is ‘business executive’?!

Lynn: The article wasn’t about you!!

Lynn: NASA’s trying to keep people focused on the mission, and all the work that we’re going to
be doing. It’s gonna be hard to do that if we mention that my sister-in-law is the fifth-richest person
in the country!!

Victoria: My DAD is the fifth-richest person in the country.

Lynn: Ooh, what a distinction.
Victoria: You still could’ve done better than business executive.

Lynn: And what would Her Most Royal Highness have preferred her title to be?

Victoria: First of all, bite me. Second, something a LITTLE flashier!

Lynn: Like what?

Victoria: “sister-in-law Victoria, high-ranking executive”. Or maybe “sister-in-law Victoria, corporate America’s most powerful woman”.

Lynn: “sister-in-law Victoria, a constant pain in my ass”.

Jessica: You know I’m a professor too, right? At NYU?

Lynn: There were only so many words left over for my family history. We thought ‘professional violinist’ was sufficient.

Jessica: And my wife only gets one word? Just ‘cellist’?

Lynn: The article was about me! Not you!

Jessica: Then why were we there?

Lynn: Because you’re my family? And important to me? Did you notice that the article about Delaney didn’t even MENTION his wife and kids?

Jessica: Speaking of, how about a count of your nieces and nephews? I’ve got three kids who’d love to know why Aunt Lynn only mentioned their moms, not them.

Lynn: “What a cool article, Lynn! I’m so proud of you! Congratulations on getting your name in the paper!”

Jessica: “... again.”

Lynn: Well, maybe you and your family should be cooler.

Jessica: I am cool! I have videos on YouTube too!!

Lynn: Yea? What’s the hit count? Let’s compare.

Jessica: ... shut up.

Kevin: I see how it is.

Lynn: This better not be about the article.

Kevin: You didn’t want to get overshadowed by your nephew. I totally get it.

Lynn: I’m gonna tell you the same thing I told your mother and your aunt; it’s not always about you.

Lynn: Though maybe I would’ve, if you’d made that touchdown against the Raiders last week.
Kevin: I carried us sixty-four yards!

Lynn: But another seven, that would’ve killed you?

Kevin: I was being chased by the second-fastest Safety in the league!

Lynn: Your excuses won’t get me back the fifty bucks I lost.

Lynn: By the way, I want some Rams merchandise. Preferably stuff that’s light, and compacts easily.

Kevin: ... are you gonna bring it to Mars?

Lynn: I’m allowed eight kilograms of personal items, so long as it fits into a 30cm by 30cm box. I figured some NFL stuff from my nephew’s team would be neat.

Kevin: If I tell the manager, she’ll probably send a whole truck of stuff for you to choose from. Especially if they’ll be seen in your social media updates.

Lynn: Christ, I could see my boss’s head explode at that sight. Just send me a flag and a travel mug. Maybe one of those super-soft hoodies, so I have something comfy to wear in my downtime.

Kevin: Can I send you a bobblehead to leave on the surface?

Lynn: ... no.

Kevin: Why not?!

Lynn: Because I’m not flying 140 million miles to litter.

Kate: Can I ask you something?

Lynn: I swear to God, if this is about the article, I’m going to Mars and never coming back.

Kate: What? No. Who’s asking about the article?

Lynn: ... never mind. What’s up?

Kate: Do you have a few days free before the launch? Where you could come to Los Angeles?

Lynn: James and I had planned on making rounds to visit family for the holidays, before we go.

Kate: Do you think you could come to L.A. first? Maybe early in the month?

Lynn: Why?

Kate: Because I’m the deputy Superintendent of a district that would LOVE to have one of the Magellan astronauts visit a few schools.

Lynn: Really? You want me to go to your schools?

Kate: It would be really awesome if you did.
Lynn: I’d have to get permission, but I don’t think NASA will mind, since I’m supposed to be doing public outreach anyway. So sure, why not.

Kate: THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU!!

Lynn: ... you were already planning on me saying yes, weren’t you?

Kate: I’ve got a three-day agenda on my desktop :)

Lynn: Of course you do. How intense is it?

Kate: Day 1 has you visiting five schools to speak in auditoriums and answer questions for an hour each. Day 2 is guest-lecturing at a couple of technical high schools for physics classes, speaking at two more schools, and answering questions for student newspapers. Day 3 has you talking to girls in the morning about STEM jobs, and acting as a judge at a science fair in the afternoon.

Lynn: Okay, that last part actually sounds cool.

Kate: I thought you’d like that. Though we still need to come up with a prize for first place.

Lynn: Tell them that the first place winner gets a rock from Mars.

Kate: ... you can do that?

Lynn: We’re all bringing some rocks back for friends and family. It’ll probably be the size of a piece of gravel, but yea, I can totally do it. Just let me clear everything with NASA before you make it official.

Kate: Do I get one too?!

Lynn: Of course.

Kate: Then I forgive you for referring to me as just a schoolteacher ;)

Lynn: ALL OF YOU CAN GO TO HELL

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2047

FIRST LIGHT ELDER FOUND DEAD IN HOME

Story by J.R. Perolla

The Arcadia Bay Police Department reported that Eric Jefferson, the most prominent figurehead of First Light of Christ, was found dead in his home on Friday afternoon.

A department spokeswoman confirmed the identity of the deceased, and that his body was found after the department received reports of a gunshot coming from the residence. The spokeswoman stated that the death appeared to be a suicide, but the official cause of death will not be official until the autopsy is complete.
The sudden death comes on the coattails of a three-month investigation into allegations of fraud by the White Collar Crimes division of the Oregon State Police. The state police force confirmed that Jefferson was the focus of the investigation following reports that he was running a scheme commonly referred to as a ‘boiler room operation’ out of empty houses in the First Light community. Jefferson was allegedly running the scheme in an attempt to increase the amount of money available to First Light, so that he could revitalize their financial standing.

In a boiler room scheme, operators cold-call potential investors and use false or misleading information to convince them to buy up shares in a micro-stock, thus increasing it’s value. Once the value is high enough, the scheme operators immediately sell all of their own shares, which were purchased before the stock price rose. People who were suckerized into buying the stock afterwards are left holding shares worth significantly less than they paid for them, while the scheme operators change locations and start the process again.

Police were turned onto the operation after a tip from the SEC, with information that most of the shares were being purchased in Oregon from phone numbers traced back to the Arcadia Bay area. The White Collar Crime worked closely with the SEC to confirm the fraud’s origins before tracking down the boiler room’s location, finally arresting sixteen people in one night. The leaders of the scheme all gave statements indicating that they had been directed by Eric Jefferson, who was reportedly desperate to re-solidify First Light’s finances.

The task force indicated that as much as three million dollars had been seized, and they were in the process of returning it to the victims. Eric Jefferson was deposed several times, and sources familiar with the investigation said that they were on the cusp of making an arrest. He would have been immediately turned over to the SEC and prosecuted for fraud at the federal level. Punishment following a conviction would have included significant jail time, as well as harsh fines and penalties.

When asked, the state police indicated that the investigation would still continue, and the people who took part in the boiler room would still be charged. They also confirmed that they were still exploring the possibility of penalizing First Light itself, and potentially seizing property to pay those fines.

With Jefferson’s death, First Light is left without any leadership; their other Elder, Thomas Maxson, passed away of heart failure in January. Calls to the church offices were unanswered. Their last reported membership rolls numbered the parishioners at less than five hundred, and many in Arcadia Bay doubted the accuracy of their numbers.

Jefferson’s more recent public behavior included a dramatic run for office against the incumbent mayor, Brooke Scott, to fill the seat left by the retired mayor Daniel Britton. Jefferson lost by a wide margin, gathering nineteen percent of the vote. When asked for a comment, Mayor Scott only said the following: “I was always told that if I couldn’t say anything nice about someone, then it was better not to say anything at all.”

Rachel: Nice comment.

Brooke: I thought so.

Rachel: Very diplomatic of you. And gracious.

Brooke: Better than “the world is a nicer place without him”.

Rachel: Little bit. What happens with First Light now?

Brooke: Well, without that money, it’ll have been a few years since they paid property taxes on
ANY of their real estate. And Jefferson would’ve been the only one who could’ve anyway, since his name was on everything.

**Brooke:** I asked the police leave notices on all their properties this week, informing them that someone needs to contact the city to start making arrangements. So far, it’s been radio silence.

**Rachel:** What about their houses? Aren’t they all owned by the church?

**Brooke:** Most of them. That’ll be tricky. I honestly have no idea how we’ll proceed, especially now that Jefferson’s dead.

**Brooke:** When was the last time you visited a First Light neighborhood?

**Rachel:** I don’t even know. Must’ve been at least a decade now.

**Brooke:** You wouldn’t recognize them. They’re trashed. I think something like ninety percent of those houses are empty.

**Rachel:** Jesus, they’ve fallen hard.

**Brooke:** Yea. I figure if we haven’t heard anything from First Light in a month or so, we’ll probably form a committee to figure out what to do.

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**Brooke:** April, I’m so sorry.

**April:** Thanks.

**Brooke:** Are you okay?

**April:** Honestly, I’m a little torn.

**April:** I mean, yea, I hated him. He was an incredible dick, a raging homophobe, and an absolute narcissist of a human being. Him and my grandfather literally ruined lives and stole childhoods.

**April:** ... but he was still my dad.

**Brooke:** Have you heard from your brothers? Cousins?

**April:** Not really. But I know most of them have left the state. Joey and Mark were probably the only ones who still talked to my dad, but they don’t want anything to do with First Light.

**Brooke:** Aunts and Uncles?

**April:** I know Aunt Mary is dead. Uncle Elijah is living in California, last I heard. I haven’t spoken to my Aunt Sarah or Uncle Paul in years, but I know they were pissed when my dad proclaimed himself Elder. I don’t think they have anything to do with First Light either.

**Brooke:** I’m sorry, I know it’s a hard time for you, and I don’t want to badger you with this kind of stuff. But we really do need to talk to a family member. Ideally one who would inherit from your father.

**April:** Can I ask why?
Brooke: First Light is going to owe the city a lot of money soon. Probably the federal government, too. There’s stuff we need to go over, signatures to gather...

April: I can try to reach out. But I don’t think anyone will be willing to accept an inheritance that includes this sort of headache.

Brooke: Yea, I don’t blame them.

Brooke: If we don’t hear back, then it’ll go through the probate court, and the city will try to seize everything. It’ll be the end of First Light.

April: What a fucking tragedy. And that doesn’t seem like something you’d be eager to fix.

Brooke: I don’t want to fix it. But we have to handle it the right way.

April: Nobody would blame you if the church was “accidentally” burned to the ground.

Brooke: Don’t tempt me.

Max: Find out who’s running First Light yet?

Brooke: The boogeyman, as far as we can tell.

Max: Who’s giving the sermons?

Brooke: Nobody. I sent someone to the church on a Sunday, to see if we could figure it out, but they were shuttered. The guy said there was movement inside, but nobody would answer the door.

Max: Wow. Wonder what they’re doing?

Brooke: Me too. Opinions are split between squatting and stealing.

Brooke: At this point, it’ll have been six weeks since Jefferson died. We’ve gotten nothing from First Light, and nobody’s been able to have a real conversation with any of their parishioners. As far as we can tell, there are less than a hundred of them still in town, most of them over the age of sixty. And their last laundromat hasn’t been open in months.

Brooke: My guess is that they’re skipping town, so they don’t get caught up in the boiler room investigation. We’re pretty sure the police didn’t catch everyone involved.

Max: So... now what?

Brooke: I’m meeting with a few people next week. If nobody has any strenuous objection, we’re going to consider their property abandoned.

Max: Sounds like the state police will be seizing the buildings, then.

Brooke: The state police have already told us that they don’t want them. Nobody will buy them, and if they take possession, then they’ll be responsible for the upkeep. The threat of seizures was supposed to force Jefferson to cooperate.

Max: Talk about backfiring.
Brooke: To be fair, nobody’s REALLY upset at how it turned out.

Max: Then what’s gonna happen to the buildings?

Brooke: I have a plan. But we’re going to have to take possession of their property first. Which means that I’ll be the one seizing them.

Max: ... you lucky dog.

Brooke: You say that, not seeing the literal mountain of paperwork in front of me.

James: Seizures, huh?

Brooke: Looks like it.

James: I don’t envy Elizabeth. One of the reasons I never went that route is because navigating the court for that’s a nightmare.

Brooke: Yea, she’s pretty pissed at me. She’s threatened to quit a few times.

James: She’s the one who wanted to run for the job.

Brooke: Bet that retirement’s looking pretty nice.

James: Very much so. Especially when I read about all the hard work I don’t have to do anymore.

Brooke: You’re not getting bored? I’m sure Elizabeth would love some extra hands.

James: I may offer.

James: Speaking of new jobs, I’ve been hearing interesting rumors from some old friends at the state DNC office...

Brooke: No idea what you’re talking about.

James: Of course not. But next time, don’t reply so quickly :)

Faith: I got a job at the Ronald Reagan Medical Center!

Teresa: Congratulations!!

Max: Yay!

Chloe: Where at?

Faith: In the ER!

Max: Their ER? I thought you wanted to do pediatrics?
Faith: I mean, I still kinda do.

Faith: But I got thrown up on a LOT during that rotation. And grabbed. One of those little boogers almost pulled down my scrub pants.

Teresa: ... on purpose?

Faith: Debatable. He was about that age, though he was also running a 102-degree fever.

Teresa: Oof. Well, I’m sure you’ll still see kids in the ER.

Faith: I saw quite a few of them during that part of my training, so probably.

Chloe: Why the ER, though? You couldn’t have worked anywhere else?

Faith: I guess the ER has a high turnover rate for nurses.

Faith: I don’t mind. It was stressful at times, during traumas, but it wasn’t so bad. I still got to help lots of people.

Max: Traumas? Like when people come in via ambulance?

Faith: Yea. It’s pretty fast-paced, lots of shouting and moving.

Faith: But I got to shove my arm up to my elbow in some dude’s chest last month to stop the bleeding.

Teresa: To your... elbow?

Faith: He was REALLY fat.

Teresa: That is so gross.

Chloe: That is so COOL and I want photos.

Max: For what?!

Chloe: So I can see! I’ve never been elbow-deep in a person! How did it feel?

Faith: I don’t know, wet and squishy?

Chloe: AWESOME

Max: ... and now I’m skipping lunch.

2049

William: Hey, you remember how you used to tell me that if I studied hard, I could be a doctor?

Max: Of course. Why?
William: Congratulations. You were right.

Max: YOU GOT ACCEPTED?!?!

William: I just got the letter :)

Max: Which one? Where are you going?

William: Johns Hopkins!

Max: What?! That’s in Maryland! Aren’t there medical schools in California?

William: It’s Johns Hopkins! The best medical school in the country!

Max: Does it HAVE to be so far away?

William: Unless you have a plan to move it closer, yea, probably.

Max: Don’t get smart. I don’t want my son running off across the country. We’ll miss you!

William: Yea, I know you will.

Max: ... will you miss us?

William: Not enough to decline the invitation.

Max: I’ll remember that answer come Christmas.

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Jennifer: Do you think Aunt Victoria will write me a reference letter?

Max: For what?

Jennifer: Just... will she?

Max: I don’t know. Maybe. She’s never mentioned doing one before.

Jennifer: What if it was to help her favorite niece get into grad school?

Max: You want to apply for grad school?

Jennifer: I mean... I know you make lots of money with your MBA. The admissions counselor said that with my GPA, it’s worth considering.

Jennifer: But part of the application is a reference letter.

Max: You don’t want one from me? I’m a c-level executive, you know.

Jennifer: I think it’d have more weight if it didn’t come from my mother.

Max: Who, by the way, is also an alumni of the UCLA Anderson School of Management.

Jennifer: Look, I know Aunt Victoria is business-famous. I’m pretty sure with a high test score on the GRE, and a letter from her, I’d me a shoo-in.
Max: Tell you what, I’ll ask. But this is the sort of thing she’ll take seriously, kiddo.

Jennifer: Really?

Max: Jennifer, a reference letter from her means that she’s personally vouching for you. Which means that your behavior, your work ethic, and your grades will be a direct reflection of her.

Max: Are you sure you want to subject yourself to that level of pressure?

Jennifer: ... yea. I can do it.

Max: Okay. I’ll ask. Be prepared for a real intense conversation.

Max: Hey, how’d you like to be a really, really awesome aunt?

Victoria: More awesome than I already am?

Max: Like, making my kid’s year.

Victoria: I’m intrigued.

Max: Jennifer just decided that she wants to get her MBA. And she thinks that a reference from her Aunt Victoria will help with the application.

Victoria: Sure thing.

Max: Really?

Victoria: When does she need it by?

Max: Hang on. I gave her a lecture on how it was a big thing that she was asking, and how what she did would reflect on you. You’re not even gonna think about it?

Victoria: I mean, if it was anyone else’s kid, maybe. But I’m not gonna give my niece the third degree.

Max: ... would you?

Victoria: Why are you trying to make this harder? I said I’d do it.

Max: I’m subtly manipulating the situation to ensure that my daughter has the fear of God in her, thus making her a better student.

Victoria: Isn’t her GPA 3.7?

Max: 3.8. Are you gonna help me here or not?

Victoria: Okay, what exactly did you have in mind?

Max: An interview of some kind where you ask very intense questions while she struggles to maintain her composure. Ideally at a restaurant where the prices are high enough to make her even more uncomfortable.
“I still don’t see why we had to come over so early.”

Chloe smirked, as she pulled the truck in front of the apartment building. “Because I need to do something.”

“What, exactly?” Max rubbed her eyes, then took another sip from her travel mug full of coffee. “Faith won’t be expecting us for another ninety minutes. She’s probably still asleep.”

“I know.” Chloe turned the truck off. “You have her emergency key, right?”

“Yea? Why?”

“Gimme.”

Max looked at her wife warily, but complied, unhooking the key and handing it over. “You gonna tell me what this is about?”

“You’ll see.”

Chloe didn’t say another word as she left the truck, closing the door quietly behind her. Max was slightly amused as she walked behind her, Chloe sneaking quietly up the stairs and towards the door of Faith’s apartment. She stopped in front of the door and slowly, almost glacially, inserted the key and unlocked the door.

“Be vewy, vewy quiet,” she whispered cartoonishly.

Max rolled her eyes as Chloe pushed her way inside, following a few steps behind her. Faith’s apartment was mostly clean, with only a small amount of clutter. A pair of athletic shoes by the door, kicked aside carelessly; keys and a purse sitting on the table; a hoodie draped loosely over a chair; and a plate left out, the empty sleeve of a Hot Pocket sitting on it.

*Looks like she had a late night,* Max decided as she looked around. *Long shifts at the ER.*

Chloe motioned for Max to stay still as she crept up to Faith’s bedroom door, where they could hear the snoring from the other side. She slowly turned the knob and pushed it open, slipping inside and closing it behind her.

Max waited patiently for several seconds.

“I WANT WAFFLES!!” Her wife finally screamed.

Faith’s shriek was ear-piercing, and Max flinched as she stepped back from the door.

“CHLOE!!” Faith yelled after a few seconds. “WHAT THE FUCK?!!”

“I WANT WAFFLES!! MAKE ME WAFFLES!!”

“YOU- ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME?! HOW THE FUCK DID YOU GET IN
HERE?"

“I WANT WAFFLES, FAITH! GET UP AND MAKE ME WAFFLES!!”

“It’s six o’clock in the morning!! I got to sleep four hours ago!!”

“I don’t care! I want waffles!! With peanut butter and whipped cream!!”

“Get- stop!! Chloe, I’m not dressed!! Let go of my-”

Max snorted in amusement as she heard something crash onto the floor.

“OW!! Chloe, let go of my arm!!”

“No!! Waffles!!”

“Out!! Get the fuck out!!”

The sounds of an intense scuffle reached Max’s ears, as something thumped into the door.

“But I want waffles!!”

“Out!!”

The door finally opened, and Max watched her wife get shoved out of the bedroom. Faith stood in
the doorway, wearing a long shirt, her hair completely mussed and frazzled. She was breathing
heavily as she glared intently between Chloe and Max.

“Are you insane?!” she snapped. “Why the fuck are you breaking into my goddamn apartment at six
in the fucking morning to scream at me for waffles?! Are you having a fucking stroke?! What the
fuck is wrong with you?!”

Chloe drew herself back upright, smiling connivingly. “Sucks when someone does it to you, doesn’t
it?”

Max watched Faith’s eyes light on fire, the anger on her sister’s face building quickly. “Okay, you
had your fun,” she said as grabbed Chloe’s arm, pulling her back towards the apartment door. “We’ll
be back in an hour Faith. See you then!!”

“But Max!” Chloe protested. “I didn’t get my waffles!!”

They got to the door just as Faith grabbed the dirty plate on the counter. Max barely got her wife
outside, closing the door just as the flying dinnerware shattered against it.

Steph: ... okay, that does sound really satisfying. And deserved.

Chloe: Right? But somehow, I’m still the bad guy.
“You didn’t sleep, did you?”

“A little.” The brunette itched at her close-cropped hair, as she looked down at the booklet in her hands; a copy of the material for a presentation she was about to give, to a panel of very serious people. “Not much, though. Only a couple of hours. What about you?”

“Not a wink.” The Asian girl next to her shook her head. “I drank three cups of coffee this morning. I’m not tweaking, am I?”

“No.” The brunette glanced at the papers in her friend’s hands. “What was your recommendation? Invest or not?”

“Not. They’ve changed CTOs six times in three years, they’re short of liquid capital, and their application ideas are for current trends; by the time they’re actually ready, they’ll be out-of-date. What about you?”

The brunette squirmed. “I, uh... I’m gonna recommend investing.”

“Bold.”

“Yea, I know.” She sighed heavily. “But the potential rewards are worth the risks.”

“You say that as if you won’t get your ass fired for wasting twenty million dollars of the company’s money.”

“Thank you so much for that reminder, Jian.” The brunette pinched her nose. “I wasn’t already stressed about this.”

“I was just busting your chops, Jen.” Jian scoffed. “You’re the last intern that they’re going to fire.”

She smirked. “If you really think that, you clearly don’t know our boss very well.”

The door opened before their conversation could continue. “Miss Caulfield-Price?”

Jennifer stood, nervously smoothing out the miniscule wrinkles in her blazer. “Yes?”

“They’re ready for you.” The assistant gestured down the hall. “This way.”

Her heart was practically pounding out of her chest, as she walked through the door behind the assistant. They’re not going to fire you at this meeting, she tried to assure herself. This is supposed to be partially educational. We’re supposed to learn while making this company money. Calm down. ... and then try to pretend like Aunt Victoria won’t tear you apart because you’re her niece.

Fat chance. Mom already said that won’t get me any favors here. She squared her shoulders as they approached the boardroom, and she could see the others sitting at the table while they spoke quietly. Let’s just focus on not fucking this up.
The assistant opened the door for her, and the conversation stopped. She walked inside, the booklet clutched in her hand so tightly she was worried about ruining the paper as the six men and women looked up at her with indifferent faces.

Jennifer tried to forget that they were all corporate officers, but failed as she took note of who was in the room. Tom Frackman, Chief Financial Officer... Harriet Jones, Chief Legal Officer... Jessica Maxwell, Chief Operations Officer... Aunt Victoria, of course, right in the middle... Fred Gavel, Chief Marketing Officer...

... Mom?

Her mother had the same look of indifference as the others while Jennifer took her position in front of the table. Shit. I didn’t know she was going to be here.

Guess I shouldn’t be surprised. This IS her job.

The CFO leaned forward onto his elbows as he interlaced his fingers, and Jennifer decided to get started. “Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.”

“Good morning.” The CLO nodded. “And you are?”

“Jennifer Caulfield-Price.”

“Are you ready to answer questions about the business you were assigned to evaluate?”

“I am.”

Victoria leaned forward. “What business were you given?”

“Roadie’s Figurines.”

“And what do they do?”

She cleared her throat. “Roadie’s is a company working out of a San Jose warehouse that earns their income by making small figurines of pop-culture characters from cast aluminum,” she began. “They started small, only selling locally, but their popularity has started to skyrocket. They’re in a great position to expand, and we have the opportunity to buy in right as they become a household name.”

The CFO raised his eyebrows. “You think this business is going to become a household name?”

“I do,” she answered. “Their popularity is growing very quickly; the figurines were recently featured in several magazines, and some of their more popular models are sold out on Amazon. A few are even selling on eBay for two or three times their retail price.”

“So.” Victoria paused. “You’re going to tell us that we should invest in their company.”

... no turning back now.

“Yes.”

The members of the board looked amongst themselves. Except for her mother; she seemingly studied her intently, as if she was trying to read her mind. She didn’t even look at the notepad in front of her and she picked up a pen, poised to begin writing.

“Jennifer.” Victoria leaned back and crossed her arms. “Do you know what Beanie Babies are?”
She frowned. “No.”

“I’m not surprised. They were plush toys, like stuffed animals, about six or seven inches long. They were incredibly popular during the nineties, about thirty to forty years before you were born, to the point that people were paying thousands of dollars for some of the more collectible dolls.” Victoria paused. “Do you know why you haven’t heard of them before?”

“... because it was thirty to forty years before I was born?”

Nobody laughed. Jennifer felt herself wilt a little, as Victoria continued. “Because, like all fads, they had a lifecycle that ended,” she answered. “By the time you came into this world, the dolls that had been selling for two or three thousand were listing on eBay for twenty bucks, and nobody was bidding.”

“I understand, Miss Chase, but-”

“How about Funko Pops? Do you know what those are?”

“... no.”

“They were small statues of pop culture characters, too. They made a run for every major television show and movie. Not a single person from my generation didn’t have at least one on a shelf somewhere. Do you know why you haven’t heard of them, either?”

“I.”

“Because, like all fads, they had a lifecycle that ended,” Victoria repeated. “I’m sure we can continue giving examples; e-cigarettes, Hummel figurines, and Pokémon cards, just to name a few. And now you’re pitching that we should sink twenty million dollars into a company that’s making the next big ‘gotta have it’?”

Jennifer hesitated. “... yes.”

“Are you confident in that answer? Because if you’re coming in here to tell me that I should cut a check for twenty million dollars, I expect you to do it with confidence. And you just answered like I was your boyfriend asking if it’s okay to go to a slumber party with your yoga instructor.”

Her cheeks colored as the others in the room, her mother included, snorted in amusement. “Yes, ma’am,” she finally answered. “I think investing in them is worth it.”

“Well, I don’t,” Victoria stated. “So whatever argument you have, it had better be incredibly convincing.”

Jennifer gathered herself up mentally, as she took a short breath. “Have you ever seen a Roadie, Miss Chase?”

“I have not.”

“I brought an example.” Jennifer reached into her pocket and pulled out a small figure, about three inches tall, made of metal. She approached the table and placed it in front of her. “I’d like you to notice how detailed it is.”

Victoria examined the figure, clearly unimpressed. “Any artist with a 3D printer can make similar figures.”
“Yes, they can. But this isn’t made from plastic, it’s made from aluminum. And it’s not printed; it’s cast, assembled, and painted.”

Beside Victoria, the COO frowned. “That doesn’t seem very efficient. How much do they sell for?”

“This model goes for about thirty dollars.”

“In that case, it almost seems like they’re losing money.”

“They’re actually not. Even factored with time and materials, they mark them up by about sixty percent.”

“Sixty percent?” The CFO raised an eyebrow. “Do they have slaves working in that warehouse?”

“No. But they do have this.” Jennifer opened her booklet. “On page four, you’ll see a picture.”

They all turned their booklets and studied the photo of a giant machine that was several dozen feet long. “And… what are we looking at?” The CFO asked.

“That’s a proprietary machine invented and designed by Roadie’s CEO; a man named Mark Walton, who has two Master’s degrees in engineering from MIT,” Jennifer explained. “With enough materials, it’s capable of producing up to two thousand figurines a day over the course of three days. That includes heating the raw aluminum, casting it into all the pieces needed, painting those pieces, and then assembling them.”

“This one machine can do all that?” The COO sounded incredulous.

“Yes, sir.”

“I have a hard time believing that.”

“Mister Walton actually explained to me that it wasn’t very complicated.” She shrugged. “Industrial fabrication and casting isn’t new, he simply scaled it down. The assembly area is just a smaller version of the automated plants used by car manufacturers in Detroit, as is the painting area. But the factory at Chrysler is spread out over several buildings; this is only eighty-five feet long. The machine is incredibly precise, can manipulate parts as needed with internal arms, and completely eliminates human workers from the process. Their rejection rate during quality assurance is a fraction of a percentage.”

“Mm. Very clever of him.” Victoria cocked her head. “Just because he has low overhead doesn’t mean that the business is worth it. These statues are still a fad.”

“We have to think past the statues, Miss Chase.” Jennifer cleared her throat. “The statues are irrelevant to the business; what we should focus is on the fabrication process he’s pioneered.”

Victoria scoffed. “He’s made an automated assembly line. Henry Ford beat him by almost two hundred years.”

“Respectfully, Miss Chase, this isn’t cars. This is mass micro-fabrication, and with a little more capital, he can probably shrink the process down even smaller, and make it more sophisticated. Today it’s multi-piece figurines, but who’s to say that tomorrow it’s not phones? Wristwatches? Microcomputers?” Jennifer paused. “And even if it’s not, at the rate they can pump out those figurines, we’ll at least get our money back.”

“I don’t just WANT my money back,” Victoria retorted. “I want to make a profit. I want the
shareholders to get raging erections and soaked panties when they see our quarterly earnings reports. And when I tell them that twenty million dollars is tied up in what amounts to an overpriced toy factory, I don’t think they’ll be eager to throw me a parade.”

“Then think of it as an investment in the future, Miss Chase.” Jennifer held up the booklet. “Mass micro-fabrication technology is still in it’s infancy. Even in China, where they have mass production down to an art form, something like this would likely have some human interaction. If we refine this technology, the applications are essentially limitless.”

Victoria pursed her lips, before leaning back into her chair. After several seconds, she turned to the others. “Does anyone else have any questions?”

The first hand up was the CFO’s. “What percentage of Roadie’s does twenty million dollars get us?”

“Mister Walton is willing to sign over thirty percent.”

The COO cleared her throat. “You mentioned the potential for this micro-fabrication process. I assume assembling figurines is more of a show-of-force?”

“More or less.” Jennifer nodded. “Mister Walton explained how the machinery works. A lot of it was pretty technical, but he emphasized that the figurines mostly helped get him into the market; their popularity was an unforeseen consequence of the machine’s work. With the right improvements and additions to the machinery, he can expand it into more complex and precise fabrication. Maybe even electronics, further down the road.”

“Is anyone else miniaturizing this process?”

“A few other companies,” Jennifer allowed. “Apple and Motorola have some similar ideas, but it’s still in concept. Most small-scale fabrication like this is still done overseas, but the quality isn’t nearly as refined.”

“How long would it take for the machine to be repurposed for other applications?” The CMO asked next. “Or is it even possible for the same machine to create other products?”

“... I don’t have an answer for the time frame,” Jennifer admitted. “But the machine can be repurposed. It would likely need some new tooling, which would have to be custom-engineered, but it can be done.”

“Mm.” The CMO leaned back in his chair, before he looked at the others. “Who’s next?”

Max’s hand shot up before he could even finish. Jennifer hadn’t even noticed that her mother had been scribbling notes.

“Very well.” Victoria nodded. “Floor’s all yours, Max.”

Okay, then. Jennifer nervously watched her mother clear her throat. This is gonna go one of two ways; either I’m gonna get some softballs, to make up for Aunt Victoria’s questions, or she’s going to annihilate me.

“What do you know about Mark Walton?”

The question threw her for a loop. “Um... as I said, he has two Master’s degrees from MIT. He’s held tech jobs at Google, Motorola, and Verizon. And he was-”

“What else, besides his job history and education?” her mother pressed. “What do you know about
his personality? His likes and dislikes? How is he as a manager? How are his leadership skills?”

Jennifer blinked. *Okay. Definitely not option one.*

“I... well, he’s very charming, and-”

“I’m sure he is. He’s trying to get you to cut him a check for twenty million dollars.” Her mother planted her elbows on the table in front of her. “I imagine he was only slightly less charismatic than Hitler. Did you happen to notice how he treated his subordinates?”

“He didn’t interact with any of them when I met him at the warehouse.”

“There might be a reason for that.” She slid Jennifer’s report aside and opened up a manila folder. “Did you know that when he worked for Huawei, he had four reports of sexual harassment made against him?”

“... no.”

“You didn’t mention Huawei in his job history. Did you know that he worked for them at all?”

Jennifer felt a pit of dread start to develop in her stomach. “No.”

“I’m not surprised. He probably doesn’t like to discuss being forced to resign from their Canadian office, though I doubt that it comes up often.” Her mother nodded. “He covers for the gap in his work history by claiming a longer employment period with Google. Did you know that while he worked there, he had two other allegations of harassment filed against him?”

“I didn’t.” Jennifer swallowed. “But I don’t think that changes the fact that he’s a technical genius who-”

“It changes EVERYTHING,” her mother interrupted forcefully. “What happens when we buy into his company, and bring in our own personnel? Given the size of his operation, we’d want to involve at least a dozen people who would be junior to him. And this corporation has a zero-tolerance policy for workplace harassment. What if he gropes an assistant, like he did back in Toronto, and we force him out on his ass?”

“I.”

“I’ll tell you. We get dragged into court over intellectual property disputes, because he’s going to want to take his technology with him.” She looked towards the CLO. “Harriet, how long do you think that lawsuit would take to resolve?”

“About two to three years,” she answered immediately.

“What would we be looking at in terms of cost?”

“Based on precedent? Millions.”

“Millions.” Her mother turned back to her. “Not to mention that we’ll have lost the mind behind this process. And while Mark Walton might be a chauvinistic pig, he’s undoubtedly one of the smartest people in the world; he’ll be nigh on impossible to replace.” She closed the folder and slid a new one out from underneath it, opening that up as well. “Did he show you his sales numbers from the last year?”

“Yes.” Jennifer nodded, relieved that she was getting questions she could answer. “Sales of the
“They sure did.” She nodded. “A very impressive figure. I can see why people would certainly be interested in investing.” Her mother looked up to meet her gaze. “What did he do with it?”

“... I’m sorry?”

“Two-point-four million dollars is a lot of money. What did he do with it?”

“I... well, the machinery takes a fair amount of maintenance-”

“Which would not have been factored into the net profits,” her mother corrected. “After paying for all of the maintenance, salary, taxes, utilities, and materials, Mark Walton had two-point-four million dollars left over. As the sole owner of his company, the spending of that money was at his complete and unquestionable discretion. I, for one, would love to know what happened to it. Did you ever ask him?”

Jennifer squirmed. “No.”

“That’s a shame. Though it probably wouldn’t have mattered, I doubt he would have told you the truth.” Max lifted a glossy photo from the folder. “My assistant got this photo from his Facebook page. Do you know what kind of car that is?”

“... a Lamborghini?”

“No. It’s a current-year McLaren Spider. British-made, not Italian, and one of the fastest production cars in the world.” She looked at Victoria. “Your father has an affinity for these. Do you remember how much they cost?”

Victoria glanced up. “If memory serves, the newest models go for between four and five hundred thousand.”

“Certainly a lot of money.” Jennifer looked back to her mother as she kept the photo raised where she could see it. “Do you see the house behind it?”

“Yes.”

“It’s rather large, isn’t it?”

Jennifer bit her lip and didn’t answer.

“I looked it up on a realty website.” The photo dropped back on the table. “It was purchased for about one-point-two million in cash last summer. While you were researching Roadie’s, did YOU look at Mister Walton’s Facebook page?”

“No.”

“He has some very interesting photos online.” Her mother picked up several more pictures from the folder. “Here’s one of him in a hot tub with some very beautiful women. Here’s another of him with some different beautiful women, driving his new supercar. And here’s one of him with even more beautiful women in what looks like a private jet, coming back from a trip to Mexico. Do you recognize the girl sitting on his lap?”

Jennifer realized that the Latino girl’s face rang a bell. “... she looks familiar.”

“Her name is Nina Garcia-Lopez. She’s a rather famous influencer on social media, especially
popular in her native country of Brazil, with close to four million followers.” She produced a new photo. “She mostly shares provocative pictures of herself in swimsuits and underwear, but she posted this during that Mexico trip. What does it look like?”

“Uh...” Jennifer peered at the photo. “Like she’s... drinking with Mark Walton on a hotel balcony?”

“Indeed.” Max produced another photo. “Here’s the same picture, zoomed in just over her shoulder and brightened. What does that look like on the table behind them?”

She took a closer look at the photo, blinking. “... oh.”

“Have you ever seen cocaine before, Jennifer?”

“No,” she responded quietly.

“Good answer.” Her mother put the photo down and closed the folder. “So. We have an owner who’s a chauvinistic pig with a drug problem that fancies himself a playboy, and is more interested in using his company’s money to fund his lifestyle than grow the business. Given what you’ve just learned about Mister Walton, do you think it’s a good idea to cut him an investment check for twenty million dollars?”

Jennifer felt her face get incredibly hot, as she looked from her mother to the rest of the board. All of whom were looking at her just as intently as she was.

... fuck.

*There’s only one good answer.*

“No,” she muttered, breathing heavily.

“I’m sorry?”

“No.” she glanced down at her feet. “I, uh... I’m sorry for wasting the board’s time.”

Jennifer was excused, and asked to wait in the hall.

She walked around the corner and stopped, leaning against the wall. Then she slowly slid to the floor, plopping down with her arms resting on her knees.

*Shit.*

She closed her eyes.

*I can’t believe that just happened.*

*Aunt Victoria might actually fire me. Not to mention that I’ll never be able to look any of those people in the eye ever again.*

Hot tears burned against the corners of her eyes, and she wiped them quickly.

*That motherfucker.*

*I knew he was too slick. I knew he had all those answers way too fast. I SAW how the others in that office looked at him, for fuck’s sake.*
I can’t believe I didn’t think to look into him. Or at the very least, check his fucking Facebook. She opened her eyes, wiping them again before the back of her head hit the wall. Christ.

She looked down in the booklet in her hand. After a few seconds, she ripped it into two pieces, dropping them on the floor.

Fuck that fucking motherfucker.

Jennifer barely paid attention to the footsteps that came around the corner. She only looked up when they stopped, seeing her Mama looking at her with a concerned expression. After a few seconds, she took a seat on the floor next to her.

“So.” Chloe tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “How was your first big board meeting?”

Jennifer sighed. “Go away.”

“That good, huh?”

“How did you know to be here?” Jennifer looked sideways. “Are you even allowed on this floor?”

Chloe smirked. “Who do you think sets the security clearances on everyone’s access cards?” she asked. “Besides, I’m in IT. I can go wherever the hell I want. And your mother said that it might be a good idea if I was here when you got out.”

“Mm.” Jennifer turned back to look at the far wall. “Well. At least she was nice enough to have you waiting for me, after she finished humiliating me in front of all the other c-levels.”

Chloe raised an eyebrow. “Are you blaming your mother for what happened?”

“... no,” Jennifer muttered. “I’m just lashing out in embarrassment and frustration. She’s right, I should have done more research into the guy who owned that company. I never even thought to check his Facebook at all.”

“Hey.” Chloe reached around her shoulders and squeezed. “You’re twenty-four. Even if you do have an MBA, you’re allowed to be wrong every once in a while.”

“I tried to convince Aunt Victoria to cut a check for twenty million to a guy who pissed away all his company’s revenue on hookers and blow. Literally, not figuratively.” She shook her head. “Plus a British supercar and a mansion.”

“Damn.” Chloe exhaled. “Sounds like a hell of a party. Maybe he’ll invite you next time.”

Jennifer snorted. “Thanks. That makes my career-ending fuckup better.”

“Stop that. It’s not a career-ender.”

“I can never face those people ever again.”

Chloe raised an eyebrow. “Are you under the impression that none of them have ever fucked up, in their twenty-to-thirty years of experience?” she asked. “Did your mother ever tell you about the Harkin-Wright fiasco?”

Jennifer frowned. “Harkin-Wright? The hedge fund in San Diego that tanked because it was a massive house of cards?”

“Jen, before all that happened, your mother spent MONTHS trying to convince Derek Chase that it
was a good buy.” Chloe smirked. “He refused every time, because he was one of the few people who couldn’t get the math to add up in his head, and decided that he wanted nothing to do with them. Your mother actually flew up to Seattle to try to convince him otherwise.”

“What?”

“Oh, yea. You think she didn’t feel like a moron when they fell apart?” Chloe shook her head. “It was probably days, before she could even look your Aunt Vic in the eye. And hey, guess what?”

Jennifer looked at her expectantly.

“Derek still promoted her to CAO a couple of years after that.” Chloe smiled. “And I’m sure your Aunt Vic doesn’t have a squeaky-clean track record either. People don’t get to that level without making a couple of serious fuckups.”

“... I guess not.” Jennifer rubbed her eyes. “Still. This was big, and I totally blew it.”

“Did you learn from it?”

“Yea.”

“Then you didn’t waste your time.” Chloe stood back up, holding her hand out. “Come on, kid. Up you go.”

Jennifer hesitantly took her hand, and let herself get pulled back to her feet. “Thanks,” she muttered. “I still feel like an idiot.”

“Welcome to being an adult.”

She was called back in a few minutes later, and found a chair waiting for her. “Have a seat,” Victoria told her, gesturing.

Jennifer sat down, nervously running her palms over her pant legs.

“So.” Victoria folded her hands. “We talked it over. And we decided that you did okay.”

“... I’m sorry?”

“This was a test, Jen.” Max cleared her throat. “An exercise, for your and the rest of the executive interns. One of a couple that you’ll be put through, actually, before your probationary year is over.”

“A test?” Jennifer glanced at everyone. “I don’t get it. That was a real company.”

“Yes, it is,” Victoria agreed. “But we never had any intention of investing in Roadie’s. Actually, the decision of whether or not we’re going to invest has been made already for all the businesses we gave you and your colleagues to evaluate.”

Jennifer blinked. “We’re not... but the machine-“

“We’re going to extend an offer to buy the company outright,” Max interjected. “An offer that includes separating Mister Walton from the company, in exchange for a hefty sum of money and the machine itself.”

“... oh.” Jennifer blinked. “Wait, I did okay?”
“You did.” Victoria nodded. “We liked that you were able to see past their figurine business, and into future applications; we were curious if whoever drew them would do that, or try to convince us to ride out the lifecycle of the toys before selling our interest.”

“But...” Jennifer glanced at her mother. “What about Walton?”

“We didn’t say you did great,” Max clarified. “We said you did okay. You’re supposed to learn from this exercise, and now you can take away the importance of a company’s leadership prior to investing in it.”

“Ah.” Jennifer scratched the back of her neck as she looked at her lap. “Yea. I, uh... I’m sorry. He was so polite, and helpful, and open with everything, that I didn’t think I had to.”

“You’ll ALWAYS have to,” Max corrected. “And now you’ll know for next time.”

“Do you have any questions for us?” Victoria asked.

Jen bit her lip, before she looked at her mother. “How did you know about the sexual harassment complaints?” she asked. “When I called Google to confirm that he worked there, they didn’t tell me any of that.”

Max smirked. “That’s because you called their Human Resources department,” she explained. “They’re limited by law, regarding what they can and can’t say. I know their Deputy CTO, and I called him. He gave me the full story and directed me to Huawei.”

“Just to be clear.” The CMO leaned forward, getting Jennifer’s attention. “We aren’t faulting you for not knowing about those complaints. Your mother found out because of a personal connection that, as an intern executive, you won’t foster for years. But the social media posts were something you should have caught.”

“Yes, but other than that, you did well,” Victoria reaffirmed. “You’re currently working in the Sales office, right?”

Jennifer nodded.

“Starting next Monday, you and all the others will be switching around.” Victoria looked at Max. “You’ll be reporting to your mother’s department for the next few weeks while you learn the finer points of Acquisitions.”

“... really?” Jennifer looked at her mom. “I’m working for you?”

Her mother snorted. “No. I don’t work with interns. You’ll be working for Kara Higgins. She’s one of the best executives in my office.” She paused. “I also believe the others refer to her as a slave driver. Though I wouldn’t do so within earshot.”

Jennifer nodded. “... okay then.”

“That was the most miserable experience of my life.”

Jennifer nodded as she sipped her drink at the bar later that night. Jian was resting her forehead on the table. “Yea, today kinda sucked.”

Jian glanced through her arms at her. “You didn’t get chewed out by the COO for not asking about a company’s long-term objectives. Or failing to consider their intangible assets.”
“No, I just got humiliated in front of that entire panel by my mother,” Jennifer remarked dryly. She tilted her head back and swallowed the rest of her drink. “I’m not unconvinced that she didn’t enjoy it.”

“... fair point.” Jian picked her head back up and sipped from her glass. “Christ, what a shitty way to end a week.”

“No kidding.” Jennifer waved to the waitress, who nodded and went to the bar to get their refills. “Hey, at least we have all weekend to mentally stew on our fuckups.”

“Forget that. I’m calling Hans over the second I get home. I’m gonna get laid until I forget about today.” Jian smirked. “You gonna track down Carl?”

“Maybe I would, if I hadn’t found out he was already married.” Jennifer shook her head. “My moms are right, boys suck.”

Jian arched an eyebrow. “So... what? You gonna go bi now?”

“No.” Jennifer sighed. “But maybe I should try to meet someone in person, instead of a dating app.”

“Mm.” Jian pursed her lips, then shrugged. “You want me to ask Hans if he’s got any cute, single friends who aren’t dickheads?”

“Maybe.” Their waitress appeared, and Jennifer accepted a new drink. “Christ, I hate being a working adult.”

Jian snorted. “What, you want to be like your brother, who’ll be in school for the next decade?”

“Fuck that, I’m not smart enough to cut people open and start poking around.” Jennifer shook her head. “He just told us that he got accepted into a surgical program. My mom was going on and on about how proud she was, and all I could think was how if he’s off by a couple of millimeters, he’s going to kill someone.”

“Yea, but think about this.” Jian paused. “He’d probably still have a job.”

“Shit. That’s really true, isn’t it?”

Jian was about to reply, before she glanced over Jennifer’s shoulder and straightened up in her seat. Jennifer turned and saw her mother walk up behind them, smiling as she stopped at their table. “How are you doing, Miss Li?”

“I’m good, Miss Caulfield.” Jian smiled back. “How are you?”

“Well, thank you. Do you mind if I have a few minutes with my daughter?”

“Sure thing.” Jian stood and made her way over to the bar, taking her drink with her.

Max slid over and took her seat, settling in as she looked over Jennifer. “How are you feeling?”

“Oh, you know.” Jennifer took a healthy sip of her beer. “As well as anyone can be, when their mother humiliates them in front of five of the most powerful people in her company.”

Her mom smirked. “Jennifer, you really were one of the best in your group,” she assured her. “I assume your friend Jian told you that she got a remarkable talking-to from Jessica?”

“Oh, she mentioned that.”
“What about Nicholas? Did you know that his primary argument to buy a restaurant downtown was that the food was amazing, ignoring the health department reports? Or that Gregory completely missed that his commodities firm was in the middle of an SEC investigation?”

Jennifer blinked. “He did?”

“Yes. The CFO had some very choice words for him about that.” Max cocked her head. “Are more upset that you missed it, or that I found it?”

“... there any reason it can’t be both?”

“I suppose not.” Her mother folded her arms on the table between them. “Sweetie, we gave you a company that had potential, but came with a serious drawback that was easy to miss. It wasn’t a pass-fail assignment, you were meant to learn from it.”

Jennifer sighed. “I still could have done without getting called out by my mother,” she muttered.

“Then next time, I suggest that you learn to use all the tools at your disposal. Including Facebook.”

“I will.” She met her mother’s gaze. “By the way, Walton made a pass at me while he was showing me around the warehouse. A heads-up would have been cool.”

Max pressed her lips together. “If I had known about his past before we picked his company, sweetie, you never would have gotten it.” She paused. “You did turn him down, right?”

Jennifer shrugged. “I guess I will after dinner tomorrow.”

Her mother blinked several times, before inhaling slowly. “You’re full of it.”

“Like I said, he was very charming.”

“Your Mama and I raised you better than that.”

“But he invited me to Murphy’s Steakhouse, and I’ve always wanted to go.”

“Jennifer, I will take you to whatever restaurant you want this weekend if you confess that you’re lying.”

She finally grinned. “Yea, okay.”

Max put a hand on her chest as she sighed in relief. “You’re not funny.”

“Well, you’re not really on my Christmas card list right now, so we’re even.”

“Nevertheless.” Max dropped her hand. “Hey, despite whatever you might think about what happened this afternoon, a lot of people are very impressed with the work you’ve been doing.”

“... really?”

“Of course.”

“You’re not just trying to get back on the Christmas card list?”

“No.” Max shook her head. “I met with Lisa yesterday. She said she was very pleased with the work you did while you were in the Marketing office. And Frank has said some very nice things about you, since you started working in Sales.”
Jennifer bit her lip. “You sure they’re not just saying that because there’s six rungs between them and you on the company ladder?”

Max looked amused. “I don’t meet with people who have a vested interest in kissing my ass. And do you think I couldn’t tell the difference even if they were?” She leaned back in her chair. “Don’t mention it to anyone, but if you do well enough over the rest of your intern year, Victoria’s considering bringing you onto her personal staff.”

“Wait, for real?”

“Yes. But you have to survive working for Kara first. Like I said, the phrase ‘slave driver’ has been thrown around when talking about her before, as well as ‘ball-buster’, and ‘dragon lady’. I’ve heard that she’s driven a few interns to tears.”

“Awesome.” Jennifer slumped in her chair. “You couldn’t hire anyone nicer?”

“I didn’t hire her to be nice. I hired her to make money. And she is VERY good at making money.” Max smiled widely. “Also, I reminded her this afternoon that while she’s been making us money, as an intern, you’ve been costing us money. Just so your position in the pecking order is clear.”

“... thanks, Mom.”

“Anytime, kiddo.”
Brooke stirred the pot several times, finally lifting the ladle full of soup. “How’s that?”

“That... actually looks pretty good.” The chef, Andrea, picked up a small spoon and took a sample from the ladle, tasting it. “Mm. Not bad.”

“I told you, the right spices will make anything palatable.” Brooke smirked, as she put the ladle back in the pot. “As does meat that isn’t flash-frozen.”

“That, I think, makes a bigger difference then the spices.” Andrea stepped back over to the oven just as the timer went off, opening it to withdraw two trays of bread rolls. “You keep this up, and I just might offer you a job.”

Brooke chuckled. “Don’t tempt me. I would seriously consider taking it.”

“Speaking of which,” her assistant, Hank, spoke up behind her. “You still need to formally accept Governor Hackney’s invitation to the debate.”

“I will when he accepts my list of questions.” Brooke turned down the flames on the stove, letting the pot simmer as she moved back to the cutting board. “If he’s going to get into it with me about my tax plan, then he’s going to have to answer for his campaign contributions from the NFL.”

“You know that opens YOU up to those same questions,” Hank pointed out. “We’ve accepted corporate donations too, remember? And not all of them were from sources that people would consider family-friendly.”

“I will sit in front of the microphone and answer questions about the medical marijuana industry all day.” Brooke picked up the kitchen knife and started chopping carrots. “They’re banking on me because I acknowledge the thousands of people who use their product to treat their medical ailments. Hackney and his predecessors took millions of dollars from the NFL because they agreed to let taxpayers foot the bill for the upkeep of a hundred-million dollar building that’s owned by a private corporation.”

Hank smirked. “You’re going to piss off a lot of red-blooded men who love the Portland Raiders.”

“You mean all the men who were voting Republican anyway? What a shock. Maybe if they- I’m sorry, please don’t.”

“Huh?”

“Not you.” Brooke looked past him and smiled at the two girls behind him who were holding up their phones. “Guys, I’m flattered, but I would appreciate it if you don’t take my picture.”

The put them away quickly, looking properly chastised. “Sorry, Madam Mayor.”

“That’s alright, and I don’t mean to be rude. But the work we do here is important, and we need to
focus on that.” She kept a warm expression on her face. “You two can find me later if you have questions, okay?”

They nodded, as they turned back to their side of the kitchen. “You should’ve let them take your picture,” Hank admonished. “A photo of a potential Governor working at a homeless shelter would do a lot for your campaign.”

“Hank, this isn’t a photo op. I’m here because unlike our current governor, I actually care about the less-fortunate citizens of Oregon.” Brooke turned back to the cutting board. “Also, my daughter already posted a photo of me to her Facebook page this morning.”

Hank pulled out his phone, working it for several seconds. “Wow. She sure did.”

“How unflattering does it look?”

“You haven’t seen it?”

“No. I just got a text from Dave about it earlier.”

Her assistant smirked. “Well. I’m sorry to say that she didn’t catch your good side.”

Brooke picked up the cutting board and used the knife to sweep the cut carrots into a bowl before she started over. Not before taking a peek at Hank’s phone, though. “God, that looks terrible. What did she caption it with?”

“Let’s see. ‘Mom’s gonna kill me for posting this, but I don’t see Governor Lack-ney spending all morning working a soup kitchen. Hashtag future-governor’s-daughter, hashtag Arcadia-Bay-House-of-Hope, hashtag do-something-about-your-hair-mom’.”

“Lack-ney?”

“That appears to be Sara’s favorite nickname for our current Governor.”

“Oh, wonderful.” Brooke grimaced. “Please tell me that nobody’s picked it up.”

Hank read quickly. “Too late. It’s already gotten four thousand likes. And it’s been shared one hundred and sixty-seven times. We’ll probably see it in the next news cycle.”

Brooke sighed. “Let that be a lesson, Hank. Don’t ever let your kids become teenagers.”

“I’m curious as to what you think the alternative is.”

“It involves an extra-large bassinet and the fire station.” She shook her head as she continued to work the cutting board. “My husband not having his own degree gives Hackney enough ammo for me, if he decides to go negative. Sara’s aspirations to be a social media influencer aren’t helping.”

“I disagree. I think it’s a great thing.” Hank put his phone away. “A covert photo of you working here is one thing. An unflattering one, posted by your daughter against your instructions, clearly not staged? It definitely improves the public opinion of you. And we want all the positive opinions we can get.”

Brooke felt her pocket vibrate before she could answer. She retrieved her phone, glancing at the screen. “Oh, shoot.”

“What?”
“That thing is today. I can’t believe I almost forgot.”

“Crap, it is, isn’t it?” Hank glanced at his watch. “We need to leave, so you can get ready.”

“Yep.” Brooke looked over at Andrea. “Sorry, I have to go.”

Andrea nodded. “I understand. Hope you and Sara have fun.”

“I will. And my daughter isn’t leaving.” Brooke grinned, as she undid her apron and folded it. “She’s about to learn a harsh lesson about listening to her mother.”

She made her way towards the back of the kitchen, coming across a teenager on her phone. Her daughter, Sara, froze as she glanced up and saw the look in her mother’s eyes. “Mom, wait, I-”

Brooke’s hand flashed out, and she snatched the phone out of her daughter’s hands.

“Hey!”

She ignored her, as she brought up the Facebook app, speaking as she typed. “I am GROUNDED from my phone for the rest of the day-”

“What?! Why?!”

Brooke hit the delete key. “... the next TWO days...”

“Mom!!”

She raised an eyebrow. “You want to go for three?”

Sara opened her mouth, but caught herself. She fell silent as Brooke continued. “...two days, because I don’t have enough respect for elected officials. Nor do I listen, when my mother tells me what I can and cannot post on social media.”

Her daughter folded her arms. “Apparently I also don’t want my mom to be Governor.”

Brooke shot her a look. “I don’t need your help, Sara. You need to focus on school, not coming up with bad nicknames for Hackney.”

“I was just-”

“Hackney was caught taking three million dollars out of the state’s education budget to cover up accounting discrepancies during an audit from the OMB. And he arranged to have two of his son’s DUI charges dropped.” Brooke put Sara’s phone in her pocket. “I do not need the help of my seventeen-year-old daughter to win this race. There are professionals doing that for me. Now, stop lollygagging and go help Andrea.”

“... fine,” Sara muttered. “Where are you going?”

Brooke smirked, as she turned and followed Hank out the back door. “To fix my hair.”

She straightened her blazer as Hank drove the car, heading through the old First Light community.

“This place must be creepy as hell at night,” he observed. “All these empty houses? And I’ll bet at least one of them is haunted.”
“The church killed fifty-six people,” Brooke pointed out. “And those are just the ones we know about. This whole area is probably an angry spirit minefield.”

“Christ, that’s depressing to think about.” Hank shook his head. “How much longer did the developers say it would take to demolish the rest of these?”

“About three months. It’ll be at least a year and a half, before there are livable houses in this part of town again. Hey, do me a favor and turn right up here?”

“What for?” Hank asked, as he hit the blinker.

“I want to make a stop.”

He didn’t ask any more questions, as he followed Brooke’s instructions. “There,” she finally said, pointing. “Pull into that driveway.”

The house they parked in front of was one of the more intact properties, though it still didn’t look very good: the siding was collapsing under its own weight, several windows were broken, and the paint had long since faded and started chipping. It barely resembled the house from her childhood, since the church had stopped upkeeping the neighborhood almost a decade prior.

Hank followed Brooke as she got out of the car, closing the door behind him quietly. “Is this where you used to live?”

“Yes.” Brooke kept her eyes on the house. “Used to look a lot nicer, though.”

“Used to? Is this the first time you’ve seen it since you left?”

“Never had a reason to come back.”

She made her way to the front door, ignoring the large red notice as she turned the knob. It swung open with a long creak, and she surveyed the inside. The drywall was crumbling, and the floor was covered in dirt, but if she focused, she could still see it as she remembered from the morning she’d run away.

“Wow,” she remarked as she looked in the kitchen. “That’s still there.”

“What is?” Hank asked, walking behind her.

She pointed at the ancient fridge. “You see that little dry-erase board?”

“Yea?”

“That’s where I wrote the note, when I ran away from home.” She lowered her hand. “I figured it would be gone. Thrown out, or something.”

“That’s incredible.” Hank looked at her. “What did you write?”

“This is my life, not yours,” Brooke recalled. “I wrote it two days after they told me that I was going to be pulled from school to live as Bobby Marshall’s wife.”

Hank looked at her, as she kept her eyes on the fridge. “How old were you?”

“Fifteen. A few weeks shy of sixteen.”

“Christ.” Hank frowned as he turned his gaze back to the fridge. “I’m surprised it’s still here. You
would’ve figured the new owners would’ve eventually gotten rid of it.”

Brooke shook her head. “There were no new owners, after the IRS seized this place. My family was the only one that ever lived here.”

“Really? How is that possible?”

“The house might’ve been taken from my parents, but this was still a First Light neighborhood.” Brooke reminded him. “Nobody wanted to buy here while the church was still active. I don’t think realtors even came to this part of town. And by the time the others passed away or moved on, this whole block was in shambles.”

Hank shook his head, taking in the rest of the house. “That’s a shame. This place looks like it used to be pretty nice, between the granite counters and the hardwood floors.” He paused. “I thought the old parishioners lived below the poverty line?”

“Most of them did. Unless you were my grandfather, and could skim a hundred thousand dollars or so from the church accounts every year. And arrange to have shell corporations pay your mortgage with church funds. My family lived a pretty good life, relative to the others.”

“So... everything here was paid for with stolen money?”

“From the food stamps of hungry church-goers who were already tithing twenty-five percent of their income.” She shook her head, as she continued into the house, walking up the set of creaky stairs. “This was my room, right here.”

Hank looked inside as she pushed the door open. “It’s empty,” he noted.

“Yep. They sold everything that wasn’t nailed down, to pay back the victims of my family’s fraud.” Brooke nodded down the hall. “My parents’ bedroom was right there. And my brother’s was down the hall. Good thing, too, because he used to snore like a lawnmower.”

Hank looked at her uncomfortably. “I didn’t want to bring it up... but I did get word from someone at the state DNC office, that Hackney’s people might be keeping statements from your brother in their back pockets.”

“Then they must be desperate for dirt on me, if they’re reaching that far.” Brooke smirked. “He spent over ten years in jail for his role in the fraud, trying to destroy evidence, and stabbing a cop in the arm during the raid. Also, my family has a permanent restraining order against him for the death threats he keeps making.”

“I didn’t know that.” Hank frowned. “Where is he now?”

“Living in a trailer somewhere in Arizona. He’s trying to start a new version of First Light.” She sighed. “Though he’s mostly just trashing me to the twenty-seven subscribers on his YouTube channel. My brother was never really the ‘take charge’ kind of guy.”

“No, he certainly doesn’t sound like it.” Hank frowned. “Twenty-seven, huh?”

“Well, two of those don’t count, since it’s me and my husband. We like to keep tabs on him.” Brooke shook her head. “I tried to help him, you know,” she mentioned as she closed the door to her old bedroom.

“You did?” Hank asked, surprised.
“After he was released from jail, he was living in a car in the church parking lot. There weren’t a lot of parishioners left when he got out, and none of them really wanted anything to do with him.” She shrugged. “I went to see him. Offered to help get him a job and loan him enough money to put down a security deposit on an apartment.”

“That was pretty nice of you,” Hank allowed. “Especially after everything you went through. I’m guessing he didn’t take it?”

“Oh, no. He pulled a knife and started screaming that it was all my fault.” Brooke rolled her eyes. “If only I had done what I was supposed to like a good little girl, and not blabbed to the media, everything would have been fine. And that he was going to kill me for my transgressions.”

“He didn’t actually hurt you, did he?”

Brooke smirked. “I wasn’t stupid. I went to see him with Dave. When he started coming at me, my husband knocked him out with one punch.”

Hank smiled. “Nice.”

“Yea. I still felt bad, so I stuck a couple hundred bucks in his pocket before we left. Haven’t seen him since.”

She led the way back downstairs silently, Hank right behind her. “How much of what happened does Sara know?” he asked after several seconds.

“Most of it. The interview I gave is still online, and I know she’s watched that, at least. And she’s aware of my brother’s existence; we showed her a picture a few years ago, so she knows to run if she ever sees him.” Brooke glanced around again, before she started heading for the door. “I never told her how terrifying everything was. Or that Bobby Marshall attacked me at his sentencing hearing, or that the uncle she’s never met would kill her for wanting to go to college. I don’t think she knows that she has a restraining order against him, but it wouldn’t surprise me if she did.”

“Well.” Hank followed her back out of the house, shutting the door behind them. “It sounds like closing the chapter on this part of the city’s history will be very therapeutic for you.”

Brooke nodded, glancing back at her old house one last time before she got in the car. “You have no idea,” she agreed, as Hank took his seat behind the wheel. “Now, let’s go tear down this fucking church.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, that's that.

It's been fun. I liked this story a lot, and I hope you all enjoyed reading. It was nice to expand on the other characters I wrote in EtL, and tell their stories that I only glossed over. I want you guys to know that I read all the comments, and I really appreciate all the feedback and kudos I got for BOTH stories.

... Christ, y'all are thirsty for Wardson.

Anyway, this AU is done. I have no intention of re-visiting it. But I DID mention in a couple of the comments that I was working on something else. Problem is, it's not nearly
as finished as EtL and WWAA were when I started posting them.

But I don't want to leave people hanging TOO much. So...

https://archiveofourown.org/works/21010625/chapters/49968563

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!